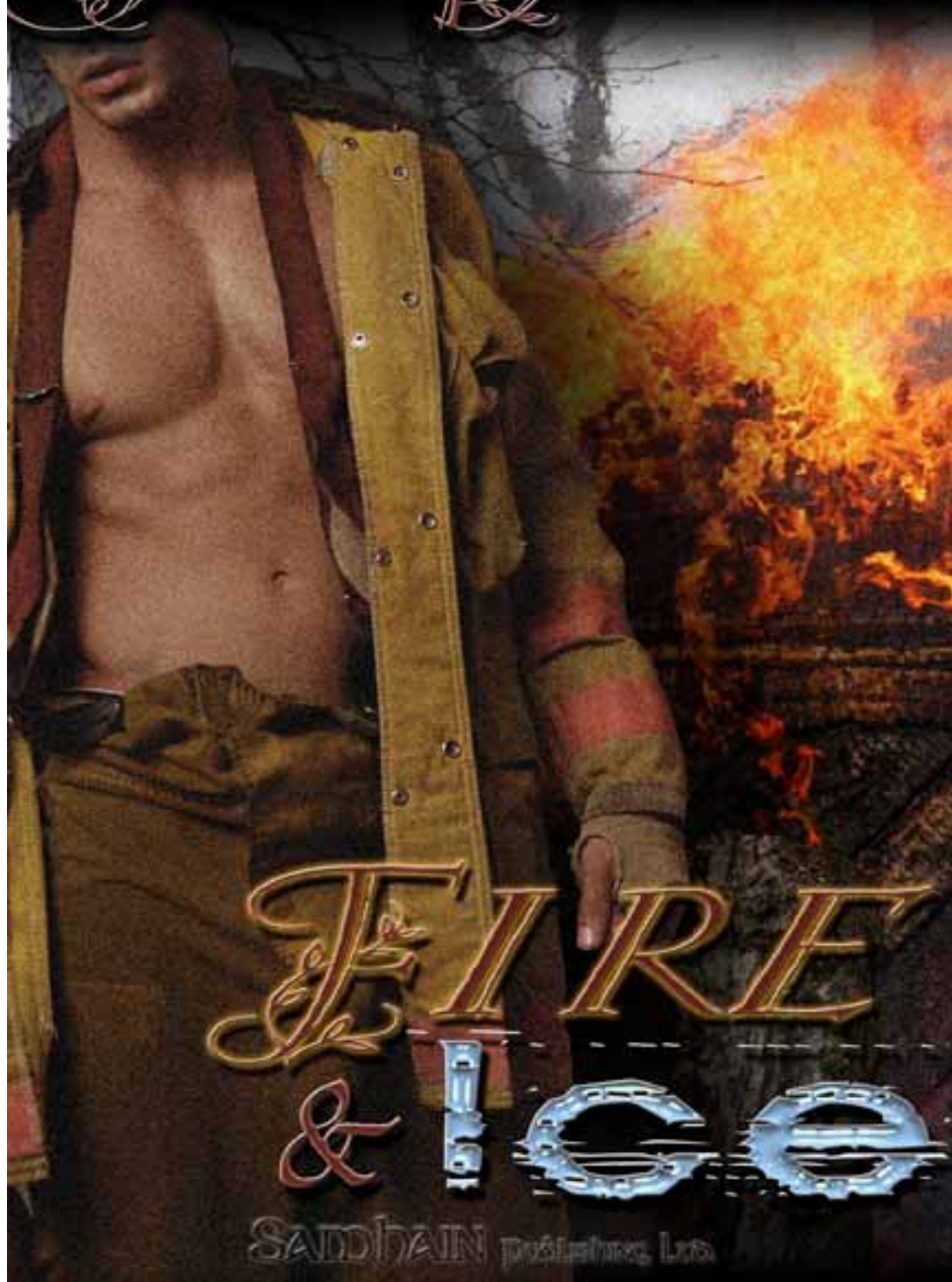


Ferri Drennen



FIRE
& ICE

SADDHAIN publishing, Ltd.

eBooks are *not* transferable. They cannot be sold, shared or given away as it is an infringement on the copyright of this work.

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.



Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
2932 Ross Clark Circle, #384
Dothan, AL 36301

Fire & Ice
Copyright © 2006 by Jerri Drennen
Cover by Vanessa Hawthorne
ISBN: 1-59998-228-5
www.samhainpublishing.com

All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First **Samhain Publishing, Ltd.** electronic publication: October 2006

Fire & Ice

Jerri Drennen

Dedication

I want to thank my critique group, Romance Writers World for encouraging me, for laughing while reading Fire & Ice, and for being honest when something didn't work. I have a profound respect for each of these ladies and I know we'll always be friends if nothing else.

Chapter One

“Manning,” Randall Jones, a fellow firefighter, called from the doorway. “The chief wants you to call him. He seems to think you’ve turned off your two-way and cell.”

Knox ignored the man’s accusation, his full attention on reenacting the events of a day earlier.

Blue-tipped yellow and orange flames raced a narrow path across the floor, swallowing an outer wall to engulf the ceiling before consuming everything else in its path.

Knox Manning pictured the fire from first spark to smoldering ash.

He'd seen this before—too many times. The distinctive burn pattern. The intense blistering on the hardwood floor. An accelerant had been used. What form was yet to be determined.

Jagged, blackened holes were left where the fire had gutted the steep, pitched roof. A light rain filtered inside, dripping steadily on what was left of the living room floor, forming a puddle at Knox’s feet. Off to his left sat the skeletal remains of a couch and loveseat, next to them, two charred spindles, the only remnants of a coffee table.

The home on Summerset Drive which once housed a family of five was nothing more than an eerie shell.

Knox inhaled, not surprised that after twenty-four hours a strong, overwhelming smell of melted plastic, wet fiberglass insulation and a

heavy layer of smoke still permeated the air. The stench tickled the inside of his nose.

Kneeling beside the corpse of an interior wall, Knox studied it carefully. Fire fascinated him with its ultimate purpose—reducing everything to ashes. From day one, after seeing the destruction of his first fire, he'd respected its power.

“Manning!”

Knox acknowledged the chief's flunky with a grunt. Jones was Barton Fire and Rescue's biggest suck-up. Hell, Beagles had whiter noses. Blocking the jerk out was getting harder. He'd love to tell the guy to shove his command, yet held his tongue. He had enough problems, no need adding to them.

True, Knox had dumped the chief's daughter. She deserved it. Life went on. Heartbreak healed given enough time.

Sandra Gallan hadn't been right for him. He was his job, and she'd had the nerve to be annoyed with that. Not to mention the fact that she hadn't been willing to give up anything for him, yet wanted to change the way he dressed, spoke and carried himself. Why want him at all? He obviously wasn't her usual type—a white-collared stuffed shirt. Knox didn't have money falling out of every pocket. He was blue collar all the way and always would be.

Sandra had emasculated him, the one thing he refused to live with, no matter who she was. Or how hard her father made his life at the station. Though he had to admit the chief was starting to tick him off.

Knox snorted. Ticked wasn't even close to describing the motions surging through him. Was it too much to ask for his boss to handle himself with a little more professionalism? As long as Knox did his job that's all that should matter.

Too bad that wasn't the way things were.

Chief Gallan had been on his back, had shadowed Knox's every move for the past two months. He was barely able to take a piss without the chief or one of his lackeys around to compare notes. A guy could get a complex.

He had to draw the line somewhere. This seemed as good a time as any.

Ideally, transferring out of the 901 would have been the solution, though at this time that was impossible.

“Are you gonna call the chief?”

Knox glanced up. Jones lingered in the doorway, his arms crossed rigidly over his chest, as he leaned against the blackened frame.

What Knox wouldn't give for the archway to let go at that moment.

“Yeah. When I get a chance.”

Randall mumbled something under his breath, the word “asshole” catching Knox's attention. Jones turned and left the building.

Count to ten.

Five years ago, Knox would have followed him out and knocked him on his ass-kissing behind. He'd since learned how to control his temper. Though if things didn't change soon, he was going to blow a gasket.

Shifting his foot, Knox uncovered the corner of something white buried in the rubble. He took out the penlight tucked in his breast pocket and removed debris from the object.

He picked up the paper and turned it over. Three words were barely visible on the surface. “Melanie” and “art exhibit”. Seemed to be some sort of flier for this woman's art show. Might be evidence.

He bagged the flier and tucked it securely into his satchel.

First thing in the morning he'd search for local artists on the Internet. See if a Melanie was among them.

Maybe he was grasping at straws with the clue. Yet he'd found nothing else and, surprisingly, he'd caught arsonists with less to go on.



Melanie Sharp stood back and studied the seascape she'd been working on for days and sighed deeply.

Almost done.

Her exhibit was a week away and she wanted the piece in time for the show.

To say she was nervous would be an understatement. This was her first real art show, her name in lights so to speak. She wanted it to be perfect. If it didn't go well, she might as well kiss her career goodbye. Though it wouldn't be an end to her creatively. Landscape and portrait painting was her passion. To pay the bills she created ice sculptures for weddings and charity events. Something she'd stumbled onto by chance.

Her first creation came to mind, an intricate dolphin which had gone over so well that she had enough work from referrals to keep her in oils and canvas for a long time.

Luckily, an ice sculpture took less than a day to create, giving her the rest of the time for painting.

Creating art with ice was a challenge, the only drawback, watching her delicate work melt into a pool of nothingness. As pay went though, it was too lucrative to give up.

A few days from now she had a bald eagle sculpture to carve for the Forth-of-July celebration sponsored by the mayor's office. The piece would not only earn a profit, it would also help distract her. She hadn't been out much in the past three months. Not with the show looming and learning that the man she'd dated for eight weeks was married.

Melanie was still surprised by it. She wouldn't have found out if her best friend hadn't spoken to the man's wife, learned that the couple had been married for seven years and had three children under the age of five.

All Dean's lies came out while planning their first night together. The man had been pressuring her for weeks to sleep with him. She'd finally decided to give in that day. Thank God she'd found out before they'd slept together. What a huge mistake that would have been. Clearly he was looking for nothing but a good time.

Men always wanted what they didn't have, and grew tired of what they did.

Heck, Dean still wouldn't stop calling. He begged to see her, promises of divorce in every conversation they had. What would his wife say if she knew what he was telling Melanie?

Did it matter? She'd never go out with him again anyway. She had learned long ago a married cheat was heartache for all parties involved.

Inhaling deeply, Melanie thrust her paintbrush into the blue and white paint, mixing them together on her palette.

With precise strokes, she brushed the paint over the canvas, refusing to think about Dean or any other man. Reminiscing wasn't doing her any good. Besides, she didn't have time to think. The painting propped on her easel had to be done by tomorrow afternoon and that meant she'd be up all night working.



Knox sat in front of the computer, staring at a name on the screen. Melanie Sharp.

He took a deep breath and jotted down her address. He turned off the machine and rose. Ms. Sharp had a record, a fact he'd obtained from a

friend over at social services, the file closed to the public because she'd been a minor at the time. This little tidbit certainly placed her at the top of his list of suspects.

He headed out of the firehouse to his truck. What he wouldn't give to wrap this case up before the end of the day. Maybe if that happened the chief would get off his back.

His cell phone rang.

He unclipped it from his belt and flipped it open. "Knox, here."

"Don't hang up, Knox. I need to see you."

His stomach lurched into his throat. Had thinking about her father conjured her up? "I can't talk right now, Sandra. I'm working." He pressed end and punched another button, sending all incoming calls to his voicemail. She was the last person he wanted to deal with right now. What the heck did she want to talk about that hadn't already been said? Crying wouldn't get him back. He hated that. Their relationship was over. She needed to get that through her rich, snobbish head.

He jumped into his truck, started the engine and took off toward Madison Avenue.

Why was it so hard for women to understand him? Arson investigation got him up and going everyday. Anything else came in a distant second. He loved digging around burned out houses, scraping along the floorboards for the hint of accelerant. Questioning neighbors and friends of his suspects, grilling the person under suspicion until they confessed. The whole job stirred a passion in him like nothing else.

As he sped down the road, he grabbed a CD and inserted it into the player.

Seconds later, the hard beat of AC/DC blared from the speakers, relaxing him as he drove.

He turned onto Lachlan Drive and checked the address again. 325 Crescent Lane. Just around the next corner.

Knox took a right and came to a stop in front of the house. The structure itself was painted winter-white. On either side of the porch steps, leading up to the front door, pink Hibiscus plants sat in large, clay pots. In the window, in front of a pair of white, ruffled curtains hung a yellow welcome sign.

The home didn't look like a place harboring an arsonist. Though firebugs weren't defined by any one thing.

They came from all walks of life. Male, female. Rich, poor. Young, old. From massive homes, to quaint, little houses like the one he looked at right now.

Knox inhaled deeply and opened the truck's door.

He had to handle this just right. The last thing he needed was to put Melanie Sharp on the defensive. She had to think he was here to talk about the flier he'd found at the scene. He wouldn't even mention her previous arson charge. Not right away. He needed her to talk openly. He'd acknowledge the fire later, after she'd spoken with him.

Once on the porch, he rapped on the door, took a step back and glanced around.

The neighborhood was pleasant enough, the homes, two-story structures built in the sixties.

Knox knew all about Barton. When it was established as a city. All its city officials and aldermen, people you wanted to stay in good graces with. Unfortunately, he'd found that fact out the hard way.

A rattling chain and a loud creak had Knox spinning around. The white door inched open a half a foot, a pair of powder blue eyes all he made out of the person standing behind it.

"Yeah?" the woman asked.

Was that impatience he heard in her soft voice?

Knox leaned forward, hoping she'd open the door further. To his surprise, she actually closed it an inch or so. "I'm looking for Melanie Sharp?"

"Why?"

Yep, definitely irritation there. He was sure he heard her teeth grinding. "I need to talk to her about a flier I found."

"What kind of flier?"

Knox took a breath and released it, trying not to lose patience. He glanced around. He didn't want anyone thinking he talked to doors. "Are you Ms. Sharp?"

"I might be. Who wants to know?"

"I'm with the city's fire and rescue department. Name's Knox Manning."

"Okay, Mr. Manning. What's this about?"

"Would it be possible to see who I'm talking to? I feel weird speaking to you through the door."

Seconds passed. The door didn't budge and Knox wondered what to do. Was she afraid to open the damn thing? Did she think he was lying? Worried he'd harm her in some way? "I can show you my ID card if that's why you're reluctant."

"No, that's not it. It's just that I've been up working all night. I'm sort of a mess."

"Ms. Sharp, I'm sure you look fine."

Silence met his remark. The door inched open and Knox got his first glimpse of the woman who might be his arsonist. Her face looked like a paint palette, with every shade of blue smudged from head to toe. The color of her hair was unrecognizable.

His gaze traveled lower, to the gray, sleeveless tee covering a chest that looked like a boy's. She looked like a homeless waif.

For an instant, the image of her naked popped to mind, and he cringed.

She certainly didn't fit her home.

"About that flier?" she asked, her voice taking on a hostile edge.

Had she seen his grimace? Talk about getting off on the wrong foot. Now she was going to be on the defensive and not because of her past indiscretions.

Just ask what you need to ask. "One of your art exhibit fliers was found at a burned out house on Summerset Drive."

Her blue eyes narrowed to mere slits. "So? What are you trying to say, Mr. Manning?"

"I was just wondering if you know Dean and Tracy Grainger, the homeowners."

"No. I don't."

An awful quick response. Did it mean she was lying?

"I handed out hundreds of those weeks ago, Mr. Manning. They could have gotten it anywhere."

"So you're an artist?"

She snorted. "No. I just like wearing paint all over me."

Geesh, Manning. That was swift. "Right. Sorry. Do you know anyone who lives on Summerset?"

She shook her head. "Sorry. I don't."

Knox noticed that her feet were bare and as dirty as the rest of her and winced. "Are you sure?"

"Quite," she snapped, her eyes glinting with aggression.

This conversation was getting him nowhere, though something in her gaze sparked recognition at the mention of the Grainger's.

What did you expect? Her to confess?

“All right. I guess that's all I have to ask for now. Thank you for your time.”

Knox's eyes met hers and a strange jolt of electricity struck him head-on. An odd, almost overwhelming sensation weakened his knees.

He smiled, turned and retreated to his truck.

What the hell just happened?

Melanie Sharp's eyes had beckoned to his, though for the life of him, he didn't know why. She was the most unappealing woman he'd seen in his thirty-two years. Dirty and flat-chested. Unkempt would have been a kind description. She was obviously one of those eccentric artsy types. He tried to picture what she'd look like cleaned up and failed. So why the odd feeling?

Hell, he must be working too hard. His eyes were playing tricks on him like some Halloween prank gone bad. Come hell or high water, he wasn't getting anywhere near Melanie Sharp's unappetizing basket of treats, no matter how powerfully her eyes appealed to his.

Chapter Two

“Have you eaten anything today, Mel?” her best friend Kay asked, glancing over Melanie’s shoulder to see what she was working on. “Who is that?” Kay physically moved her aside and stared at the painting. “He’s downright yummy.”

Melanie snorted at her friend’s observation. “I’m sure he thinks so, too. He’s an asshole.”

Kay arched a brow. “If that’s so, why are you painting his portrait?” Her friend glanced at the painting again and heaved a resounding sigh.

Melanie rolled her eyes. The man was big and brawny with dark hair and green eyes. Definitely Kay’s type. In no way Melanie’s. She preferred a man with intelligence, a man who she shared common interests with, someone who’d want to talk for hours. Not a big strapping guy who’d drag you off to his cave as soon as he met you and do tantalizing things to your body.

Who’d want that?

She snorted again, loud and very unladylike.

Okay, she wouldn’t mind a little cave action, though not with a man who thought she was an arsonist and looked at her as if she were the monster from the Black Lagoon. Frankly, as far as she was concerned, Knox Manning could take a long soak in the middle of a shark-infested ocean.

So her art-opening flier was found at a burned out house. Did that make her the torch? Heck, she'd sent out hundreds of them weeks ago. They might have picked it off the ground for all she knew. Sure, she knew the man who owned the house—that didn't mean she'd burn the place down. As for her appearance that morning, she'd been up all night working on a painting and hadn't gotten the chance to wash up yet.

"Who is he?" Kay asked again, practically drooling on the painting Melanie still didn't know why she had started. Though needing a dartboard came to mind.

"Knox Manning. He's a fire investigator. He thinks I set Dean's house ablaze."

Kay's jaw dropped. "What? Why would he think that?"

Melanie shrugged. "According to Mr. Manning, one of my fliers was found in the house."

"Does he know about the fire twelve years ago? Or the fact that you were dating Dean?"

Melanie swallowed hard. "No! At least I hope he doesn't. I don't want to talk about this anymore. Let's drop it!"

"Okay, okay. Don't get your panties in a wad. He is gorgeous though. I'd definitely do him."

Melanie just shook her head. Kay would do anyone with the right plumbing.

"I know what you're thinking." Kay wagged a finger in warning. "So I like sex. Does that make me bad? I can't go for years without it. Greg Spears was the last man you slept with. That was what—two years ago? You know what they say, don't you?"

Melanie knew whatever her friend said, it'd be of a sexual nature. The woman was a man in a skirt. "No, what's that?"

Kay grinned. "Use it or lose it. You'd need a map by now to find yours."

"Hah, funny."

"Hey, you never did answer my first question."

Melanie had always been amazed at how fast her friend's mind changed gears. "No, I don't have his number," Melanie said, wiping paint from her hands onto a rag she picked up.

"I didn't ask that, though I should have. I asked if you'd eaten. You look peaked."

Why shouldn't she look pale? She'd practically been accused of arson. That would make anyone a little sick. "No, though food does sound good. Let me get cleaned up and we'll go out for lunch."

"Sounds great. I'll just wait here and stare at Mr. Fireman. Hey, Mel, you think he has a big hose?"

Melanie rolled her eyes and left the room without answering.

What size hose Knox Manning had was the farthest thing from her mind. He wasn't getting within a hundred feet of her hydrant anyway.



Knox finished his last set of repetitions. He set the weights down and grabbed his towel. On the way to the showers, he wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Hey, Knox." Brent James stopped him just as he entered the firehouse locker room.

"What's up?"

"A few of us are headed to O'Malley's for a late lunch. You want to join us?"

"I need to take a quick shower. How about I meet you there?"

"Sounds great. See you in a few."

Knox watched Brent leave, then went to his locker and undressed. He wrapped a towel around his waist on his way to the shower.

Once in the stall, he hung the towel behind him on a hook and ducked under the spray. The instant the hot water coursed over his body, Melanie Sharp's paint-laden face popped into his mind.

He grimaced at the memory. What was going on with him? Why her? She was not his idea of attractive, though ever since their eyes met two days ago she'd haunted him.

Lathering up his chest and shoulders, Knox tried to extinguish her from his thoughts, yet failed. The woman had nothing that appealed to him. So...maybe that wasn't entirely true. She had a pair of powder blue eyes that seemed in some way lost.

Lost or not, he wasn't interested in her in a physical way. All he wanted was to find the truth. To do his job. Period. If she'd started the fire on Summerset, he'd see that she paid for it.

He finished his shower and dressed quickly. He had to hurry to O'Malley's before the guys gave up on him and ordered.

Outside the pub, a strange vibe hit him. Knox pushed it aside as he entered through the back door.

Loud, easy listening music played from somewhere above his head. The smell of hops and beef mingled in the air, stirring his appetite.

O'Malley's was the 901's favorite hangout. They'd come in to eat and have a few beers to unwind after a grueling shift.

Knox spotted the crew at a large table in the middle of the room and headed their way, the tingling he'd experienced outside getting stronger. What the hell was the sensation? He'd never felt anything like it before.

He glanced around the pub, his gaze landing on a blonde who eyed him with interest. He didn't recognize her though she stared at him as if she knew him, her eyes raking his body as if she'd seen him naked.

He swallowed, shifting his attention to the redhead sitting with her, her back to him. She laughed at something the blonde said, causing the strange tingling to race up his arm like a flash fire across dry grass.

There was something familiar about it.

“Hey, Knox, over here,” Brent hollered, waving to him.

The redhead turned. Knox saw the powder blue gaze, connected to a face that he would have never recognized if not for those eyes. Melanie Sharp. Paintless. In no way breathtaking. Cute, in an unconventional way. She had a nice peaches and cream complexion—one that was enhanced by red, shoulder-length hair. She wore a hot pink, short-sleeved flouncy top and a pair of blue jeans. For an instant, Knox would have given his shirt to see how her ass looked in them.

“Knox?” Brent called from behind him. “You know them?”

Knox turned to Brent.

“We’ve been trying to get their attention since we got here. You walk in and manage to turn both their heads. Though I’d say the redhead doesn’t like what she sees. That’s some nasty scowl she’s sending your way. She’s not an ex is she?”

Knox returned his attention to Melanie’s table. The look she sent his way could’ve frozen a five-alarm blaze on a one hundred degree day.

He smiled at her and went to take a seat with the crew. Let her give him dirty looks. He didn’t give a shit. She was no one to him besides a suspect in an arson case anyway.

“Did you see the blonde? Damn. Talk about a nice pair of pumpers. I’d like to forward lay her,” Brent said, sending the guys into fits of laughter.

Both Melanie and her friend stared at them.

The intense glare Melanie gave Knox iced his blood. Even the chief himself hadn't intimidated him as much as this skinny, blue-eyed woman.

He averted his gaze, aware that the tingling had taken control of his entire body, his nerves endings vibrating like a cheap, coin-operated bed.

Damn. What the hell was happening to him? Why did this one woman cause such a strange humming in his body, and how did he make it stop?

"What do you think of the little redhead?" Mike Dryer, another one of his friends asked, nudging Knox in the side.

"She's okay." He didn't bother to look at her. Afraid the hum would turn to a full-blown quake.

"She's cute, though a little small on the top for my tastes," Brent said. Knox caught where the man's attention lay—on Melanie's chest—and he felt as if he'd been punched in the gut.

Hell, why did it matter if Brent checked her out? They did it all the time, always talking smack about women—comparing notes. He didn't even like Melanie Sharp, so why should he care what his friend said about her tits, small as they were. She looked like a prepubescent girl. Not even a handful that he saw. Knox had always been a breast man. Drawn to women with large boobs. Real or man-made. He didn't care. Melanie definitely didn't have enough to accommodate him. Superficial, yet that's what he was drawn to.

He glanced at Melanie again, who still watched him.

Their eyes met and held.

Knox's heart began its steady acceleration while sweat formed on his upper lip. No matter how hard he tried, he found it impossible to look away.

“Knox, you okay? Knox?” Brent tapped his shoulder and pulled him out of the trance. He shook his head, trying to clear it.

Something strange was happening between him and this woman. What, he wasn't sure, though it wasn't attraction. That was impossible. She wasn't anywhere near his image of the perfect woman, if there was such a thing.



Melanie struggled to breathe. Why did a man who wanted to send her up the river cause her heart to skip like a stone across the water's surface?

He was a Neanderthal, big and brawny, with muscles to spare. She'd bet the farm he had no brain in that gorgeous head of his.

Their first and last conversation played back in her mind. 'So you're an artist?' Duh! How obvious did something have to be?

Kay touched Melanie's hand from across the table. "Melanie, he's watching you."

"Yeah, he's hoping to put me away."

"I don't think so, Mel. Those luscious eyes of his are saying, 'I want your body'. Not, 'I want to send you to Attica'."

Melanie snorted. "Right. I think you're misreading those eyes. They're saying, 'I hope you don't drop the soap'."

"Come on, Mel, that only happens in male prisons."

Melanie shook her head. "That's not the point, Kay. He wants to blame me for that fire. I know it. And with my past with Dean and the previous arson charge, he just might be able to. Don't you watch the news? Innocent people are framed every day for crimes they didn't commit."

“Calm down. You’re not going to be one of them. Maybe we should do a little investigation of our own. See what we can find out about Dean. Where he was that night? Hell, maybe he set the fire himself to try and frame you.”

Kay's implication was preposterous. No way would Dean burn down his own house. “Why would he do that?”

Kay sighed and thrummed at her bottom lip. “Well, maybe he figured if you weren’t going to be his, then you’d belong to no one. Believe me, men don’t like being dumped. They like to do the dumping. He might have done this to get even with you for that. Who knows? I just think we need to do a little spying on the Grainger’s, see what we can find out.”

“Kay, we are not detectives. I haven’t a clue how to spy on someone. Do you?”

Kay's eyes lit up. “No. Paul Nader does, though.”

Melanie’s jaw slacked. No way would he get involved. “Your ex-fiancé isn’t going to help us, Kay. He hates you.”

The light in her friend’s eyes faded. “No he doesn’t. He loves me. That’s why it’s so hard for him to be civil.”

Melanie wanted to laugh at her friends clouded perceptions. “You keep telling yourself that, Kay. He does have every right to hate you. Who wouldn't after being left at the altar and thrown over for the best man?”

“Well, technically that’s true, I did do that. Yet I know he still loves me. Besides, you know I didn’t sleep with Roy. He was just my escape route out of an event I was not ready for. Sleeping with the same man for the rest of my life. I wasn’t sure if that’s what I wanted or not.”

“Didn’t you tell me Paul was the best lover you've ever had?”

“Yeah, had, the operative word. What about the men I haven't had? I just wasn’t ready to stop looking for something better.”

“So have you had any luck since you broke up with Paul?” Melanie already knew the answer. Kay told her every detail of every romp she'd ever had—including how powerful the orgasms were.

“No, though who knows. He might be just around the corner. Or sitting in this room right now.” Kay glanced around her, her gaze landing on Knox. “Hell, maybe Mr. Fireman over yonder might be able to start a little blaze that he could ever-so-slowly put out. He’s an awful big man. He probably has big attachments.”

Why did Kay’s remark not surprise her? Melanie loved her friend dearly, yet some days, she reminded her of a sailor on leave.

“You know what they say?” Melanie used Kay’s words from earlier.

Her friend’s eyes sparkled and she played along. “No what?”

“It’s not the size that counts. It’s all in the way you use it.”

Kay scrunched up her face, looking aghast. “No, honey. It’s the size. Don’t let anyone tell you any different. The only ones who say that size doesn’t matter are men with tiny dicks.”

“Am I interrupting?” a deep, male voice asked, intruding into their conversation.

Melanie turned to find Knox standing just inches away, his eyes dancing with amusement. He’d obviously heard everything.

She glanced at Kay whose face now resembled an over-ripe tomato.

“What do you want?” Melanie asked, her eyes narrowing, any humor from earlier gone.

“I wanted to apologize for the other day. I feel like we got off on the wrong foot.”

Melanie snorted. Talk about an understatement. Wrong foot her ass. It was much more than a foot. The entire leg and half a hip were included.

“No problem. You caught me at a bad time. I'd been up all night.” She wasn't going to tell him how she really felt. She was in enough trouble.

“Anyway, you two enjoy your lunch.” He started to turn. Kay's next words stopped his leaving. “Would you like to join us?”

Melanie wanted to strangle Kay at that moment. She settled for a swift kick under the table.

“Ouch, Mel. That hurt.”

Melanie turned to Knox and caught the twitch playing around his mouth.

Was he laughing at her? Did he find her discomfort entertaining? Melanie would see who left O'Malley's with the last laugh.

She smiled. “Kay, ask Mr. Manning about what you were wondering earlier.”

Kay's eyes narrowed and her friend shook her head, pretending not to have understood her.

Melanie's grin widened. “You know—about his equipment.”

Kay looked mortified. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Sure you do. Remember... You wanted to find out how far his fire hose extended.”

Manning's jaw dropped, just the type of reaction Melanie had hoped for.

Chapter Three

Knox slammed his Ranger into gear and stomped on the accelerator. He was shocked that Melanie would ask such a question. She didn't even know him. Hell, as if she had the right to inquire about his hose capacity anyway. She'd be the last woman on earth to experience that pleasure, and even at that point, he'd seriously have to talk himself into it.

The whole thing confused him. Why would she embarrass her friend like that? So the woman had invited him to join them. Was the prospect so distasteful that she'd subject her friend to such ridicule? If so, she wasn't much of a friend.

Moreover, why was he dwelling on this? What did it matter?

He glanced at the dashboard, realized he was speeding and let up on the gas.

Why did he seem to lose all control around the woman—or simply by thinking about her? It had to stop. Right here. Right now.

Melanie Sharp. Subject closed.

He drove into the firehouse lot, the skinny redhead pushed out of his mind.

Knox pulled into a parking space and, as he exited his truck, he noticed Sandra's green Lexus parked next to her father's car.

Great. What was she doing here?

He'd rather fight a ten-alarm blaze with a thimble than go inside the firehouse right now. Instead, he got back into his truck and headed for

Summerset, his hands gripping the steering wheel. He'd go dig around the rubble for a while. That suited him much more than seeing the chief's daughter. Besides, maybe he'd get lucky and find something else to link that woman he wasn't going to think about to the fire.

Damn. Not thinking about her was harder than he thought, especially when she was the prime suspect in his arson case.

Ten minutes later, he pulled up next to the burned out house and caught a glimpse of a red sports car parked to the side of the home.

Who'd have the nerve to come to the place? Damned thing was cordoned off. No one was supposed to be inside until he'd finished his preliminary investigation, especially since the structure was unsound.

Knox jumped out of the truck and stormed up the sidewalk, planning to catch whoever was inside and ream them good.

As he rounded the side of the house he heard female voices coming from the back. At least they'd had enough sense to stay out of the building.

One of them laughed and Knox froze. Great. He knew that laugh. It belonged to Melanie. Damnable woman. Had she come back to finish the job—in broad daylight no less?

Closing the distance between them, Knox stalked around the back and found both Melanie and her friend off to the right, balanced on a large plank of wood, peeking through a window, the master bedroom as he recalled.

“What the hell do you two think you're doing?” Knox inquired as calmly as possible.

The two collided as they scrambled to get away. Melanie tripped over her friend's foot and ended up face down on the ground, limbs akimbo. She looked up at him and blew at the wisps of hair that had fallen in her face.

Knox would have laughed if he weren't so angry about her trespassing.

"I'm waiting for an answer."

Melanie cleared her throat. "Kay thought we should check out the scene of my so-called crime."

Knox crossed his arms over his chest. "Do you two know I have the authority to arrest you for being here?"

"Arrest us?" Melanie's friend asked. "Would you have to handcuff me?"

Knox's attention flew to the pretty blonde, caught off guard by the spark of heat in her amber gaze. From the interested look she sent his way she found the idea appealing. A bit of a turn-on, for sure. Too bad she was Melanie's friend. She was off limits to him. "I don't carry handcuffs. Do you want me to call someone who does, have you both thrown in jail?"

Melanie got to her feet, her hot pink blouse smeared with soot. She tried brushing it away, only to make it worse the more she rubbed. Not to mention causing the tips of her nipples to pop to attention from the action.

Knox's body reacted immediately, thrumming away.

"We'll leave." Melanie grabbed her friend by the arm. "Right now."

"You do that," Knox said with a growl. "And I'm warning you. If you come back, I'll haul you in, no questions asked."

Melanie raced past him, her nearness making his teeth chatter.

The woman had the power to unnerve him—to stir sensations he'd never experienced before, and God knows he didn't like the feeling. It didn't set well in his gut, and he wasn't going to allow it to happen again. From this moment on he planned to avoid her. Melanie Sharp was becoming a distraction that he didn't need or want in his life.



Melanie lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. Why did Knox Manning have to come by and catch them snooping around Dean's house? Talk about bad luck. Now she had trespassing added to her list of offences.

She wanted to wring Kay's neck for suggesting it. And her friend coming on to Knox hadn't set well either. Why, Melanie wasn't sure, though when her friend had practically offered up her hand to him, Melanie's chest had constricted. The man was nothing to her, so why did it matter if Kay slept with him or not? He might be the one to tame her friend's wild ways—God knows Paul hadn't managed it.

Melanie chewed on her bottom lip. She'd thought Paul Nadar had been perfect for Kay, willing to see past her relationship phobias. She loved her best friend dearly, but she wasn't easy to get along with—to sustain any relationship with. At times, Melanie grew weary of Kay's attitude. Paul had complemented her—made her very happy until he wanted to tie the knot. The kiss of death, at least for Kay. Though something still shone in her friend's eyes when she spoke of him—a glint of interest Melanie was sure Kay didn't want to feel. Love. Need. Longing to have back what they'd shared. Who knows?

Her best friend played the tough broad to a tee. Too bad Melanie knew better, saw beyond her show of bravado. Kay had feelings, especially for Paul. There was no denying that. When she was with him or even when his name was mentioned, her eyes sparkled. Losing him had hurt her, though she didn't want to show anyone. Paul had refused to talk to Kay since she'd high-tailed it down the aisle with his best man.

Melanie found it hard to blame him. She herself hadn't talked to her friend for days after the wedding disaster. Her mind couldn't erase standing next to her at the wedding, holding her bouquet, and watching

Kay tuck her wedding dress between her legs and run. Paul's expression would be permanently burned into her memory—his look of pain and disillusionment.

Paul's handsome face faded. Knox's earth-shattering features replaced it and caused Melanie's body to heat.

She swallowed past the lump in her throat. Why did she find this man so unnerving—so appealing to her senses? Because, for some reason, he stimulated her body as no man had before. That's why. The man was hot—paralleling his line of work perfectly. Hell, he'd certainly started a fire between her legs. Yet could he put it out as easily?

Melanie clamped her hands over her face, embarrassed by the thought. Obviously she'd lost her mind. She was attracted to a man who made her feel as if she'd crawled out from under a rock. Besides, it hadn't gone unnoticed the way he'd checked out Kay's cleavage and found it to his liking.

She glanced down at her chest and grimaced. She was built like a boy, flat as a sheet of half-inch plywood. A fact that had always bothered her. Yet she refused to go under the knife to change what she was born with. To her, having larger breasts wasn't worth the risks. If Knox Manning had a taste for big-breasted women, he wasn't for her.

Rolling onto her side she heaved a sigh, disappointed by that fact. So Knox Manning was the sexiest man she'd ever known and she was undeniably drawn to him—he wasn't into her. The way he looked at her made that perfectly clear.

The phone rang, startling her out of the shortcomings she'd been dwelling on.

She stretched across her queen-sized bed to reach the receiver. "Hello."

"Mel, it's Dean."

Great, what did he want? Didn't he have enough to deal with now that his house was gutted?

"What do you want, Dean? It's late. I was about to go to bed."

"I want to join you," he said in a deep, sexually charged voice.

Would he ever give up? She'd told him a hundred times she wasn't planning to see him again, let alone sleep with him.

"Where's your wife, Dean? I don't think she'd appreciate you calling me. Don't you have more pressing problems to deal with?"

"Nothing is more important to me than you. I've told you I'd leave Tracy in a heartbeat. You give me the word and I'm at an attorney's office in the morning." He took a breath. "I'm in love with you, Mel. I can't think of anything except being with you."

What was Melanie supposed to say to that? Contempt was all she felt for him, a man who'd cheat on his wife and lie to the woman he claimed to love. Unfortunately, Barton had a sizable population and she'd only known what he'd told her, had no idea about his marriage and children. *He* sure as hell knew and chose to pursue her anyway. Deceit at its finest. To Melanie, love came with respect. She felt neither for Dean Grainger.

"Are you still there, Melanie?" His voice was just above a whisper. Had his wife walked into room? "Okay, thank you," he said. The phone went dead.

Melanie hung up and slammed her head back against the pillows. Dean was obviously playing both her and his wife. He didn't plan on losing both of them.

She snorted. With him it was one or the other. As far as Melanie was concerned though, he had no choice. His wife, Tracy, could have him.



“Manning, get your ass in here.” Knox heard the sharp edge to the chief’s tone and knew he was in deep shit. Nothing new. What had he done now?

He walked into Gallan’s office, hovering near the door in case he had to make a quick escape. “You wanted to see me, Chief?”

The chief looked up from the papers in front of him, his blue eyes narrowing slightly. “Come in and close the door.”

Knox did as instructed though his first impulse was to bolt.

“My daughter came by yesterday. She told me you refused to talk to her when she called. Is this true?”

Knox knew this day would come. He hadn’t been ready for it today. His mind was filled with red-haired waifs with striking blue eyes and lips that looked sweet as sugar. Just the thought of her mouth sent his heart racing. Somehow Melanie had become a drain on his mind, made it hard to think about the job or anything else. The whole thing made him angry. Right now the last thing he needed was the chief ragging on him. Why couldn’t Sandra be adult enough not to go running to her daddy with her problems? “I was on the job, Chief. I didn’t have time to talk. We do have an ongoing arson case to solve.”

“Yes, I realize that, but you should have called her when you’d finished. Did you come in to the firehouse at all yesterday?”

“Of course. I was here all morning. I went back out to Summerset yesterday afternoon to get some extra samples for the lab—the first ones were inconclusive. They were unable to isolate the type of accelerant used.” It was a lie, the results hadn’t come back yet. He just wanted the chief off his back.

The man rubbed at his gray, stubbled chin. “Sandra does need to talk to you. I expect you to be a man and call her.”

Knox's anger spiked. He'd had all he was going to take. The guy trying to tell him what he had to do in his personal life. No way. That was off limits. Let the man fire him. "It's over between your daughter and me, sir, and there's nothing she can say to change anything. So if you want my job, just say the word."

Knox didn't wait for the chief to reply, he threw open the door and stormed from the office. If there were a way to turn back time, he'd refuse to fall for Sandra Gallan's ploys to get her claws into him. Going out with her was the biggest mistake he'd ever made—an error he'd be paying for as long as he worked at the 901. And the indiscretion could actually cost him his career.

Chapter Four

Melanie stood back, her teeth chattering from the chill in the room. The bald eagle was ready to go. Nine hours of chiseling and then polishing the ice to give it a shine had it finally done.

She threw a cloth over the eagle and left the freezer, pushing the door closed. As she trudged toward the front of the warehouse she stripped off her coat, exhaustion taking hold of her.

She'd been lucky to find a place to work on her sculptures—fortunate that a friend had a warehouse with a walk-in freezer large enough to store her special ice and the finished work until delivery. Too bad it was miles from home.

In the morning she'd pick up the piece and present it to the centennial committee. This event was the highlight of the year for Barton. Everyone came out to celebrate the founding of their fair city and party into the wee hours of the morning.

Melanie intended to get a good night's sleep. She planned to enjoy tomorrow evening's dance, the last event of the centennial celebration.

With fatigued hands she locked the back door and walked to her car, amazed by the bright, full moon and twinkling stars above. The scent of honeysuckle and fresh cut grass filled the night's air. It was a perfect summer evening—one made for lovers. Too bad she didn't have one.

Her mind wandered back to Knox Manning. A man who hadn't been far from her thoughts since she'd met him. Unfortunately, he'd even

entered her dreams last night—a dream that had her waking up in a clammy, sexually charged sweat. In the dream he definitely knew how to put out a fire.

God, she'd become Kay overnight. She'd gone two years without sex—and eight weeks of dating a man who hadn't stirred any kind of sexual desire. Meeting Knox had changed that. It confused her—left her wondering why he made her feel things no other man had. She wanted to find out what was so special about him, why he stirred these sensations in her.

Headlights flashed, drawing her attention. A sedan pulled up next to her car. Dean. Great. She didn't want to deal with him now.

He jumped out of his car and rushed over. “Mel, you need to give me another chance. I told Tracy last night I was leaving her.”

Melanie's jaw dropped. This was the last thing she wanted to hear. No way did she want him to leave his wife—not for her. The idea was repugnant. You'd have to be totally in love with someone to break up a home like that. She certainly didn't love this man.

“Say something. I need to hear you tell me you love me, Mel.”

“No, Dean. I won't be the cause of a family break-up. I didn't know you were married when we were dating, though now that I do, I don't want to see you again.”

“I told you I'm leaving my wife. I love you, Mel.”

“Don't be a fool. Don't leave your wife. There's nothing between us.”

Enhanced by the moon's icy white glow, Melanie saw Dean's eyes turn deep hazel. He was angry.

“You do. I know you love me. You just don't want ‘home wrecker’ on your resume. We can move far away, Mel. Start over. No one would have to know.”

Melanie shook her head. “No, Dean! Go back to your wife and kids. Try to make things right with them.”

He grasped her shoulders painfully and pulled her close. “I don't want Tracy. I want you.”

In the back of Melanie's mind she knew this might escalate into something ugly if she didn't dispel his anger. “Let me go, Dean. You're hurting me.” Melanie never thought he'd be so obsessive. Apparently she knew very little about the man.

His grip relaxed, yet he didn't release her. “The last thing I want to do is hurt you, Mel. I need you. Tell me what you want me to do. I'll do anything.”

Think, Melanie. What would get you out of here safely?

They were out in the middle of nowhere. Nothing but warehouses for blocks. This was not a good time to be honest with him, especially in the mood he was in. “Give me some time to think about this,” she said, her heart pounding hard in her chest. “I can't think straight right now.”

His gaze burned into hers as he seemingly tried to decide if she told him the truth or not. Would her face give her away? Nervous sweat trickled between Melanie's shoulder blades and she held her breath until he finally released her.

“Okay. You think about us, Mel. I'll give you until tomorrow night. I want an answer, and the right one.”

Melanie stepped back, fumbling to find her keys in the large handbag hanging off her shoulder. Her hands shook so hard that when she found them, she almost dropped them. “I'll talk to you tomorrow.” Another lie, true, but she had to get away from him.

From this night on, she planned to stay away from Dean Grainger. Obviously he'd slipped a cog—and he scared Melanie to death.



“You’ll be stationed near the end of the fun booths,” the chief said to Knox and the other men sitting around the table on the second floor of the firehouse.

Knox was thankful he still had a job, yet knew he’d drawn the bum assignment. The men who’d worked the area in previous years had spoken of how they’d worked overtime to keep the town from burning to the ground.

He could see the chief having a good laugh at his expense. Just another way of making his life a living hell.

The chief stood. “Everyone has their assignments. You all put on a happy face out there. Let’s show Barton that the 901 is here, through rain, flood, earthquakes or fire to serve them and make their community a safe place to live.”

Knox wanted to cuss a blue streak. Safe or not, he was stuck with the shit detail and wasn’t looking forward to it one bit.

Making sure no booth burned down because of human error was a flunky’s job. Not one for a man in his position.

The year prior a Boy Scout troop, while trying to teach survival training, just about torched the raised platform for the annual Fire & Ice dance.

Knox only hoped nothing like that would happen on his watch.

He picked up the drawing of the booth setup from the city and studied it. They had something new this year, a palm reader. Total bullshit as far as Knox was concerned, though he was sure it’d do well. Everyone seemed to want to know his or her future. Hell, he didn’t need some seer to tell him what he already knew. He’d stay single and be happy about it.

Knox's gaze landed on another booth entry. A dunk tank. Did they still have those things? Maybe the chief would volunteer to be on the hot seat. What he wouldn't pay for a chance at dunking him.

He laughed. What a crazy day this was going to be. Watching the young and old, all of whom had eaten too much funnel cake, popcorn, and cotton candy, ending up at the EMT station for antacids.

A day from hell he wished was over.



Melanie gripped the steering wheel until her knuckles whitened. "I am not going to do it, Kay. Forget it."

"I need help, Mel. Glenda has the flu. She's too sick to be dunked."

"I am not going to sit on a plank and wait to get dropped into ice-cold water. This is your booth. You sit there." Melanie glared at her frowning friend.

"I know it is, Mel. But I need to have someone drawing people over. I'm better at that than you are."

Melanie rolled her eyes. Everything Kay did drew attention. Melanie would rather use her brains and talents first, then her body, not that using it got her what she wanted. Not with her board-like chest. Kay, on the other hand, was built like a Playboy Bunny and could lure any man for miles, even the man Melanie desired.

No! She refused to think about Knox Manning today. She had more pressing concerns—like how to avoid Dean. She should have a restraining order slapped on him, though from what she'd seen all that paper did was make the men who received them more determined to do something to the sender.

It would make Dean furious. Last night his eyes had turned dark when she'd told him to leave her alone. Putting it in writing might drive him over the edge so that even an army couldn't protect her.

"Come on. You're supposed to be my best friend, Mel. I need you to do this for me," Kay said, bringing Melanie back to the present, back to Kay's guilt trip. She always did this when Melanie refused to do something for her. Managed to talk her into it every time. She might as well give up and resign herself to being dunked in a tank all day. Hell, maybe she'd get lucky and die of pneumonia. At least then she wouldn't have to worry about Dean.

"Okay, I'll do it. Now lay off," she snapped, turning into a parking slot behind the thrift store.

"You're a saint." Kay leaned over and planted a kiss on her cheek. "I owe you one."

"You owe me more than one."

Melanie exited the car, pressing the lock before closing her door.

She knew this was going to be a very long day.



Melanie stuck her tongue out at the man trying to dunk her, laughing when he missed the target.

Luckily, so far no one had a good aim. She'd been perched on top the board for close to three hours, not once being dunked. Thank God it was mid-day and she wouldn't have to endure this much longer.

"You call that a throw," Melanie heckled, winking at Kay who smiled back at her. "I've seen toddlers with more power on the ball."

The tall, lanky man scowled at her, took his final throw at the target, and grazed the edge slightly. Melanie's stomach clenched, the chili-cheese dog she'd eaten earlier threatening to come up.

That was close. Maybe taunting them wasn't such a great idea.

The man walked away, his shoulders slumped in defeat.

Kay came to stand next to the tank. "You just about got dunked that time, Mel. Maybe you shouldn't rile them so much."

"I think you're right."

"I'd like to try my hand at this game," a deep, sexy voice said.

Oh my God. Knox Manning.

Her heart jumped, taking off at a breakneck speed when she stared into his haunting green eyes. The man was magnificent.

She swallowed hard and tried not to lose her balance on the perch. The jitters had taken hold and made it impossible to sit still.

He reached into his back pocket and took out his wallet. Was he serious about trying to dunk her?

He waved a bill at her friend who looked to her, obviously apprehensive about taking it. "Well, am I going to get a shot at her or not?" he asked Kay. He glanced at Melanie and winked.

Melanie snorted with bluster, though secretly she prayed he couldn't hit the broad side of a barn.

Kay handed him three balls and stood back. Some help she was. Why didn't she try to distract him?

He placed two of the balls down on the counter and rubbed the other one between his hands. "Did I tell you I played ball in college?"

Melanie's heart sank. She was going down.

He fixed his stance and with great force threw the ball, hitting the target square on.

Melanie felt the seat give way beneath her. She dropped, grabbing a last breath before going under. Icy cold water surrounded her. She came up sputtering, slapping at the water's surface.

Damnably man and his huge, nicely formed arms. From somewhere nearby she heard loud hoots of laughter. Was that Kay? Would her best friend laugh at her misfortune?

She swiped at the hair dripping in her face, and peeked at Knox who looked damned proud of himself. She stood in the water and glared at him, her teeth chattering uncontrollably.

“I have two more shots,” he said to her, picking up another of the white balls, rubbing it around in his hand.

And I would wring your arrogant neck.

Reluctantly, she waded over to the ladder and sloshed out of the water, her clothes clinging to her skin.

She slid onto the seat and glared at him again.

The devilish grin he wore just seconds earlier had vanished, replaced by something she wasn't sure of. She looked to Kay for answers. Her friend's face looked flushed. “What's wrong?” Melanie had no clue what had happened.

“Didn't you wear a bra?” Kay's cheeks blushed a bright pink.

Melanie looked down. Her white blouse clung to her breasts and had become completely transparent.

Her hands instinctively flew to cover herself. Heat infused her face. The man had been ogling her chest, visible through the wet shirt. How mortifying. She'd never be able to face him again.

Tears threatened to well in her eyes. Melanie refused to succumb to them.

What did it matter anyway? He found her unappealing though his intimate gaze hadn't appeared disgusted—just the opposite.

She shook off the thought.

Never again would she allow Kay to talk her into doing something for her. This was it—from this day forward she refused to play the fool for anyone.

Chapter Five

Knox pulled a white cotton polo shirt over his head, tucked the bottom into his pants and buckled his belt. On the floor next to him was a pair of comfortably worn black boots.

He sat on the bench in front of his locker and pulled them on.

After a six-hour detail he'd come back to the firehouse to change for the dance. Since that afternoon, his thoughts hadn't wandered far from Melanie and her sweet little, over-exposed breasts.

He'd never had such a reaction to seeing a woman's chest before. You'd think they'd been his first pair from the intense arousal overwhelming his body even at the memory, like it had at the time of exposure. He wanted Melanie with a passion he'd never experienced, which was strange considering she didn't fit his ideal image of the perfect woman. Even so, she sure as hell sent his body into fits of uncontrolled desire—so much so that he thought of little else.

He wanted to see her again—be close to her—find out if those unusual feelings he'd experienced had been a figment of his imagination. He had to, and soon, because the mere thought of her kept him in a constant state of firestorm.

He slid his wallet into his back pocket and headed out of the firehouse.

His heartbeat accelerated as he anticipated running into Melanie at the Fire & Ice event. He wanted ask her to dance.

What would she feel like in his arms? Would that strange humming start up once he got near her? He'd gotten a taste of the vibration when he'd seen her from across the fairground—razzing a patron trying to dunk her.

He'd had to laugh at the expression on her face when he'd asked for a shot at doing the same. Fear was evident in her pretty blue eyes, though they had also held tiny embers of desire. A man would have to be blind not to see that—how her irises had darkened a shade. She wanted him and, against his better judgment, he had to have her. She'd become an all-consuming obsession.

Sandra hadn't stirred emotions even close to what he felt just being near Melanie, and Sandra was supposed to be his type. The whole experience was too strange to fathom.

Melanie had somehow woven a spell around him and until he went to bed with her, he knew his desire would only grow stronger.

The only thing that didn't set well was that sleeping with her would be a conflict of interest. She was a suspect in the Grainger fire, though Knox didn't think she did it. True, her flier was found at the point of origin. Seemed too convenient. Something didn't fit. To him it appeared as if whoever had set the fire was trying to make it look like Melanie had.

Maybe tonight he could learn more—find out if she had any enemies who'd want to point the finger of suspicion at her. Someone who knew her well, was privy to the prior arson charge? That was another thing he planned to look into more as soon as he had some free time.

Something in Knox's gut said Melanie wasn't the type to do something so calculated or dangerous to other people. Not when she was an artist, someone who created beauty.

According to her she didn't even know the Grainger's. What would she have to gain? What was the motive? Most arsonists had one. Without a reason the whole thing didn't make sense.

His conclusion made him smile. If she weren't a suspect in his eyes, there'd be no reason not to date her. He'd make love to her—the one thing he wanted to do more than anything right now.

Once in his truck, he reached into the glove box, pulled out a bottle of cologne and sprayed some on. The soft, musky scent always seemed to arouse women and that was his goal tonight. He was determined to get Melanie to go back to his apartment. To put an end to this blasted humming once and for all. To be able to move on with his life as a single, contented man.



Melanie watched three couples sway to the music that came from the band in the corner of the raised platform.

Darkness had settled over the city of Barton and more and more people were arriving to dance until dawn.

She glanced over at the refreshment table, her ice sculpture glistening in the middle, food and drink surrounding it. A sense of pride made her beam.

Someone brushed her shoulder.

Inwardly she prayed it wasn't Dean.

She turned around and relief washed over her when she saw Kay. "It's beautiful, Mel."

Melanie was still angry with Kay, blamed her for the calamity earlier with Knox. "I shouldn't even talk to you. But thanks."

Her friend's pretty face scrunched up, her amber eyes narrowing. "I've told you I was sorry. What more do you want? Blood?"

Mel placed a finger to her lips, pretending to contemplate her friend's offer.

Kay rested her fists on her voluptuous hips. "Well?"

"Well, what?" Melanie thought it was about time Kay realized their friendship wasn't one-sided. That Melanie had feelings too and she was tired of playing the court jester.

"I *am* sorry, Mel. How was I supposed to know you weren't wearing a bra and the shirt you wore went peek-a-boo when wet?"

Melanie cringed at Kay's remark. Peek-a-boo was right. She was mortified at the memory of Knox's surprised expression. At first she'd thought she'd read desire in his gaze. But she knew better. She'd read the emotion wrong, that's all. He found her disagreeable at best. No matter what she'd like to believe.

"I'll forgive you, Kay, if you promise never to ask another favor of me." Melanie raised a questioning brow. "Do you think you can do that?"

"I can try." Kay squeezed her tight. She released her and glanced around the dance floor. "So who are we going to dance with tonight? Oh, look who just arrived." Kay gestured to the opposite end of the platform.

Melanie followed her friend's direction. When she spotted Knox her stomach fluttered.

The man looked heavenly. So tall and strong. The top of his head barely cleared the plastic icicles hanging from above. The white shirt he wore clung to his muscular chest and shoulders, highlighting his deep tan. Tight fitting jeans hugged his narrow hips and strong thighs. The outfit was completed by a pair of black, large-sized boots.

"Yummy," Kay said, drawing Melanie's attention back to her. "I want to take him out back and eat him."

"Oh my God, tell me you didn't just say that?"

Kay smacked her lips. "What? What's wrong with what I said?"

Melanie tried to keep her mouth from gaping in shock, but failed. Her friend was worse than any man she knew. “Kay, about that friendship thing.”

“Yes, what about it?”

“Don’t mess with Knox Manning.”

Kay’s eyes glistened with amusement. “Mel, you like him, don’t you? I was beginning to wonder about you. I thought you might have gone over to the other side.”

“What?” Melanie’s temper flared. “Not hardly, and I never said I liked Mr. Fireman.”

“You didn’t have to. I can see it in your eyes. You want to take him out back and eat him.”

“Stop saying that. That’s terrible.”

Kay glanced at Knox, then quickly returned her attention to Melanie. “I bet it wouldn’t be terrible at all. I bet it would be very, very good.”

“Oh God, he’s coming over,” Melanie whispered. “Don’t say anything embarrassing or I’ll kill you.”

Melanie’s gaze dropped to her feet. She was too afraid to look at him.

“Ladies,” he said once his boots had stopped a few feet from her pink sandaled feet.

Melanie’s mind was in a jumble and her eyes refused to look up. Kay’s insinuation kept popping to mind—her and Knox out back engaging in a little tongue-on-tongue action.

Her face burned at the thought. In a matter of days she’d turned into an over-sexed kitten, like Kay. Obviously they’d spent too much time together. Somehow Kay’s free and easy lifestyle had rubbed off on her and Melanie was too ashamed to look at Knox. She might embarrass herself further.



Knox's gaze locked on Melanie. She looked breathtaking in a clingy pink dress that came down to just above her knees. Her hair was done up in a ringlet style that made her look soft and feminine. He wanted to pull her into his arms and kiss her. Though for some reason, she wouldn't even look at him—probably still embarrassed about the dunk tank incident.

"Would you like to dance, Mr. Manning?" Melanie's friend asked, drawing Knox's attention to her.

Disappointment filled him. He didn't want to dance with Melanie's friend. He wanted to dance with Melanie.

"Sure." Knox didn't want to hurt the lady's feelings, even when she wasn't the woman he wanted to hold in his arms.

"Great. Melanie was just saying how much she wanted to dance to this tune. Weren't you, Mel?"

Melanie's head flew up, her eyes filled with panic. "I...ah...yeah."

Knox could barely contain his excitement. He held out his hand, pleased when she placed her delicate fingers around his. Electricity shot up his arm and bolted down his backbone, ending at the tips of his toes.

Damn. What would making love to her be like if just touching her sent a shockwave through his entire being? Somehow he knew it'd be an experience he'd never forget—one to dull all others.

Maybe getting involved with her wasn't such a great idea. What if she got him to thinking the single life wasn't all it was cracked up to be? What if she finagled her way into his heart and he liked it?

Hah! Not in this lifetime. Or any other. He was single and free to come and go as he pleased. No skinny red-haired woman would ever change that.

He lead her out to the middle of the dance floor, placed his hand on the small of her back and pulled her into him, so close he felt warmth radiating off her body—heard her heart pounding.

The perfume she wore was a heady mixture of exotic flowers and earthy tones, each complimenting the other, driving his senses crazy.

Desire coursed through him. Before it got out of control, he tamped it down. He was a grown man. He needed to remember that. For now. Once he got her back to his apartment he'd allow himself the luxury of touching her—inhaling her, tasting every inch of her skin.

“Sorry about dunking you this afternoon.”

She pulled back to look up at him. “I'd been lucky until you came along.”

Knox smiled. “So how'd the booth do?”

“Very well. Kay can bring in men for miles. I was lucky most everyone's aim was off.”

“Your friend does have a flare for drawing attention, though she's not my type.” It was a lie. She was exactly his type—or at least had been until he'd set his sights on a skinny blue-eyed artist.

Melanie pursed her lips.

“You look skeptical.”

She shrugged. “I guess I've never met anyone who didn't find Kay attractive.”

“I never said I didn't find her attractive. I'm just not interested.”

The spark in her powder blue eyes faded. “You're dating someone?”

He shook his head. “No, I'm not.”

“So if Kay isn't your type, then...”

Knox brought his thumb to her mouth to stifle her words and brushed it lightly across her bottom lip, mesmerized by the soft, supple texture.

Their eyes locked. Time seemed to stand still until the music ended. The spell Knox was under was broken when couples leaving the dance floor swept past them.

Reluctantly he led Melanie back to her friend's side. "Thanks for the dance, Ms. Sharp."

Knox needed time to regroup. The simple contact with her lips had made him hard.

He needed to cool down.

He'd bide his time, wait until Melanie had worked up enough sexual frustration, then he'd corner her again. That's when he'd convince her with a few passionate kisses that a night in his bed was just what the doctor ordered. It sure as hell would be a magic pill for him—like a dose of Viagra to a geriatric patient.

He'd gone without sex since he'd broke up with Sandra and it was going on three months now—a record drought for him—one he planned to put an end to tonight with Melanie in his arms.

Chapter Six

Melanie's bottom lip tingled long after the touch of Knox Manning's magic fingers left it.

Intimately, he'd caressed her, then left her side—only to dance with every available woman from twenty-five to forty in the town of Barton. Talk about mixed messages.

Obviously the man was an insatiable flirt. Every woman seemed enchanted by him after a whirl around the dance floor in his strong capable arms. She couldn't blame them. He was an amazing looking man. His charm had certainly blindsided her.

"He can see you watching him." Kay wrapped her arm around Melanie's shoulder.

"Who?" Why had Melanie's plans of appearing unaffected failed so miserably? Maybe it was just Kay who'd noticed.

"Who? Please, Mel. I'm not a five-year-old. And neither are you. Quit staring at him and wipe the drool from the corner of your mouth. You look like a rabid dog."

"I'm not drooling," Melanie snapped.

"Really? So why is there a puddle at your feet?"

Melanie looked down before she realized her error. Oh boy. She was in trouble.

Kay giggled.

“Stop laughing at me.” Melanie’s face heated. “I can't help staring. He's so hot. He's like watching a burning building, you can't turn away.”

“Yes, he is scorchingly handsome. Remember though, men want to be the ones to chase women. They're strange creatures. Panting after a man is fine as long as they don't know you're doing it.”

Melanie wasn't sure if she believed Kay or not. Though Dean seemed to like the fact that she didn't want him. Maybe her friend's observation was right. Men didn't like women who liked them.

Odd, according to some doctor she couldn't name, men and women were from different planets. Believing that wasn't hard.

Hell, to Melanie the male species came from another solar system altogether. A system where no man had any sense and they toyed with women's hearts. As far as Melanie was concerned Knox Manning wasn't playing fair. Coming on strong and then leaving her to deal with all this pent-up desire.

Kay tugged on Melanie's shoulder. “You're doing it again. You have to stop looking at the man as if he were a bar of fine chocolate on the first day of your period.”

Melanie frowned at her friend's analogy. “I don't even like chocolate.”

Kay rolled her eyes. “It was a metaphor, silly. I know you don't like chocolate. That wasn't my point.”

Melanie's patience slipped. “Okay, get to your point because I'm not getting any younger here.”

“That's right. You're not. What I'm trying so badly to say, dear friend, is—if you want this man, don't look so eager.”

Why did none of this make any sense?

Wait a minute. I'm mad at Knox and he isn't even doing this on purpose. It's a game men and women play. Another type of dance.

True, it was skewed, but who could change that?

Kay knew the dance well, had always gotten any man she'd set her sites on—though she'd be very disappointed to know that Knox had no interest in her.

The thought brought a smile to Melanie's face.

"What?" Kay asked, her flawlessly unlined forehead etched. "What's so funny?"

"Oh nothing." Melanie caught a glimpse of someone on the other side of the raised platform. Her attention focused in on the person's face—Paul. "Don't look now, Kay, but your ex just showed up."

Her friend looked confused, her gaze darting around, landing on the one man who always brought a spark to her eyes.

She sighed. "Doesn't he look heavenly?"

Melanie studied her friend and knew at that very moment Paul Nadar meant the world to Kay. She just wouldn't admit it to anyone—including herself.

Somehow Melanie had to get the two back together. She wasn't sure how. The two were perfect for one another and Melanie had to find a way to help them come to terms with that.



Knox sipped his beer, admiring the ice sculpture in front of him. A bald eagle depicted in flight. Beautifully done. Crystal clear, sparkling like a multifaceted diamond. The man who created it clearly was an artist in his own right.

"It's amazing isn't it?" A female voice asked from beside him.

Knox glanced over to find Melanie's friend standing next to him.

"The name's Kay, by the way." She extended her hand to Knox.

He shook it. "Knox Manning."

“Yes, I know.” Her eyes connected with his. “She only does these sculptures to pay for her painting supplies.”

Knox was confused. Who was she talking about? Was he supposed to know? “She?” he asked, glancing back at the eagle.

“Melanie, of course. She’s made them for the last three centennials. Last year’s was a mermaid diving into the ocean. It was gorgeous.”

Knox’s looked at the eagle again. Melanie had done the sculpture? What a talented artist she was. He’d never dreamed she could create something so lifelike out of a block of ice.

“Painting is her true passion. She has her first showing at Shavendoah’s Gallery in Chicago next week. A goal she's been working toward for years.”

“She’s talented.” Knox's mind wandered to an image of Melanie’s hands creating a piece of work. Those capable hands on him, her feathery touch gliding over every inch of his body. The mere thought sent a bolt of desire shooting through him and made his cock respond with a rigid salute. Damn. The woman was driving him crazy. He wanted her with every breath he took. Tonight she’d be his if he had to tie her up with a fire hose and kiss her senseless.

“Where’d Melanie go?” he asked, too impatient to wait any longer. At this point they’d be lucky if they made it to his apartment. He might just make love to her in his truck, in the parking lot of the County Mart. Who gave a shit if his ass was seen by all bystanders making their way to their cars for the night? He was about to explode. He wanted Melanie and he wasn’t waiting for her to come to him.

“She went to get a sweater out of her car. It’s parked behind the thrift store.”

“Thanks. Oh and, Kay, if she doesn’t come back, don’t worry. She’ll be in capable hands.”

Kay smiled. "Yes, I'm sure of that."

Knox grinned back at her. Melanie's friend seemed as jaded as he was. She knew the score and had no problem with what he had planned for her friend.

He walked past the platform and headed down the path toward the small strip mall where Barton's only thrift store was located. A montage of flattering observations pinged around in his brain. Women loved to hear how beautiful they were, how terribly appealing you found them. But Melanie didn't seem to be the typical vain type. He might need to use a different tactic with her. Tell her how he found her art moving. And while he was at it, ask if they could go to her place to check out her etchings.

God, what the hell was he thinking? No way was he going to say something so lame. Besides, she'd know it was a line. She wasn't dumb. He'd have to handle Melanie with kid gloves if he wanted her to go to bed with him.

A woman's angry voice interrupted the silence, drawing Knox out of his thoughts of seduction.

"You'd just better stay away from him or I'll make sure you pay," the female voice said, a determined air to her tone.

"Like I said, I don't have any intentions toward your husband. He's the one who keeps pursuing me."

Knox stopped in his tracks. No way. It wasn't Melanie. Was it? What the hell was going on? Who was this other woman and had Melanie been messing around with her husband?

"Dean told me you keep calling him. Telling him to leave me. I know about everything, you little bitch."

“No, you know nothing,” Melanie’s voice rose an octave, “Your husband won’t leave me alone. As soon as I found out he was married I refused to see him again. He’s the one who won’t let go.”

“Right! Like I’d believe anything you say. You’re nothing but a skinny-assed home wrecker. Did you ever once think of our children? They’re just babies. They need their father.”

“Believe me, I don’t want your husband, Mrs. Grainger. If you want someone to blame, look to Dean for that. I had no idea when I met him that he was married. Now I’m going. Please just leave me alone.”

Disillusionment wrapped around Knox’s shoulders like a heavy wool blanket, weighing him down. The ramifications of what Melanie had said quickly sank in. She knew Dean Grainger—had dated the man—and lied to him about the whole sordid mess. Which now meant she had a motive for arson, a big reason to extract revenge against the Grainger family. An affair with a married man, one who refused to leave his wife for her, was a pretty good reason to set fire to their home.

The desire for Melanie vanished and was quickly replaced with anger.

Knox turned and retraced his steps to the dance floor. How could he have been so stupid? Falling for a woman who burns down houses for revenge.

Never again would he allow his personal feelings to get in the way of his job.

Melanie Sharp had once again become the prime suspect in his arson case and that meant she was null and void in any other capacity.



Melanie weaved her way through the crowd of people, mortified by what had just happened. Tracy Grainger had no idea about her husband’s twisted personality. Was blind to the man’s lies. Melanie

wasn't. She knew who Dean was. An opportunist. If she had been willing to continue to see him then he would have left his wife. But since she hadn't been, he'd told Tracy that Melanie was the one instigating their relationship. That *she* wouldn't leave *him* alone.

Why were men such pigs?

Dean Grainger was as rotten as they came. She'd need to steer clear of that whole family.

She crossed the dance floor and made her way to Kay, who leaned on the refreshment table, a glass in her hand. When she saw Melanie coming she frowned. "What are you doing back?" Kay's voice was almost accusing.

"I just went to get a sweater. What did you think I was going to do? Leave?"

"Yes," Kay shot back. "With Knox. He went looking for you. What happened?"

Melanie's eyes widened. She hadn't seen him. Suddenly the encounter with Tracy Grainger resurfaced. Had Knox overheard their argument?

She played it back in her mind. Oh God! She'd admitted to dating Dean. Just the opposite of what she'd told Knox. She'd said she didn't know the Grainger's. Now he knew she'd lied and would use it as a motive for her to have set the fire. "Why was he coming to talk to me?" Melanie asked Kay, a sick, sinking feeling now in the pit of her stomach.

"He planned to take you home with him. The man had passion shooting from his eyes. It was clear he had designs on you. What the heck happened?"

"Tracy Grainger happened. She cornered me at my car. Told me to stay away from Dean. Knox must have overheard the conversation and changed his mind. From what was said, he now knows I was seeing Dean

and that I lied to him when he came to discuss the fire. I told him I didn't know the Grainger's."

Kay shook her head. "I'm sorry, Mel. I wish I hadn't told him where you were."

"It's not your fault. You didn't know."

"Now what?" Kay asked.

"I guess I'll be on the top of his list of suspects again. He'll be especially vigilant now that he knows I lied about Dean. He'll probably even believe what Tracy said. That I was in love with Dean and wouldn't leave him alone."

Kay sat her cup on the table and grasped Melanie by the shoulders. "You'll just have to tell him the truth, prove to him you have no interest in Dean Grainger. Use your feminine wiles. Show him that his firemen's pole is the only one you'd like to slide up and down. And if that doesn't work, prove it to him."

"You mean—"

Kay nodded. "Yes. You do what you have to, to get him hot."

"I can't do that, Kay."

"Yes you can. I know you want him and, up until a few minutes ago, Knox wanted you. Do what you have to, Mel, or you just might end up in a maximum security prison, in a cell block filled with love-starved women vying for your affection."

The awful image took shape in Melanie's troubled mind. She refused to go to jail. She had to do something. Would seducing Knox prevent her incarceration? Would she even be able to lure him into bed?

She cringed at the thought of rejection.

Rejection or not she had to do something and fast before she found herself in a prison cell with Kay's scenario a high probability.

Chapter Seven

Knox tapped lightly on his sister Tara's front door and waited. He needed something to ground him today and she'd always been able to do that in the past.

When no one answered he knocked again.

A few seconds later the door eased opened, a small pair of fingers reaching around the doorframe. A little boy's cherub face popped out, his green eyes lighting up with excitement. "Uncle Knox!"

The boy charged toward him and leaped into his arms. "Cody. How's my superhero today?"

The exhilaration on the little boy's face faded. "Mommy said I can't be Spidey anymore. She said I'd get hurt."

That sounded like his sister. Since Tony went on the lam, she'd been overly protective of the boys.

Knox smiled. "Well, have you decided what you're going to be now?"

"I wanta be a fireman like you, Uncle Knox."

Knox's heart swelled with pride. "You do, huh? What would your mom think of that?"

The boy's eyes grew huge. "Don't tell her. She won't let me do anything anymore."

"She's just being a mom. Like Grandma was with me. She's scared you'll hurt yourself."

“I wanta be a fireman bad. Maybe you can talk to Mommy. Tell her I won’t get hurt.”

“I’ll see what I can do, okay? Where is your mom anyway?”

“She went to put Ty in bed. He has the sniffles. He’s been real icky.”

Knox loved both his nephews and hated when either was sick. “Has he? Are you getting a cold, too?”

“Nope. I’m tough.” Cody flexed his stick arms. “Mommy said she hopes I don’t get it. She said she needs to get some sleep tonight.”

Knox carried Cody into the house and placed him in front of the entertainment center in the living room. “You think you might tell your mommy I’m here without waking Ty?”

“Yep, I can.” He puffed out his chest. “You promise to ask Mommy if I can be a fireman.”

Knox ran his hand over the boy’s dark buzz-cut hair. “Sure thing, buddy.”

When Cody ran from the room Knox glanced around. Even with a sick child, Tara kept the place looking like an ad from Good Housekeeping. How his sister had time to breathe, let alone clean, was a surprise to him. His apartment was a mess and he was never there. Tara had two rambunctious boys and her place looked like a shrine. She’d clearly gotten the clean gene in their family.

“Knoxville, what are you doing here?” a soft voice asked from behind him.

Knox snapped around. “Don’t call me that,” he snarled. “You know I can’t stand it. I don’t care if I was conceived there. They didn’t have to give me the name to immortalize the event.”

Tara laughed. “You know Dad and his love of history.”

“Yeah, unfortunately I know Dad. Is he still seeing that waitress in Wagner? Or has he moved on again?”

“I know you don’t like Dad’s lifestyle, Knox, but remember, he’s your father. You need to show him some respect.”

“When Mom can walk freely in town without everybody whispering about how blind she’d been to his philandering, I will.”

Tara’s eyes narrowed. “Mom doesn’t care what people think. Neither should you. Besides, you’re no angel according to what I’ve heard.”

“I’m not married,” Knox said in his own defense. “Dad was.”

“Mom and Dad had problems for years. You were just too busy with sports to see that.”

“We’ve been over this a thousand times, Tara. I don’t want to get into it again. So Cody told me Ty’s sick. What’s wrong?”

“He’s got the sniffles. He’s better today. I’m just praying Cody doesn’t catch it. You know how he gets when he’s not feeling well.”

Knox nodded. Cody didn’t deal well with being sick. He was an active child, and when he couldn’t be, it didn’t sit well with him.

“So what brings you here? Usually there’s a reason for your visits.” Tara arched a questioning brow. The look reminded him of their mother. Barbara Manning always graced him with the same expression when she was trying to extract information from him. His sister had learned how to play him with equal skill.

“Well,” Tara prompted. “I’m waiting.”

Knox shrugged. “The chief’s been on my back about Sandra. She won’t stop calling and...I’ve got an arson case that’s been bugging me.”

Tara pointed to the couch. “Sit and tell me who she is.”

“What do you mean?” Knox stared at his sister, flabbergasted that she read him like a book. Then again, he did the same with her. Instinctively he knew if Tara was troubled. She obviously had the same gift when it came to him, knew something beyond work and his ex was on his mind.

He sat on the sofa and tried to organize his thoughts.

Tara plopped down in the chair across from him and Knox noticed how tired she looked. Maybe if he took the boys out when Ty was feeling better it would give his sister some much-needed rest.

“So tell me about her.” Tara’s eyes lit up at the prospect of hearing something juicy. Clearly she needed to get a life. Quit living through his.

“There’s nothing to tell.”

“Right. You forget who you’re talking to. I know you, dear brother. I can see that for once a woman is on your mind instead of a fire.”

Knox frowned, shifting uncomfortably on the sofa. “How can you see that?”

Tara placed her hands firmly on the arms of the chair and leaned forward. “I just can. Now tell me who she is.”

She wouldn’t stop hounding him until he told her about Melanie. He knew that. He might as well spill his guts. Maybe his sister would have some clear answers as to why he felt so drawn to a woman who he shouldn’t be.

“Okay, okay. There is a woman. Though I have no idea why I’m even thinking about her. She’s the prime suspect in this arson case I’m working on.”

“Wow, talk about a conflict. Do you think she did it?”

“I didn’t until last night.”

Tara frowned at his remark. “Last night? What happened to change your mind?”

“She was screwing around with the married guy who owned the house. So she had a motive.”

His sister’s eyes narrowed again. “That would be a motive. Why are you interested in this woman? She sounds like an awful person. Having

an affair with a married man? Especially with how you feel about Dad and what he did to Mom.”

“I found out last night. Before that she’d told me she didn’t know the family in question.”

“So she lied as well.” Tara shrugged. “What’s the problem?”

What was his problem? Hell if he knew. “I guess the problem is I can’t stop thinking about her.”

Tara’s hazel eyes grew enormous and from the look on her face, she was trying hard not to smile.

“What’s so funny?” Knox’s tone was sharper than he’d intended it to be. Why would his sister think this situation amusing? He’d always felt her pain, had been there after Tony had knocked her around and stood by her when she’d decided that she’d had enough of his abuse.

“I’m sorry, Knox. I’ve just never seen you like this. It’s a nice change.”

“What do you mean, a nice change?”

“Well, it’s good to see that you actually can feel something for a woman, though this one doesn’t sound like the right lady to get involved with. What about your career? She might put a damper on any advancement, especially after Sandra.”

“I know that, Sis. It’s just that no matter how hard I try, I just can’t get her off my mind. She pops into my head when I least expect her to. I was seriously considering sleeping with her last night before I found out about the affair.”

“How did you find out?”

“I overheard her arguing with the guy’s wife.” Knox shifted on the sofa again, replaying the women’s argument over in his head. Melanie hadn’t denied seeing Dean Grainger, though she did say she had no idea he was married at the time. As soon as she found out she ended it.

She ended it?

Was that right? Could she have been a victim in this, too?

Knox didn't know what to think. There was only one way to find out the truth—one person who knew the answers to the questions plaguing him.

"I gotta run, Sis. I have to see a girl about a fire."



Melanie dipped her brush into a glob of black paint and swept it across the empty canvas.

She was in a dark mood and it was getting darker by the second.

Knox Manning was the cause. He was the reason she had a storm cloud hovering and it was about to rain all over her. Without even giving Melanie a chance to tell her side of the story, he'd heard and misread only one side, choosing to believe what Tracy Grainger had said. He thought she was a home wrecker and an arsonist all rolled up into one person.

The more she thought about it, the angrier she got.

She smashed the brush on the canvas and made a big black X, then tossed the paintbrush into a can of turpentine.

Painting was useless. She wasn't in the mood.

Wiping her hands with a rag, she draped the cloth on the easel. Her stomach growled, reminding her that she hadn't eaten all day. She headed for the kitchen.

As she opened the refrigerator the front doorbell rang.

Who could that be? Kay had a meeting this afternoon. God, what if it was Dean? Or Tracy? Melanie couldn't deal with either right now.

Maybe she'd just pretend she wasn't home.

The bell rang again. And again seconds later.

What was she going to do?

She walked down the hall to the front door and peeked out the curtain.

Her heart skipped a beat when she saw Knox standing on her porch, looking devastatingly handsome and tempting as sin. Her throat parched while her heart thumped in her chest. What was he doing here? Had he come to arrest her?

She glanced out the window again, relieved to see no patrol car parked next to his truck. She'd been through this once before, knew the drill.

Taking a deep calming breath, she opened the door.

The first thing that hit her senses was the spicy male cologne drifting her way, and her heart rate kicked up a notch. He wore a white cotton shirt and pair of blue trousers tailored perfectly to fit him. How she'd love to see him from the back.

Melanie sighed.

"Ms. Sharp." Knox shifted his stance. He was nervous. Why? What would he have to be anxious about? She was the one being looked at under a microscope. Not him.

"Mr. Manning." Melanie found it hard to look him directly in the face. Eye contact would buckle her knees. The man had irises the vibrant color of fresh clover, all lush and green. A girl could get lost in them, find herself doing anything as long as she stared into their depths. They were hypnotic.

"I need to ask you some questions." His statement snapped her attention to his face. He looked serious—almost grim. She was in trouble if she was reading him correctly.

"Come in." Her voice shook and she was sure he'd heard it.

She led him to the living room and pointed to a chair adjacent the sofa.

Once he'd seated himself, Melanie sat. "So, what did you need to know, Mr. Manning?"

He crossed one leg over the other. The action sent a cold chill coursing through her blood. This was bad. She knew it. He didn't know where to start.

"I came across some information I'd like you to clear up."

"Okay. What is it?"

He cleared his throat. "Do you know Dean Grainger?"

Here it was. Time to tell the whole truth and nothing but.

"Yes. I lied to you about Dean because I wasn't proud of what happened."

His green-eyed stare intensified. "And what was that?"

"I dated him for a few months. At the time I had no idea the man was married. When I found out, I ended our relationship. Dean didn't take it well."

He frowned. "Why do you say that?"

"Because two days ago he told me he was leaving his wife and that he wanted me to run away with him." She twisted her hands. "I told him to go back to Tracy. That I didn't love him. He wouldn't listen. For some reason he thinks we have a future together."

Knox brows furrowed further. "So why would he think that?"

Was he angry with her? Why should he care who she'd dated?

Angry or not she wasn't going to allow him to intimidate her. "Dean's flipped. I have no idea why he thinks we should be together. I told him I didn't love him. Heck, he lied not only to his wife, but to me. Tracy Grainger thinks I'm pursuing him when he's the one who won't let it go."

"You must be pretty good in bed to be able to break up a family."

Melanie sucked in a ragged breath, stunned by Knox's remark. Why would he say such a thing?

“I never slept with Dean. Am I so unappealing that it would have to be a sexual thing for him to want me? I think this conversation is over. I’m going to ask you to leave now, Mr. Manning. If you want to talk to me again, call my attorney.”

“Look, Melanie—”

“Don’t call me that. That’s Ms. Sharp to you. I asked you politely to leave, now I’m telling you to.”

He rose, his gaze locking with hers.

Seconds ticked by. Electricity crackled in the air.

Like a jungle cat, he moved toward her, pulled her into his arms, his mouth coming down hard on her mouth.

The moment his lips touched hers Melanie’s brain went south. Intense heat engulfed her. Without a thought of what would happen her body responded.

His tongue moved between her lips, forcing her mouth open, and once inside, his tongue was merciless. Tasting her, sucking any coherent thought from her mind. His intimate exploration was like throwing fuel on a dying fire, building hot flames inside her. Her stomach tightened and wet heat coursed between her legs. Nothing mattered except for what this man was doing. An uncontrollable yearning filled her, a mindless, weightless passion. No kiss had ever made her feel like she was floating before. She was afraid of how far she’d allow it to go. Dragging him to her bedroom and closing out the world came to mind. Abruptly, Knox pulled away, his breathing deep and erratic. Without saying a word he turned and walked out the door.

Melanie stood in the middle of the living room, staring after him, her entire body tingling, wanting him to come back and put out the fire he’d started...though instinctively she knew he wouldn’t.

Chapter Eight

Knox sat in his truck outside Melanie's house, watching the sun fade in the west, still blown away by his reaction to the kiss they'd shared. Talk about a mind-altering experience. He'd never felt anything close to what he had when kissing her. It was crazy. All he'd wanted to do was carry her to the sofa and make love to her. He knew if he did, he'd never be able to mix his crazy feeling for her with an arson investigation. Would have to take himself off the case and the chief might use his actions as a way of canning him from the 901. He wasn't losing his job. Being a fire investigator had become his life. No way would he allow this wild unexplained thing with Melanie Sharp to cost him his career.

He started the truck, took one last look at Melanie's home, and left.

Before he had said he'd steer clear of her, but now he had to actually do it to stay on track. To stay focused on his work and solve this case. That way he'd never have to hear her name mentioned again. Which was the only means to get her out of his system.

His cell phone rang. He unclipped it from his belt and flipped it open. "Knox Manning."

"Knox, I need you to come over," Tara said, her voice strained. "You're not going to believe this. Tony just called. He wants to see the boys."

Knox's anger ignited. The man had some nerve demanding anything from his sister after beating her to within inches of her life. Knox would never forget the sight of her pale bruised face in the hospital. His mother

crying at her bedside. His hatred had grown tenfold for Tony that day. He'd promised himself Tara's husband would suffer by his hand—the way his sister had by Tony's. If Knox had his way the man would never get to see the boys again. "I'm on my way, Sis. If he shows up before I do, don't let him in the house."

"Okay, hurry, Knox. I'm scared he'll try and take the boys."

"I'll be there in ten minutes. Go make sure all the doors are locked."

"Okay."

Knox flipped his phone shut and threw it on the seat, stomping on the accelerator, adrenaline bursting through his bloodstream.

He was finally going to get his chance to make Tony pay for what he'd done. He'd held it in for close to six months now. He saw the whole thing clearly, his hands on Tony, kicking the shit of him—his face looking worse than his sister's had at that animal's hands.

Hitting a woman was beyond his comprehension. Tony had been a bully all his life. Had beaten Tara from day one, even going so far as to shove Cody for trying to protect his mother the last go-around. That was when Tony went into hiding. Afraid of Knox's retaliation and of being arrested. What a wimp. No one had seen him in months. Knox was going to make sure the man ended up to prison for his abuse. Even if Knox had to find him and drag him into the precinct himself. Beating the man, no matter how badly he wanted to, went against everything he knew as right. So picturing the man battered and bruised was all he could do, especially with his own job on the line right now.

As he pulled into Tara's driveway he saw an older model car speed away from the curb.

Was it Tony? Had he seen Knox's truck coming and thought it wise to hightail it out of there? Sounded like him. Afraid to face a man.

Scum bag.

Knox would get his chance and when he did, Tony Ansenee would regret ever laying a finger on his sister. First he had to make sure Tara stayed safe—which meant he'd have to find her another place to live until he got his hands on her soon-to-be ex-husband.



“What’s wrong with you today?” Kay asked, shaking Melanie’s shoulder. “Have you heard a word I said?”

“Huh?” Melanie stared at her friend, then glanced around at the people frequenting the outside eatery. “What was the question?” She hadn’t been listening. Her mind was elsewhere—on Knox. His kiss still warmed her lips even after a day. A whole agonizing twenty-four hours of feeling the pressure, the fresh exhilarating taste of his tongue tangled with hers. It was becoming unbearable. Her body tingled all over, a sensation that made sleep impossible.

“I bet I know what you’re thinking about.” Her friend’s eyes danced with interest. “Mr. Manning and his extraordinary abilities with fire. You know, starting an inferno, and trying to put it out.”

Putting it out. Hah! I wouldn’t know about that.

Melanie scowled. “These fire references are getting old, Kay. Can’t you come up with something a little more original?”

“Okay, here’s one you can relate to. Has he stopped by to see your paintings yet?”

Melanie snorted. “Right. I think he’d rather see me in handcuffs.”

Adding to the rosy glow Kay now grinned like a Cheshire cat. “I got that impression, too. I saw the glint in his eyes when I mentioned the cuffs the day he caught us snooping around the Grainger’s house. I think he’d be open to the kinky stuff.”

Melanie shook her head. Her best friend was truly unbelievable. “Do you have sex on the brain?”

Kay grinned. “Of course. Do you even have to ask?”

Well, at least she was honest. Didn’t lie about it being an intricate part of her life. Getting down and dirty seemed to be on Melanie’s mind a lot lately, too. Ever since she’d met Knox with his incredibly tempting biceps—arms she so vividly remembered being wrapped in as his tongue drove her wild. But sleeping with him to save her hide wasn’t going to happen. She had her pride if nothing else.

Heat infused her face. What did she have to do to get this man off her mind? Thank God her showing was in three days. She’d be getting out of town for a while. Get a new perspective on things.

“Did something happen you’re not telling me?” Kay asked, regaining Melanie’s attention.

No way was Melanie telling her about the kiss or her feelings for a man who obviously hadn’t liked the encounter they’d shared, what with walking out like he had. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, have you seen Mr. Hottie?”

“Mr. who?” Melanie’s attempt at sloughing off Kay’s comment went right by her friend.

“You know who. What happened?” Kay stuck out her bottom lip. “I can see in your eyes that you’re hiding something from me. I’m hurt because I tell you everything.”

“That’s allergies you’re seeing, Kay. Besides, I don’t ask you to tell me everything. You just do, and sometimes it’s an over-share.”

“Thanks” The sparkle in Kay’s eyes disappeared. “I’ll remember that you have no interest in my life. I have to get back to work. I’ll get the check on my way out.”

Her friend rose.

“Kay, I’m—”

“Forget it,” she said, cutting Melanie off. “I know you’re under a lot of pressure. I’ll talk to you later.”

Melanie watched her leave. By the ramrod state of Kay’s back she knew she was upset. She’d gone too far. Kay didn’t show her true feelings often and Melanie knew she’d been hurt by her remark. She wanted to kick herself. Talk about putting your foot in your mouth. Now she was going to have to make it up to her. Yet how? What did Kay want more than anything?

A plan formulated in Melanie’s head. Kay wanted Paul Nadar. It wouldn’t be easy to get them back together. Paul was angry with Kay for running out on him. Though would he be so furious if he didn’t still love her?

The only way to find out was to get them alone—to a place where Paul wouldn’t be able to walk away. Maybe some remote cabin with no means for escape until they’d had enough time to work things out. A romantic getaway where they’d fall into one another’s arms and confess their undying love.

What a perfect picture.

Another one popped into Melanie’s head. The two in the same secluded cabin trying to kill each other.

The image brought her back to reality. Nothing good would come of her interfering in destiny. Maybe it was best not to meddle in other people’s affairs, especially when her own life was such a disaster.

If Kay and Paul were meant to be together the forces of nature would intervene—not a friend who said something she shouldn’t have.



Knox swallowed the last bit of apple pie his mother had shoved in front of him and took a drink of coffee to wash it down. He glanced around the room and smiled. So many memories. This was the house he'd grown up in and nothing had changed. The kitchen still had the same ugly wallpaper—a striped pattern that had been popular in the seventies.

“Well, how was the pie?” Barbara Manning asked, walking in from the utility room with a basket of laundry, her focus on Knox’s empty plate. The woman was like a hawk, with the way she watched him, took in everything around her. She never missed a thing. Something of a hindrance growing up. The woman had spotted lies from miles away. Except when it was one his father told.

Knox knew what she wanted to hear from him. “Your pie is the best, Mom. You already know that though.”

“Yes, but I still want to hear you tell me so.”

Knox laughed. His mom had an ego that had to be stroked on a regular basis. She was an amazing cook, one thing no one would dare dispute. Tara always said that their dad only stuck around because their mother was a whiz in the kitchen. Knox didn’t care one way or the other. Nathan Manning never deserved his wife, much like Tony never deserved his sister. Both men were not marriage material—or decent fathers for that matter.

“Tara tells me you’ve fallen in love,” his mother said matter-of-factly.

Knox eyed his mother, stunned by her remark. “What? I knew I shouldn't have had Tara and the kids come stay with you. She’s delusional. I’ve never been in love in my life.”

“Yes, and that’s so sad, Knox. Don’t you think it's time you thought about settling down and having a family?”

Knox shook his head. When was his mother ever going to accept that he liked being single—not having to account to anyone? “I don’t want a wife. Or kids. Why can’t you understand that?”

“Because, sweetheart, I don’t think you know what you want. So who is the woman that your sister thinks you’ve lost your heart to?”

“Nobody,” he said with firm resolve. “Tara needs to keep a focus on her own troubles. Especially now that Tony’s back lurking around.”

His mother stared at him, her green-eyed gaze honing in on his with the intensity of a momma grizzly getting ready to swat her cub. He might as well tell her about Melanie. She wasn’t falling for the change of subject to Tara and the mess her life was in. “All right. She's a suspect in an arson case I'm working. She's not my type. Not even pretty really. No, that's not true. She's exquisite.”

Where the hell did that come from? Exquisite. Melanie? What was he thinking?

Her image materialized before his eyes. Her soft, ivory face surrounded by a halo of red. Intoxicating blue eyes that seemed to pierce his very soul every time he stared into them. Lips he could still feel on his.

Shit. What the hell was wrong with him?

“You are in love,” his mother said, dispelling Melanie's features from his mind. “I can see it in your eyes.”

No way was he going to put the label “love” on what he felt. Okay, he wanted her with the heat of a ten-alarm blaze. But love? No way. He knew better. It was lust. Pure and simple. And aggravating as hell.

“You read too many romance novels, Mom. What I want from this woman has nothing to do with love. I don't plan to elaborate on the topic either, unless you want to be embarrassed.”

“Knoxville Boone, why are you so hellbent on never finding love?”

Knox's anger ignited. "What did love get you? Or Tara? Were you happy with a so-called loving man who never knew what that word meant?"

The questioning look on his mother's face disappeared and was quickly replaced by something Knox wasn't sure of. What though? Humor? Did she think his confusion funny?

"Let's leave my life out of this, Knox. We're talking about you and this woman Tara thinks isn't right for you."

"Tara doesn't even know Melanie," Knox shot back without thinking.

His mother's slightly lined face lit up. "Awful protective of a woman you care nothing about. Why is that?"

Knox opened his mouth to reply. Nothing came out.

Why had he jumped to Melanie's defense? Why did he care how Tara or his mother perceived a woman he hardly knew? The whole thing made no sense. No way was it love, though. He hadn't known Melanie long enough to feel anything close to that. True, something was there—something strange that kept her on his mind and caused his penis to respond to the slightest stimuli. A feeling he knew now he wasn't going to get over until he was firmly planted between Melanie's thighs, her screaming his name in orgasm.

Chapter Nine

Melanie stared at the firehouse, nervous sweat coating her back. She was anxious about what she was about to do, especially after the kiss she'd shared with Knox.

She swallowed hard as she opened the car door.

You can do this, Melanie. She had to talk to him. Make sure she'd be allowed to safely leave town for her art show in Chicago in two days.

She stood outside the door to the 901 for a few seconds, took a deep breath and entered.

Inside the garage, some men were washing a fire truck while others were rolling fire hoses. When they noticed her they stopped to stare. Now Melanie knew what animal's felt like at the zoo. All eyes were on her.

An older man walked up to her and smiled. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for Knox Manning."

The smile instantly left his face and he grimaced. Had she said something wrong? Why would he react so negatively to her question?

"Brent," the older man hollered behind him. "Tell Manning there's a lady here to see him. Make sure he knows it's not my daughter."

Melanie caught the hostile edge to the man's words and wondered what Knox had to do with the man's daughter.

Maybe Knox was dating her and the older man thought Melanie a threat. The idea made her stomach tighten. She never considered he might have someone in his life. That he was spending his nights in

someone else's arms while she dreamed of him in hers. If that were the case, why kiss her?

Melanie heard footsteps on the stairs. She looked up and saw Knox starting down them.

Her heart did a back flip and sped out of control. The memory of the kiss they'd shared returned. The pressure of his lips. The taste of his tongue. The mere thought had her nipples beading beneath her blouse. He was the most appealing creature she'd ever seen. If given enough encouragement, she'd jump him in front of all his buddies and not give one thought to how it looked. And she wasn't the exhibitionist type. Heck, sex had been no big deal until she'd laid eyes on him. Knox Manning had changed her so much in a short period of time. The whole thing scared her.

"Ms. Sharp, what can I do for you?" Knox asked, his question bringing her back to the reason she was there.

Her mouth went dry and she twisted her hands, uncomfortable that all eyes were on them, the older man's boring a hole into Knox's back. There was something going on there, but what? More importantly, why should she care? She had her own problems. Yet she didn't like the older man's obvious animosity toward the man she found intriguing.

Knox looked around them and pointed to the exit. "Let's talk outside."

He didn't have to ask twice. She'd be happy to leave all the prying eyes behind.

Once they'd left the firehouse Melanie breathed a little easier.

"So, what did you need?" he asked, leaning against the outside of the station.

"I—"

"Look, Melanie. I'm sorry about what I said the other day. I didn't mean to insinuate that you were a, ah...well, you know."

“That’s not why I came,” Melanie said, the replay of his comment making her uncomfortable. “I have an art show in Chicago in two days and I need to make sure that I won’t be arrested for leaving town.”

“How long will you be gone?”

Was that disappointment she heard in his voice at learning she’d be leaving? Why should he care where she went as long as she didn’t leave the country?

“Two days at the most? Why?”

He shifted against the wall. “I don’t see a problem with that.”

“Great. That’s all I needed to know.”

Melanie turned to head to her car. His hand snaked out and grasped her wrist. “I was serious about what I said before, Mel. I don’t think bad about you.”

His remark left her with mixed feelings. He’d called her Mel, which was music to her ears. Did he think she was innocent of torching Dean’s house, though? He hadn’t said as much.

She turned to face him again. “What does that mean, Knox? That you don’t think I’m a slut or an arsonist?”

His green eyes turned dark. “I believe you when you say you didn’t know Grainger was married.”

The slim hope Melanie held on to vanished. “Thanks, I appreciate that. Now let go of my arm.”

He frowned. “What did I say wrong now?”

“It’s not what you said.” Melanie pulled free of him. She turned and raced to her car.

She didn’t need any man who thought her capable of horrible things, no matter how attracted she was to him.

As he approached the rear of the vehicle, she jumped into the car and slammed the door.

Knox stood next to the driver's side door. "Mel, please talk to me."

Melanie rolled her window down a crack. "I think you've said enough."

She started the engine, put it in gear and took off. Tears clouded her vision. She forced them away. No way was Knox Manning going to make her cry. Not this time—he wasn't worth the trouble.



Knox stared at the cars whizzing below his apartment window. Frustrated, he laced his fingers through his hair. His confrontation with Melanie replayed in his mind. She'd come to the firehouse to get his okay to go to Chicago, only to leave angry with him, the last thing he'd wanted.

When they'd stepped outside, he'd been hoping to ask her to dinner, unfortunately their conversation had quickly turned sour.

Knox should've never brought up his previous nasty words. To insinuate she was a tiger in the sack and that's why Grainger wanted her was totally unforgivable. And to bring it up again only fueled her anger.

Why did you call her a whore? That was her take on it.

How was he ever going to get her into his bed now when he was sure that was the last place she wanted to be? Hell, he couldn't blame her. Not one bit. From the moment he'd met Melanie he'd been a real jerk—stuck his foot in his mouth with every conversation they'd had.

You'd think he was some adolescent kid vying for his first back seat action—not a thirty-two year old man who'd done at least sixty of the one hundred positions he knew.

For whatever reason, Melanie made him unsure of himself every time he got within a few feet of her. He'd never experienced that with any other woman.

What was he going to do? If she were in town, he'd drive over to her house and talk to her. She wasn't. She was in Chicago for her show—a city he hadn't visited in ages—and at a ritzy gallery to boot. A white-collar affair. Snobby people. He hated those kinds of things. He'd gone to a few with Sandra, and had the most boring time. Though this was Melanie's art show, a definite draw in his eyes.

A spark of a plan grew.

Maybe he'd drive to Chicago to see her show. Later take her to a romantic dinner. Somewhere intimate where he'd entice her, show her how charming he could be.

A wicked smile curved his lips.

Nice plan. Would it work? Could he charm her into bed? A week ago he'd have said yes. Since, his confidence had been bruised. The only way to find out for sure though was to go to Chicago.

He jumped up and went to pack. She'd be surprised to see him. Hopefully, once she realized he'd come for her, she'd warm up to him—and with enough encouragement, heat up his bed.



Melanie downed a glass of champagne for confidence, and headed out of the gallery's office. Her time had come—her chance to shine as an artist. She prayed her work would be well received.

Collin Fitzpatrick had assured her that her art was wonderful and that most of it would sell tonight. She prayed he was right. These were a collection of her best pieces. If they didn't get rave reviews, she might as well hang up her easel and stick to ice sculpture.

In the hallway, she studied her reflection in the long mirror on the wall. The green, bohemian dress she'd chosen clung to her slim curves,

and actually flattered her non-existent chest. She turned to get a glimpse of the back.

“You look hot,” Collin said, standing at the end of the hall. “Now remember, you’re mine after the show. Dinner and dancing.”

Melanie smiled at him. “I’ll remember. Dancing sounds wonderful.”

Collin was nothing like Knox. He had sophistication, and was educated in art and culture. Making love to him would be done on a bed of silk, with champagne and caviar.

Knox was more the “me Tarzan” type. Let’s swing off to my tree and rattle some limbs, with brewskies and beer nuts to follow.

Why did Melanie suddenly have the urge to sip a Budweiser under a shade tree?

And why did that hunky firefighter always have to invade her thoughts? Even standing next to the most eligible bachelor in Chicago didn’t extinguish Knox’s image. He was permanently etched in her brain.

“Are you ready?” Collin’s question drew Melanie’s attention back to him and what was about to happen. Make or break time. Her art show.

“I’m nervous.”

“Just be yourself, Melanie.” He squeezed her shoulder for reassurance. “Everyone will love you.”

Two hours later, Melanie leaned against a wall and sighed. Her throat hurt from talking. She took a sip of champagne, hoping it would help. Almost every painting had sold and Collin spouted to all that she was the next big thing.

He came up to her, grasped her arms and leaned in to brush his lips to her cheek. “Someone just bought your last painting.”

Melanie smiled, excited. “Really?”

“Yes, a tall, dark-haired guy. I’ve never seen him before. He says he knows you.”

Melanie's mind raced. No way. He wouldn't have come, would he? No. Don't be stupid. Why would he come to your art show? "Where?" Her gaze darted around the packed room.

Collin pointed to the far left-hand corner.

Melanie watched people move aside, like the parting of the Red Sea. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw him. He stood next to a landscape painting, his eyes on her.

Knox.

She swallowed the lump forming in her throat. Why was he here, and why had he bought one of her paintings?

Melanie found herself lost in his handsome features, and even from a distance she read his desire. For her. Her knees just about gave way.

"Who is he?" Collin asked in a clipped, undeniably irritated tone.

"Knox," she responded almost breathless.

"A lover?"

His question wasn't surprising. Not with the way Knox looked at her. To any observer it would appear that way.

Melanie glanced at Collin, then returned her attention to Knox. Like a man on a mission, he headed toward her, his mere presence electrifying the room.

When he'd reached them, he took hold of her hand and without uttering a word, led her in the direction of the exit.

"Where are we going?" she asked, trying to dig her heels into the gallery's beige carpet.

He glanced over his shoulder. "I need to talk to you alone."

Once outside and away from the people milling about, he turned to face her.

"You're an amazing artist, Melanie. I wanted you to know that."

"Thanks. Do you know anything about art?"

He smiled at the question. "Only what I like."

Why did the man's grin always make her feel as if butterflies had taken up residence in her stomach?

"Go to dinner with me?" The baritone of his voice sent a tingle all the way to her toes.

"I can't. Collin and I already have plans."

He frowned. "Collin?"

"He's the curator here. He's always believed in me as an artist. Stuck his neck out to get me this show."

"Can't you cancel?" His fingers brushed against her bare arm, and her skin tingled at the contact. "I came here to be with you."

"I...ah."

He leaned closer and whispered, "I want to be alone with you, Mel." His warm breath whispered across her cheek, turning her legs to rubber. Her heart beat at a frantic pace and she swore it was going to work its way out of her chest. Intense desire washed over her entire body, a desire that throbbed between her legs with the heat of a thousand suns. Was he saying what she thought? That he wanted to make love to her?

Melanie sucked in a breath, and slowly exhaled. She needed a clear head and right now all she heard was the thundering of her heart.

Maybe it was telling her something, giving off some sort of warning to steer clear of danger. In this case the peril came in the form of a huge, extraordinarily handsome man by the name of Knox Manning, a foe, a man who not only could send her to prison, but her heart into v-fib, only to flat line. Was she willing to risk such a thing for a night in his arms?

Chapter Ten

Knox wanted to pull Melanie into his arms and kiss her resistance away, but he knew it wouldn't achieve his goal—luring her into his bed. He wasn't a damned caveman. He didn't think she'd go for being thrown over his shoulder and forced anyway. He wanted to hear her sighs of satisfaction when he touched her in just the right places.

Knox shook his head, frustrated at how his body ruled his judgment.

Before he met Melanie, he hadn't cared a whole lot about if he satisfied a woman. He never thought much about it. Melanie was different. When they did share an intimate relationship, he'd make damned sure she came before he did.

“Am I interrupting?” Collin asked, startling them.

“No.” Melanie turned toward the man. She actually looked relieved that they wouldn't be able to continue with their conversation.

“Yes,” Knox contradicted, angry that he hadn't heard the man come up behind them. How long had he been listening to their tête-à-tête? More importantly, where did this stuffed shirt fit into Melanie's life? Knox knew she and Dean hadn't been to bed. What about this guy? Was she sleeping with him? Was there a so-called casting couch in the art world? Had Melanie spread her legs for her chance at becoming a famous artist?

“Melanie, we have a reservation at Stepheno's at nine.” Collin glanced at his watch. “We have exactly twenty minutes before they give our table away.”

"I'll be right there" Melanie looked at Knox, her hand twisting the material of her dress. "I have to go. Thanks for coming to see my show, oh, and for buying one of my paintings."

"So that's it?" Knox found it hard to believe she'd chosen a namby-pamby city boy over him. Yet another blow to his manhood. He didn't think he could handle another without losing part of it next time.

Hell, maybe the gods were trying to tell him she wasn't the girl for him—and sleeping with her would just make it harder for him to see that.

"If I'd known you were coming..." Melanie said, drawing his attention back to her.

"What? You would have made time to screw me, too? That's okay." Knox turned and stalked away. Shit. What he'd just said was the kiss of death with Melanie. Yet she wasn't who he thought she was anyway.

Her hand gripped his arm, and she swung him around. Her strength surprised Knox.

The look she gave him had his stomach flying into his throat. Raw, undeniable pain radiated from her face. Tears clouded her beautiful, powder blue eyes.

"Why do you want to hurt me?" she asked through ragged sobs. The emotion in her voice tore at Knox's heart. He'd done this to her. His cutting words had made her cry and all because she'd turned him down—made him feel less than a man. Well he deserved to feel that way. What kind of guy made a woman bawl? Tony Ansenee. Was he in the same league as a wife beater?

"Mel, I'm sorry."

She swiped at her tears. "Are you?"

Knox closed his eyes. He needed to end this charade—had to explain why he said what he did. Jealousy was at its core, and it made him feel better to lash out at her.

“I don’t want you leaving with this guy.”

“Why? What do you want, Knox?”

The time had come. The truth had to be told or she’d never forgive him. “I want you. In my bed.”

“Why?”

“Why?” he repeated, not sure what she was asking him.

“Why do you want *me* in your bed? I’m sure any woman would be thrilled to have you. So why choose me?”

“I wish I knew the answer to that.”

Melanie didn’t know what to say to Knox’s declaration. He wanted to sleep with her, though he wasn’t even able to tell her why. No way was it attraction, otherwise he’d have said as much. What was left? A fantasy of sleeping with a plain Jane? Or someone he thought started fires for fun. After all he was a firefighter, put them out for a living.

Melanie didn’t know what to think. But he’d come all the way from Barton to see her.

“Could we go somewhere? Talk a while?” Knox asked.

“I have plans, Knox. I can’t break them just because you’re here.”

He nodded to where Collin stood, watching them intently. “Can I ask if you’ve slept with the suit over there?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but no, I haven’t. He’s just a friend. I haven’t been with anyone for a long time. What about you, Knox? I got the impression you were dating one of your officer’s daughter, at least that’s what I overheard at the station.”

His eyes narrowed. “No, I’m not dating anyone right now. What did this person say anyway?”

“He told one of the firemen to tell you there was a woman to see you and to make sure you knew it wasn’t his daughter.”

“The chief” He shook his head. “I did date his daughter. That was over a while ago. Chief Gallan didn’t take the break up too well. He’s made my life pretty unbearable for the last few months.”

“That explains the glare the man gave your back.”

“Melanie, we really have to go,” Collin hollered from the car, his tone sharper this time.

“Can we meet somewhere later?” Knox asked, his gaze studying her face.

“I’m staying at the Lakeside Inn on Hiller. There is an all-night diner next door. We can meet for coffee at midnight if you’d like.”

“I’d like that. I’ll be there.”

“I gotta go.” Melanie glanced at Collin who looked more than impatient now. She’d probably get an earful all the way to Shapiro’s. Dancing was out now that she had plans to meet Knox.

Her heart raced at the prospect. First she’d have to get through dinner with Collin and try to sidestep all the questions she knew were coming.



Knox sat at a booth, nursing his second cup of coffee, anxious to see Melanie. It was quarter to twelve and he bided his time by studying the other patrons in the place. Most looked as if they were sobering up from a night of drinking.

He’d had a few hours to think about his argument with Melanie, and had come to some truths while he waited for her.

First, he was a real asshole when things didn’t go his way. He never should have expected Melanie to drop what she was doing for him. It

wasn't like she'd known he was coming. This was something he needed to work on. Second, sex wasn't all he wanted from her, yet he didn't know what he else he wanted. He had to think on that further. One thing he did know, he wanted to be with her. Hold her. Protect her from the kind of man she'd left to have dinner with. He knew the type. Hell, he was one of those guys, only looking for a good time.

His cell phone rang. He picked it up off the table and flipped it open. "Knox." He shifted back in the seat.

"Knox, where are you?" his mother asked, her voice anxious.

"What's wrong, Mom?"

"Tony's been calling Tara. He said if she doesn't let him see the boys he's going to kill her."

"Listen, Mom. Call the police. Explain what's going on. I'm in Chicago right now, but I'll leave this instant. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Hurry, Knox."

Knox snapped his phone shut. He needed to leave Melanie a note. Explain why he had to leave.

He grabbed a napkin, scribbled a quick message on it and got up to pay the check. "Will that be all, sir?" the hostess asked as he handed her a five.

"Actually, I need a favor. I'm supposed to meet a beautiful redhead here in a few minutes. I have to leave. Her name's Melanie Sharp. Could you see that she gets this?" He handed her the note.

"I'm getting off in a few minutes. I'll tell Carol to make sure she does." She took the paper napkin.

"Thanks."

Knox turned and raced out the door. He hated to leave without talking to Melanie first, but his sister needed him. Tara and the boy's

safety was paramount. Hopefully, Melanie would understand after she read the note.

Knox debated strangling Tony. Would the guy ever be out of their lives? If he laid one hand on Tara or the boys he was going to break him in two.



“Melanie, why are you still in bed?” Kay shook her.

Melanie pulled the covers over her head. She wished she’d never given her friend a key. “Go away.”

Kay pulled the blanket off. “What is wrong with you? It can’t be your show. You had rave reviews in the paper.”

No it wasn’t her show. A man was at the center of her anguish, one that was a fickle as they came. “I don’t want to talk about it. Go away.”

“I’m not going anywhere until you tell me what’s got you hiding under the covers.”

Melanie sat straight up in bed and glared at her best friend. “I’m not hiding.” Or was she?

Kay frowned, clearly skeptical of her reply. “What are you doing?”

Melanie crossed her arms over her chest. “I’m resting.” What’s wrong with a girl lying in bed? Resting in peace? Was there some unwritten rule? One she hadn’t heard about?

“At two in the afternoon? Isn’t it a little early or a little late?”

Not when her heart was broken in two, it wasn’t.

Somehow this felt like an interrogation, and Melanie’s patience slipped. “Why aren’t you at work?”

“I took the afternoon off. I tried calling you all morning. I got your machine. Don’t you check your messages?”

“I turned it off.”

Kay's amber eyes narrowed, her lips pursing. "You turned it off?"

What part of turned "off" didn't she understand? "Yeah, that's what I said. I...turned...it...off!"

Her friend shoved her hands on her hips and glared. "Why?"

Melanie rolled her eyes. "I don't want to talk about it."

"What is going on with you, Mel? You look as if you haven't combed your hair in days and frankly, you smell bad."

"If I'm so offensive, maybe you should leave."

"No, I think I should drag you into the bathroom to shower and get your act together."

"Why? What does it matter?"

"I want you to tell me right now, what's gotten into you?"

Melanie fell back against the bed pillows and covered her face. "I think I'm in love."

"And that's a bad thing?"

Melanie dropped her hands at her side, feeling defeated. "It is when the man I'm in love with is a jerk."

Kay sat down on the bed. "Why?"

"He plays head games. One minute he wants me, tells me to meet him somewhere, then he doesn't show up."

"Are we taking about Mr. Fireman?"

Melanie nodded.

Kay rubbed Melanie's arm in comfort. "Has he called to tell you why he didn't?"

"Why do you think my machine's off? He's called and called. I refuse to talk to him. He came by last night. I pretended I wasn't home."

"Maybe he had a good reason for not showing up. Have you thought about that?"

“Maybe he decided he didn’t want to risk losing his job over a pity fuck.”

Kay’s jaw dropped. “I’m going to wash your mouth out with soap if I hear that kind of talk again. Actually, soap isn’t a bad idea right now. Have you thought of using it lately?”

“Okay, Mother.” Melanie sneered. “I’m getting up.”

She did need to take a shower. Heck, being around her own self was getting difficult.

For three and a half days she’d been moping in bed. Crying over a missed date with Knox. Being stood up hurt, especially when he was the one to suggest they meet in the first place.

“You take a shower. I’ll go to the kitchen and fix something to eat.”

“Okay, I’m going.”

A half-hour later, Melanie stepped into the kitchen, drying her hair on a towel. Kay stood next to her answering machine, listening to Melanie’s messages. “What are you doing?”

“Listen to this,” Kay insisted, pressing the play button on the machine. “Melanie, why won’t you call me back?” Knox’s voice asked. “I’m sorry I left without seeing you the other night. I thought the note I gave the hostess would’ve been enough. I’m sorry it wasn’t. I won’t call you again.”

It was Melanie’s turn for her jaw to slack. “I didn’t get a note.”

Chapter Eleven

Knox slipped into his jeans, getting ready to go to a bachelor party for Michael Fields, a fellow firefighter who was getting married in a few weeks.

He found it hard to fathom why Melanie hadn't understood his need to leave the night they were to meet at the cafe. He'd tried calling her ten times in the past two days. She'd never returned his phone calls. To hell with her. If she thought her needs were more important than his sister's life, he was better off without her.

He threw a green polo shirt on over his head and tucked it into his pants.

He didn't feel much like partying tonight, though Michael was a friend and he had to show up. Brent would just come and drag him there anyway.

Knox finished dressing, grabbed his keys from the kitchen counter and left his apartment. Once he was in his truck, he glanced at the directions Brent had written down for him. The place was a men's club called, A Leg Up, in St. Louis, about a half-hour drive from Barton. Nice image for a strip club. The last thing he needed was to watch a bunch of women strutting around naked, shaking their booties for money.

He had no choice though. Brent had planned the event, right down to the location of the party. Private, and closed to the public for Michael's

friends. And according to Brent, no one was going home until they were trashed.

Luckily, Knox had volunteered to be the designated driver for the night. Someone had to stay sober, to control the uncontrollable. Might as well be him. He was in no mood to drink.

Once on the highway, his thoughts drifted back to the night he'd returned from Chicago, hours spent thinking the worst.

When he'd walked in his mother's door, he'd learned the police had come and gone—spouting there was nothing they were able to do. Even with a warrant for Tony's arrest pending for assault.

The system didn't work for women who were abused. It was almost a double-edge sword for them. Unfortunately, as the law read, until the abuser did something—like kidnapped or killed them—there was nothing they could do. What kind of screwed up system was that?

The biggest surprise to Knox that night was finding his father sitting in the living room, acting as if he belonged there. He'd been shocked to say the least, to the point that he had had a hard time being civil to him. It'd been weeks since he'd seen Nathan Manning. He'd purposely avoided him. There he'd been though, looking pleased as punch to be included in the family crisis.

Knox shook his head. *Dad* didn't deserve that privilege, not after his numerous infidelities.

He glanced at the directions again, noting that he had to get off at the next exit. He didn't look forward to pretending he was enjoying himself. He had too much crap going on in his life, and drinking to get rid of it wasn't the answer. That just magnified the problem.

After exiting, Knox pulled into the parking area of the club and found a slot. Twenty or so cars were already there, the lucky groom's among them. That man would be hard-pressed to make it into work the next

day, especially if Brent's plans were executed. He'd paid one of the ladies at the club to give Michael an all night lap dance. Michael would be as randy as a rutting bull in a pen of new cows.

Knox jumped out of his pick-up and locked the doors. To him this was just another event he hoped would be over quickly with little or no drama. At least that's what he prayed for.



Melanie opened the back door to A Leg Up, slipped inside, and inched her way down the hallway.

Knox was here somewhere. She'd found that out from one of the men at the firehouse. She prayed he wasn't engaging in a sexual act when she found him.

Though why shouldn't he be? Not answering his calls had driven him to come to such a place—maybe into the arms of another. Experienced arms, legs, and God knows what else from the looks of the place.

Melanie grimaced. Could she blame him really? She hadn't returned his calls—or been all that nice to him since they'd met. He'd admitted to wanting her. But he couldn't tell her why. She wasn't beautiful. Wasn't built like Kay, curves in all the right places. Not hardly. So why would a gorgeous, hunky man like Knox want her? The whole thing made no sense.

"Hey, you. Come here," a thin, balding man said, his finger hitched up at her. "You're late."

"Me?" Melanie's heart pounded inside her chest. Caught like a rat. What were they going to do? Throw her out? She'd never find out what Knox was up to if they did.

"They just keep getting' dumber." The ugly man shook his head and grabbed her arm. "Yes, you. Hurry up. You're next."

He shoved her into a dressing room and threw a strange costume at her. "Get into that. You have five minutes."

Melanie stared at the getup, and convulsively swallowed. It looked like a firemen's uniform, except made for a Barbie doll.

She stared aghast at the tiny bits of fabric.

The man stuck his head in and frowned. "Aren't you dressed yet?"

"There has to be some...mis—"

He raised his hand and cut her off abruptly. "Two minutes."

What was she going to do? Think, Melanie. What would Nancy Drew do in this type of situation? Yeah, right. Like Nancy would ever be caught dead in a bar, spying on Ned. No, it'd have to be a case she was on the brink of solving to get her into a strip joint. Nancy Drew and *The Clue of the Exotic Dancer*.

An idea hit Melanie. Maybe if she put the outfit on, she could go out and see if Knox was with another woman. Sort of incognito.

With that in mind, she strapped herself into the outfit, which was held together by strips of Velcro. At any second the contraption threatened to fall down. Obviously the costume was made for a much chestier woman.

"It's about time," the balding man said, pulling her with him through the curtain, and down the hall to another larger one. "We have a room full of drunken firefighters waiting for the grand finale. I want you to go out there and show 'em a good time."

"Good time?" she repeated, sweat forming on her upper lip.

Music started. *Burn, Baby, Burn* blared from speakers above her head. Loud drunken whoops and whistles came from the other side of the curtain, which had started to open.

Suddenly the ramification of what was happening hit her like a semi-truck. She was their entertainment. Was expected to dance. Too bad she had two left feet.

Melanie slumped against the wall and closed her eyes. How had she gotten herself into this mess? All she'd wanted to do was talk to Knox, explain why she hadn't answered his calls.

Not parade around in a get up such as this in order to do that. How was she going to get out of this mess without looking like a fool?

The curtains moved inch by terrifying inch, cementing her fate. All these men were expecting a show. Would she give them one or hightail it out of here without getting the chance to see Knox? Her time was running out, and her options. If she left now she'd never know what he was doing on the other side of that curtain. If he was cozying up to a stripper, planning to take her home.

An image of him doing that made her stomach ache. She didn't plan to let him leave with one of these ladies if she had a way of preventing it.

The curtain inched further and she saw a few men sitting next to the stage, all watching the curtain.

Melanie swallowed hard, noticing the pole in the middle of the stage.

Maybe she could just spin around the thing for a while? Hope that would satisfy them long enough for her to spot Knox and check out what he was doing. She refused to go any further. Nothing was coming off—including the look of horror she was sure played over her face.

The curtain slid completely open and it was show time.



Knox watched his 901 buddies. A table full of them directly in front of the stage looked as if they were going to fall out of their chairs. Beer bottles littered the tabletop and some had fallen onto the floor.

He'd been at the club close to three hours, drinking cola, amazed at how mature men became raving fools in a matter of hours. Drinking looked different through sober eyes.

Michael had left the room with one of the ladies, and Knox didn't even want to think about what he was doing. Hopefully it wasn't something his fiancée would find out about later. He'd hate for a relationship to end because of a bachelor party indiscretion.

The music started, which meant another stripper was going to perform. His friends were getting rowdier by the second. The last stripper was going to face a lot of abuse before her show was over.

He took another drink of his cola, watching the curtain open. The performer was standing behind the pole with her back to them. Her costume a miniature version of their own uniforms, helmet and all. The men in front of the stage started to whoop, chanting for the stripper to take it off.

Knox would be embarrassed for them if he hadn't done the same immature things a time or two himself.

True, in her profession, she should be used to such behavior—putting up with all kinds of indignities—but being sober made him more conscious of it all. What a lady, such as she was, would feel about being razzed like this.

Knox returned his attention to the stage and saw the woman had red hair. Until he'd met Melanie, the color hadn't appealed to him. He'd actually never dated a woman anything like her. The skinny waif of a woman had changed his tastes completely. Though having a future together, after seeing her for who she was—a selfish, self-centered brat—would never happen.

“Take it off, take it off,” started up again and the dancer spun around the pole. Knox's jaw dropped.

No way. It couldn't be. Melanie?

He had to be seeing things. There was no way she was an exotic dancer. For one thing, she wasn't built like one. The costume she wore fit her poorly, especially at the top. Most strippers he'd seen were double D's. Melanie was hard-pressed to be a B-cup.

She spun around the pole, her gaze darting around the room. She appeared to be looking for someone—and from the size of her eyes, she was terrified.

Why was she here? Dancing at The Leg Up? She *gave* exhibitions. She wasn't one of them.

When she spotted him at the bar, she stopped spinning around the pole. "Hey, baby, come slide down my pole," Brent hollered, leaning onto the stage to catch hold of her leg. Melanie screamed, and yanked his hands away.

"Come on, baby. How 'bout a little lap dance?" Brent slurred.

In that instant Knox saw red.

He jumped up and stormed to the stage, ready for a fight. No way was anyone pawing the woman he wanted, especially his drunk and disorderly friends.

At the stage, Knox tapped Brent's back. His friend had a tight hold on Melanie's leg again and had started dragging her toward him.

Brent turned, still holding her ankle. He smiled when he saw Knox. "Knox, buddy, tell the lady I'll pay extra if she'll sit in my lap."

"Let go of her leg," Knox said in a low, angry growl.

Brent frowned. "What's with you?"

"I want you to let her go. Now. Or I might have to make you."

"Whoa...okay, man. I'm letting go." Brent released Melanie and backed away from the stage.

Knox looked up at Melanie, whose face was as white as flour.

“Come here” He crooked his finger at her.

She swallowed and glanced around. All the guys were laughing. It was obvious that she'd never done this before, and he needed to get her out of there before she was traumatized by the event. “Melanie,” he said firmly. “Come here.”

She shook her head. She wasn't going to come easily. Did she think he'd hurt her? “Sweetheart, I just want to take you home.”

A loud uproar of hoots and hollers filled the room. His buddies apparently thought he meant to take her back to his place and screw her.

Melanie's cheeks blotted red. She too caught their deduction. Was mortified by it. Would either one of them ever be able to live this fiasco down?

“Knox, go for it,” Brent said, slapping him on the back. “I didn't know you wanted a piece of that.”

Knox closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He had to remember that Brent was blind drunk and wouldn't normally be this crude.

He turned and faced Melanie. “Come on. Let's get out of here.”

She inched her way toward him, wary of the other men. When she reached the end of the stage, Knox grabbed her, threw her over his shoulder and headed for the exit.

Behind him laughter erupted, making Knox pick up the pace, continuing toward the door. He intended to get Melanie away from his alcohol-laden friends.

Melanie beat repeatedly on his back. “Let me down, you brute.”

“I'll let you down when you tell me why you're stripping in a club. I know you had a sold-out art show. You can't be hurting for money.”

Her fists stopped their assault.

“Well?” he prompted. “Why are you here?”

“Actually, I came to see you. I wanted to apologize for not calling.”

“Really?” Knox reached the door, opened it and strode out into the parking lot. The night air helped to cool his temper.

It was pitch-black outside. No moonlight to guide his way. Only a single floodlight that had seen better days illuminated the way to his truck.

Once he'd reached the cab, he fumbled with his keys, wondering what triggered Melanie's about-face.

He unlocked the door, flung it open and dumped Melanie onto the seat.

The dome light lit the inside of the cab, revealing that his toting had worked her top down.

His mouth went dry as he eyed the soft swells of her breasts. When his gaze wandered down to a pair of legs that went on forever, his cock jumped. Why hadn't she made an effort to tug up her top?

“I didn't get a note, Knox.”

Her remark brought his attention to her face. “What?”

“You said in one of your messages that you left me a note at the café. I didn't get it. I thought you stood me up.”

No wonder she wouldn't return his calls. He wouldn't have been too happy either. “I had an emergency at home. I had to leave.”

“Oh I hope everything's all right.”

He smiled. “Yeah, it is now.”

Silence followed. “I better take you home.”

She shook her head. “I don't want to go home.”

“You don't? What do you want to do?”

She grinned and slid to the passenger side of the truck. “Why don't you get in and I'll show you.”



Melanie stared into Knox's green eyes and sighed. The way they devoured her body caused her blood to run hot. She wanted to make love to him—here and now. In his truck, no matter who happened by. The whole world could watch as long as he continued to look at her in that way—with lust burning like a beacon.

He leaned over and brushed his lips to hers, a feathery kiss that left her breathless.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him close, deepening the kiss.

He needed no further encouragement. His tongue darted into her mouth, mating with hers as his hands snaked up to her breast and squeezed with fervor. The caress charged the cells in Melanie's body, igniting a passion she'd never shared with any man. She wanted to rip Knox's clothes off and mount him. To hell with foreplay. She didn't need it. Not one minute of it.

All she could think about was climbing on top him, riding him until he put out the inferno blazing inside her. A fire that had been raging hot for days. She had to put an end to her torment.

His hand left her breast and slid between her legs, his fingers slipping beneath the edge of her costume and sliding into her.

She sucked in a breath, amazed at how the world seemed to tilt.

Knox tore his mouth from hers. “God, Mel. You're so hot. I can't wait to feel this heat around my cock.”

“Oh, yes,” she sighed as his fingers continued their sensual assault deep inside her heat.

Melanie gasped when he began a rhythm—a pace that sent her head back against the seat of the truck. Her body tightened like an over-

wound clock and was ready to shatter when suddenly a ringing noise intruded on her passion, a peal that brought Melanie back to earth.

Knox's cell phone. Damn it all to hell. What a great time for a phone call.

He heaved a sigh, gently extracted his fingers and answered his phone.

“Knox.” A deep tremor in his voice spoke of his own desire.

“No,” he said, frowning. “They're all drunk. They wouldn't be able to put a matchstick out. Okay, I'll be right there.”

He closed his cell phone and looked at her. “I hate to do this, Mel. God, how I hate to. With all the guys out of commission, I have to take the call.”

Melanie adjusted her costume. “I understand.”

He smiled. “Can I see you later?”

She nodded and started to open the door. His grip on her arm stopped her. He tugged her back against him and kissed her hard. “We'll finish this later, okay?”

She got out of the truck, her legs almost giving way. The man made her limbs feel like rubber bands, wobbly and unsure.

Melanie stood in the parking lot and watched him leave. When all that was left to see were taillights, she walked to her car. Her blood still hummed with passion for him, and she had renewed hope that soon Knox would finish what he'd started. If he didn't, she was going to have to take a long, cold shower and hope that would cool the heat his magic fingers had ignited.

Chapter Twelve

Knox wiped soot and sweat from his brow as he headed into the firehouse. Even with a neighboring station helping out, it'd taken four hours to get the warehouse fire on Liberty under control.

More than half their own house had been too foxed to be of any help. Holt County's unit had been called in to take up the slack.

The whole time Knox had been fighting the fire, he'd had to listen to ribbing about not being prepared. Not a pleasant thing, shrugging off all the crap took every ounce of self-control he possessed.

Knox entered the station, intent on getting cleaned up and driving to Melanie's to finish what they'd started earlier. His heart hitched a notch just thinking about her. He'd never been so turned on, and he hadn't even come close to being inside her. The appeal had come from her sighs and moans of pleasure as he stroked her—kissed her full, sweet lips. He got hard just reliving it. The woman was in his blood and until he was able to eject her from his system, his erection wouldn't lower past half-mast. Until they made love, he knew it would be futile to try and sleep. He needed her and he wasn't going to let anything get in his way.

He jogged up the first flight of stairs, stopped to remove his jacket and hang it on a peg, and climbed the remaining steps to the upper level.

He'd quickly shower and race to Melanie to rekindle their flames.

As his foot hit the last step, his stomach lurched into his throat. Sandra stood in the kitchen area. What the hell was she doing here? At this time of the morning? The woman normally didn't get up until noon.

"I need to talk to you, Knox." He knew by her reserved tone something was wrong.

"I'm tired. I need to shower and get some rest."

Her amber eyes narrowed, her ruby lips pulling into a thin line. "It's important."

Knox tamped down his frustration. *Let her talk, then you can get out of here. Get to Melanie's.* "All right. What?"

She shifted from one expensive-looking, high-heeled foot to the other, her gaze darting nervously around the room.

"Well," he prompted, impatience taking hold.

"This is hard." Tears formed at the corners of her eyes.

Knox knew whatever she was about to say wasn't going to be good.

"I'm thirteen weeks pregnant."

His heart stopped, and his gaze dropped to her stomach. "What? No way."

"Like it or not, we're having a baby, Knox."

"I wore a condom every time. There is no way it's mine."

Her eyes narrowed. "Condoms break. Obviously one of yours did."

Knox's world crumbled around him. He didn't love Sandra—hell, he didn't even like her, yet no way could he walk away. Not with her carrying his child. He'd been brought up better than that. "What do you want to do?"

"I love you, Knox. I'm going to have this baby."

The ground gave way under his feet. His knees buckled. The plans he'd had with Melanie dissolved before his eyes. Nothing could happen between them now, not with this hanging over his head. If Sandra was

going to have his child, his needs and wants didn't matter. The child and what it would need, did.

Knox had decisions to make, and until he made them, it was best to steer clear of temptation—and to him that enticement was in the form of a beautiful waif with the means to drive him over the edge with desire.



Melanie paced her living room floor, her gaze fixed on the beige carpet. She stopped long enough to glance out the window as she'd done a dozen times already. It'd been hours since Knox had left her in the parking lot of A Leg Up and he still hadn't arrived. Or called.

Something had to be wrong. Maybe he'd been hurt. That would explain why he was late. Horrible scenarios ran rampant through her mind. She saw Knox in a burning building right as the roof collapsed, fire engulfing him before anyone got to him.

She inhaled, holding back the tears the image evoked.

That would be her luck, would fit the pattern. She felt as if the walls were caving in on her. Her life had been a series of unfortunate events. Ones that left her afraid and unsure of herself and her future.

Like the previous arson, a fire she'd taken the blame for because her mother asked her to. A blaze set by her stepfather—a man with two previous strikes against him.

Melanie shook her head, remembering how he'd laughed when fire investigators came to question her. What a loser. Her mother had always gravitated toward them.

Carol Sharp had been a bum magnet, and never saw that fact until Melanie paid the price for her ignorance. Melanie was lucky she'd never been sexually abused by any of her mother's so-called friends; though her stepfather, Lenny Schaefer, had come awful damned close.

The mere thought of the man sent a cold chill racing down her backbone. She quickly pushed the memory away. The past was just that. No reason to rehash it. Right now she had to find out if Knox was all right.

If she called the firehouse, she might get him into trouble. She didn't want to do that. He'd never given her his cell phone number, so that was out of the question. So what was left? Drive to the station and talk to him? That was pretty much her only option if she didn't want to pace the floors any longer.

Knowing full well she'd go crazy staying at home one more moment, Melanie grabbed her keys and raced out the door to her car.

On the way to the firehouse, her mind drifted back to the sexual encounter they'd shared. Just thinking about it made her skin tingle and heat, her nipples go hard as pebbles, her heart flutter with anticipation. The man had her so worked up she could hardly see straight. What would it feel like— to have him buried deep inside her?

An intense desire coursed through her, causing her vaginal walls to contract. She was going to have an orgasm here and now just replaying the events.

Shaking the memory, she pulled into the parking lot of the firehouse and parked.

Melanie watched the front door slowly open. Knox stepped out with a curvaceous blonde at his side. They walked to a luxury sedan and Knox opened the car door.

Melanie sucked in a ragged breath when he leaned in and kissed the woman's cheek. The scene unfolding in front of her eyes crushed her heart. Had their night together been just a random event for him—one he could have had with any woman and been satisfied? Had she completely misread him? His desire for her?

She must have from what she'd just witnessed.

Tears clouded her eyes as she stared at the man she'd thought wanted her as badly as she wanted him. His hands had been so gentle—and skillful, driving her to the brink of ecstasy.

Heat crept up Melanie's neck. All she'd been to him was a warm body, someone to ease his needs. He hadn't felt anything for her.

Anger washed over her. She was tired of falling for guys who lied to her. Ones who wouldn't tell the truth even if their lives were at stake. Melanie was not going to fall for their deceptions ever again.

After the blonde left and Knox walked back into the firehouse, she pulled out of the parking lot. Her objective—go visit Paul Nadar. See if he could find a way to exonerate her from this arson investigation. Do some undercover work. Learn who really started the fire at the Grainger's. The sooner she found out the truth, the sooner she'd be free of Knox Manning.



Knox sat staring out the firehouse window. He had so much to think about. It had been two days since he'd been with Melanie—two long days of wondering why she hadn't contacted him. She didn't know about Sandra and the baby, so why hadn't she at least called to find out why he hadn't shown up at her place after the fire? It didn't make sense. Unless she regretted what happened.

He laced his fingers through his hair and inhaled.

Their time in his truck had been magic. Her perfume still lingered inside the cab, making it harder for him to forget her soft, velvety skin against his palms.

Shit! How was he going to spend the evening with Sandra when all he wanted was Melanie? He and Sandra had plans to discuss their future and what this child would mean for both of them.

Knox still couldn't fathom this turn of events. He'd always been so careful. He was vigilant when it came to protection. So how did this happen? And what did Sandra want from him. He wasn't sure he could marry her, even with the baby she carried. Love had to be in the equation for him to make that kind of a commitment, and he just didn't feel that for her.

"Knox, you have a phone call," Brent said, slapping him on the back.

His heart skipped a beat. Melanie? Had she finally worked up the nerve to call the station?

He took large, fast strides to the phone, his heart pounding in his chest. In his mind, he heard her soft voice begging him to come over—and him saying, "Yes, I'll be right there."

Knox picked up the receiver. "Hello."

"Knox, Greg Emory."

Knox's hopes sank. "What can I do for you, Greg?"

"I'm going to need another sample from the Grainger house. I didn't get a clear reading of the accelerant from the specimen you sent."

"Sure. I'll run and get another sample. No problem." At least this would give him something to do. He wouldn't have to sit around the station and wonder what Melanie was doing, and if she regretted the intimacy they'd shared.

Why did it matter? He couldn't have a relationship with her now anyway—not with Sandra expecting his child. That would make him as bad as his father. No way could he live with that. Not in a million years.

He hung the phone up and exited the firehouse.

Working would keep him busy and that's what he needed right now.

He jumped into his truck and a faint hint of Melanie's scent whispered around the cab. The perfume was fading—his only reminder of their brief encounter.

He shook the thought and pulled out of the parking lot.

As he pulled up to the Grainger's house fifteen minutes later, a blue SUV caught his attention. The vehicle was parked in the same place Kay's car had been the day he'd caught Melanie snooping around.

He exited the truck and took off down the walkway to the back of the house. When he got to the rear, he saw a tall man looking around.

"I can't get in," a familiar female voice said as she came around from the opposite side. Melanie's face bleached when she spotted Knox.

"What are you doing here?" Knox asked, taking in every delicious inch of her. God, she was beautiful. Too distracting for words. The look on her face as he'd stroked her inner thighs and the sweet sighs of pleasure she'd given him came rushing back.

Knox's dick jumped at the replay. Time to rewind. Or stop the play-by-play altogether before he got a hard-on so obvious no one would miss it.

He turned his attention to the man standing next to her. The guy was slightly shorter than Knox, maybe ten pounds lighter. He had a slightly slimmer physique. His hair was sandy-brown, wavy in texture, and he had steel blue eyes that watched Knox intently. Neither he nor Melanie seemed willing to answer his question.

"Well," Knox prompted, and a thought hit him, leaving his gut feeling sucker-punched. Maybe this guy was the reason Melanie hadn't called. Had she spent the last day and night in his arms?

Knox eyed the man, his fists clenching at his side.

"I was trying to find some clue as to who might've set the fire here," the man finally admitted, his gaze shifting from Knox to Melanie.

His confession floored Knox. Why would the guy do such a thing, especially when Melanie hadn't been arrested for the fire? It didn't make sense.

"Why? Who are you?"

The man looked to Melanie as if to ask permission to answer.

She just nodded.

Knox looked forward to hearing what the man had to say.

"Melanie hired me to help her find the arsonist."

"Hired?"

Knox eyes narrowed on Melanie.

"I'm a P.I.," the man said.

"Really? And how do you know Ms. Sharp?"

He seemed to contemplate Knox's question. At last he said, "Let's just say, we both attended a wedding that didn't come off with a hitch."

Chapter Thirteen

Melanie's heart skipped a beat when she saw Knox standing across from her in the backyard of the Grainger's burned-out home.

Talk about bad luck. Every time she came snooping around he showed up. She just hoped he wouldn't do what he'd threatened the last time, have them arrested. That was all she needed. Who'd come bail her out? Kay? Her friend would find out she'd called Paul and probably never speak to her again.

She held her breath and watched the men size each other up, saw Knox's eyes become deep emerald. He was angry about something. If it was because they were trespassing, wouldn't he have gotten angry sooner? What triggered this newfound ire?

Melanie jumped when her cell phone began its usual Karen Carpenter tune. She reached inside her purse, retrieved her phone, and flipped it open. "Hello," she said, her eyes glued to Knox's. "Oh, hi, Kevin. What's up?" What he said next made her heart stop. "When?" Melanie's legs barely held her up.

Another fire. Why was this happening to her? Was this the fire Knox was called away to fight? In the very warehouse that she kept her ice and sculpting tools. Did he think she started it as well?

"I'm so sorry, Kevin. Were you insured?" Melanie released a strangled breath when he assured her he was covered. "Okay. Thanks for calling."

She snapped the phone closed, threw it into her bag and glanced warily at Knox. He still watched her—his gaze intense.

“What happened?” Paul’s question drew Melanie’s attention away from Knox.

“Kevin McNeil’s warehouse burned to the ground three night’s ago. All my ice and tools are gone.”

“*That* is the warehouse where you do your sculptures?” Knox asked, his question and shocked expression revealing to Melanie that he hadn’t known of her connection to the place.

She folded her arms across her chest, unable to keep accusation from her tone. “Yes. Are you going to link me to that fire, too?”

Knox’s eyes softened. “Of course not. You were with me when the blaze started.”

Melanie glanced at Paul, who grinned, his blue eyes gleaming. Did he assume she and Knox had been in a compromising situation when Knox was called away?

“Look, Knox. I didn’t start any fire. I don’t know who did. Someone is trying to set me up.”

“What about the fire you set when you were a minor?”

Melanie was surprised, though not entirely shocked by his question. It was time to come clean about the facts, tell him how she’d taken the rap to protect a man who hadn’t even had the decency to come to his estranged wife’s funeral. Her mother had loved the man and he hadn’t cared enough to show up to say goodbye to her.

“I didn’t set that fire. My mother begged me to say I did to protect the man she’d married. I did it for her.”

“So is this guy still around? Does he hold a grudge against you?”

She shook her head. “Not that I know of. Why would he? The statute of limitations on the crime was up years ago.”

“How about someone else? Is there anyone who’d gain by sending you to jail?”

“Maybe not gain. Dean Grainger is angry that I refused to see him anymore.”

“Would he go this far?” Knox asked. “I mean...burning down his own house is pretty gutsy.”

“I’m not sure, though he did tell me he was leaving his wife. He refused to understand why I didn’t want to see him even if he did.”

“That’s why we’re here,” Paul interjected. “We were trying to find some kind of evidence. Anything to exonerate Mel from the fire.”

“And what’s in it for you?” Knox asked, eyeing Paul.

“Melanie’s a close friend. I don’t want to see her caught up in something she had nothing to do with.”

Knox’s eyes narrowed and Melanie saw a storm brewing inside him. If she didn’t know better, she’d think he was jealous of Paul. But why? It’s not like she meant anything to him—not when he had the voluptuous blonde to turn to. She knew better than to think he’d want her over someone so beautiful—so built. As far as Melanie could see, she didn’t have a snowball’s chance against the woman. So why the look of contempt? Why seem angry with a man who was only trying to help her? The whole thing made little sense. But what had since she’d met Knox Manning? He’d turned her life upside-down and sideways. Especially since their encounter in his truck. Her body still trembled from the experience.

“I don’t know what could be found to help,” Knox said. “We’ve been over this place inch by inch. All we found was Melanie’s flier.”

“Don’t you think that awful convenient?” Paul asked, rubbing at the square of his chin. “Everything else had been turned to ash. I think it’s

strange that you were able to find this flier with her name still visible. I'd bet money the thing was planted there for you to find."

"I've thought of that, and with this new fire at the warehouse, it seems to fit your theory. Someone is trying to set Melanie up. Now we have to figure out why. Maybe then we'll learn who."

"So what's next?" Melanie asked, looking from Paul to Knox.

"We wait. Hope we find some evidence at the warehouse," Knox said. "In the mean time, stay the hell away from Grainger. If he's angry enough to try and frame you, he might be crazy enough to go further—maybe hurt you."

Melanie's stomach clenched painfully. Would Dean really do something like that? Would he be that angry or obsessed as to do physical harm to her?

"I'll stay with you, Mel," Paul insisted. "I don't think you should be alone."

Knox flinched at Paul's offer. Was he jealous? Did he have feelings for her?



His fists clenched. The idea of this guy staying with Melanie made his blood boil. Yet no way could he offer to stay with her—not now. Not with Sandra pregnant and expecting him to meet her in... He glanced at his watch. Ten minutes. "I have to run. I have a-ah... I have to go."

Melanie frowned. She knew something was up.

"Don't try and enter the house," Knox said to Paul. "It's too dangerous. I'll be back tomorrow morning to get another sample of the accelerant used in the fire. You can look around some then. Though I can almost guarantee you won't find anything."

Paul extended his hand to Knox. "Thanks, we appreciate that."

Knox shook it, studying the man closely. Was he interested in Melanie? Was Melanie interested in this guy? Just the thought had Knox on edge. He definitely had feelings for her. Hell if he could do anything about them. Not now. Maybe never. It looked like he might have to push his own emotions and needs aside and marry Sandra.

A chill raced through him at the thought.

He shook his head. How could he possibly do that when the idea of Sandra as his wife made his blood run cold? She was not the woman he wanted to marry. Melanie was.

Shit. How did you let this happen? You finally fall for someone and you can't have her.

"I have to go. See you in the morning."

He turned and stalked to his truck. The last thing he wanted to do was spend the next few hours with Sandra Gallan, yet he had no choice. They had decisions to make, and the sooner they made them, the better. He was obligated for at least half the responsibility of their child, something he found impossible to push aside.

Once in his truck and on his way to Sandra's apartment, his thoughts again drifted to Melanie and this PI she'd been so friendly with. Was there more to that relationship than they let on? Could he be just another man to warm her thighs when she felt the need?

Now that he thought about it, she did have a list of men at her beck and call. There was Dean, the art gallery owner, now this private dick, and this was just in the short time he'd known her. Best to stay away. She clearly didn't want to build a future with one man. Like Sandra, Melanie was not marriage material.

For his own sanity he had to get his head out of his crotch and move on before she had him all tied up in knots—tangles that would get harder to work through the longer he stayed in her life.



Melanie raced for the ringing phone and plucked it off its cradle. “Hello,” she said breathlessly.

“Mel, where have you been?” Kay’s voice vibrated with concern. “I’ve been trying to call you for hours.”

“Melanie, where do you want the groceries?” Paul asked, placing two brown-paper bags down onto the island. “Oh, sorry. Didn’t know you were on the phone.”

“Who was that? You won’t believe this, but it almost sounds like Paul.” Kay laughed and Melanie knew she was in trouble. Should she lie and say it was the cable guy or tell her best friend the truth?

“Actually, you’re right, Kay. Paul’s here. I’ve asked him to help me find some evidence to exonerate me from the fire. He agreed.”

“Really?” Even if she wanted to, Melanie couldn’t mistake the strain in Kay’s voice. She was none too happy about this turn of events. “So when were you going to tell me this? Or were you?”

“Of course. I just called him. All we’ve done is go out to the Graingers and look around.”

“So why is he there now?” she asked. The undertone to Kay’s voice alerted Melanie to her anger more than the question. Kay didn’t like Paul being in her house. That was more clear-cut than a piece of fine crystal. Wait until she told her Paul would be staying the night. She was going to have a cow—or throw one at her. Melanie would expect no less.

“Kevin’s warehouse burned down. I’m afraid Dean might have done it. I’m concerned he may try something. Paul offered to stay and make sure I was safe.” *Please understand.*

“Is that right? So you and he are going to be alone? Is that what you’re saying?”

This wasn't good. Kay didn't like the situation at all. But what did she want Melanie to do? Asking Kay to join them was out of the question. Paul wouldn't have it. He was still too angry with her.

The thought had Melanie glancing his way. He leaned against the counter, his expression guarded.

God, what a mess. What was she going to do? Should she tell Paul to leave?

If she did she wouldn't get a wink of sleep.

Better yet, she should tell Kay to get over herself and hang up. Either option had her paying in some way. As usual. Why was she always the one to compromise? Heck, Kay had broken up with Paul, not the other way around. Her friend had no right to be angry with Melanie because she'd asked for his help.

"Look, Kay. I need to put some groceries away. I'll call you later."

"Fine," Kay said. The phone went dead. My, that went well. Melanie would be lucky if the woman ever spoke to her again.

"I take it she wasn't happy to hear I was staying," Paul said, a muscle twitching in his jaw. From the simple action, Melanie could tell he was still in love with Kay. So maybe there was hope. Maybe there was a way to get them back together. She just had to think how to do that without making them both angry with her.

Melanie smiled at Paul. "No, she wasn't. You know Kay."

"Yeah, unfortunately," Paul shot back.

Ouch. Now that didn't sound like love. Of course, what had she expected him to say? The man had a wounded heart. It'd take some convincing for him to come around about Kay.

Time to change the subject. "As I recall I promised you a steak. I'll go start the grill." Melanie headed for the door.

“I’ll do it, Mel. I need to check the outside of the house anyway. I want to make sure all the windows are secure.”

“You don’t think Dean would actually try something, do you?”

“We can’t take anything for granted. Never try to guess what a crazy person will do. Don’t worry though. I’ll be here if he does try anything.”

Paul exited through the back and Melanie sank into a chair. Could Dean have set the warehouse fire? He had known where it was and he had been angry with her the night he’d met her there. But was he capable of something so calculated? Definitely the ten million dollar question. If he was, could it lead to him coming after her? Tremors of dread raced down her spine at the thought.

Chapter Fourteen

Knox sat in his truck outside Melanie's house and watched the shadowed figures through the window. Would his actions be considered peeping? In a way, probably. Though he wasn't trying to get a flash of Melanie naked. He just wanted to make sure Paul Nadar wasn't.

After he'd left Melanie at the Graingers, he'd met with Sandra. Their meeting at her apartment hadn't garnered anything but tears from her. She wanted him to make a commitment. Put a ring on her finger. Knox needed more time to think. Jumping into marriage wasn't necessarily the only alternative to their dilemma. Not if turmoil ensued. What would that do to a child? He knew that wasn't healthy, had seen how it affected his nephew, causing the boy to be withdrawn. Knox was grateful his sister got out before Cody became aggressive like his father.

A movement outside one of Melanie's side windows drew Knox's attention and had his heart pounding.

He watched intently, trying to make out the form. It was too dark to see anything clearly, yet he made out the outline of a person moving toward the back.

Knox popped open his door and stole up the driveway to where the figure had disappeared. With calm reserve, he made his way to the rear of the home, running names and faces through his mind as to who the prowler could be.

Once he'd reached the back, he stopped to listen.

Slowly, he stuck his head around the corner and skimmed the yard for the shadow. He spotted the darkened figure next to a window. Was this an intruder? Was someone waiting for the lights to go out in order to break in?

Adrenaline surged through his body as he edged his way around the building, inching closer to the outline. One step. And another, and another until he was directly beside the figure. The guy was at least a foot shorter than Knox, which helped build up his courage to lunge.

With the element of surprise on his side, he tackled the prowler to the ground. A piercing scream broke through the dead silence.

Beneath him, a soft, pliant body bucked, trying to break free. Seconds later an eye blinding light came on from somewhere above and lit the backyard. A door opened and closed. Knox tightened his grip on the prowler and looked up.

“Freeze,” an angry, male voice said from the shadows of the house. The click of a weapon being primed to fire had the hairs on Knox’s neck standing erect. He was caught dead to rights. If he moved, he’d get his ass shot off.

“Is it Dean?” Melanie asked, coming up behind Paul, who had moved close enough for Knox to make him out.

“I don’t know. Roll over and show yourself.”

When Knox didn’t move, he kicked Knox’s side and repeated the order. “Now,” Paul added.

Knox was trapped. His good intentions of protecting Melanie now looked as if he were spying on her instead. Shit! What would she think of him?

The body beneath him squirmed and he knew at that moment it was a woman. Her soft breasts were undeniable.

Taking in a breath, Knox wheeled himself off the female and sat up.

Melanie gasped when she recognized him. She took another smaller intake of breath when she saw the body that had been underneath him.

Knox glanced at the woman, shocked to see it was Kay.

“What the hell,” Paul said, his eyes on Melanie’s friend. “What are you two doing?”

Knox thought it best to stay quiet. Let Kay make her confessions first. His explanation was not going to come easy. After all, what could he say about why he was here? I was driving by and saw a suspicious character prowling around. Yeah, like anyone would believe such a tale. Only a fool would believe that.

In a shaky voice, Kay said, “I—ah. I wanted to see what was going on. I came around the back and was attacked by him.” She pointed an accusing finger at Knox and scowled.

“I thought you were a prowler,” Knox shot back in his defense, returning her glare.

“Why were you here to begin with?” Paul asked Knox, a glint of accusation in his eyes.

“I came by to check on Melanie.” Hopefully Melanie would believe him—after all, it was the truth. Well, sort of. He’d wanted to see her, make sure Paul wasn’t doing any under-the-covers work. Not that Knox had a right to dictate who she slept with, though he sure as hell wouldn’t let it happen under his nose. Melanie was a passionate woman. He’d witnessed that firsthand and knew she wouldn’t deny herself if she wanted the guy.

“Why?” Melanie asked, her blue gaze narrowing. “Why would you care if I’m okay or not? It’s not like you don’t have another woman to go to.”

Knox was taken aback by her statement. What did she mean?

Her light-blue eyes deepened to midnight. “Don’t deny it. I saw the blonde—and the kiss you gave her at the firehouse.”

Knox searched his memory. Sandra. Melanie had been there. Had seen him with her. No wonder she didn't call. She thought she was just another conquest. He wanted to kick himself when he saw the hurt in her eyes. If he told her about the baby—about the possibility of his getting married because of it, she'd be lost to him forever. He couldn't confess to that right now, especially with an audience.

"Well," Melanie reminded. "Aren't you at least going to try and deny it? Isn't that what all men do when they're caught with their pants down?"

"My pants weren't down, Mel, and you know that. She's an ex-girlfriend. She came by to talk to me."

"Don't call me that. Only my friends can call me Mel. Now. I'm going back into the house to get some sleep. You all can stay and have a party for all I care." She turned and stalked into the house, slamming the door behind her. She was steamed, an emotion that was hard to deny.

He glanced at the two left standing around him. Kay grimaced. "I guess you must feel foolish."

"I bet you can relate," he said, scratching his head.

Paul shook his head. "Goodnight." He turned and stormed to the door.

Once he'd gone inside, Knox brushed off his slacks. "I'd better get going."

Kay's eyebrows drew up. "You mean you're just going to leave these two alone together. Are you crazy?"

"Unless you've got a better idea?"

"I do. I suggest we stay right and make sure no hank-panky goes on."

"And how do we do that?"

She smiled slyly. "Have a party like Mel suggested, of course."

"A party. No. I have to work tomorrow."

“Okay, go home, and when you’re all tucked into bed, picture good old protective Paul watching over Melanie. He’ll do a good job believe me. I’ve been the recipient of his cover tucking ability. He knows how to do a thorough job.”

Knox cursed under his breath. The thought of another man touching Melanie drove him crazy, yet he couldn’t brand her to him—not with his life in such turmoil—it wouldn’t be fair to her or to Sandra.

Nope, it was best to go home. If Melanie fell into Nadar’s arms, at least the man was free to act on it. Knox wasn’t.



Melanie woke to the smell of bacon and coffee filling the air around her. Paul was up and fixing breakfast.

She smiled. The man was a saint. Kay had been stupid to let him get away.

Oh God, Kay. What had her friend thought was going to happen last night? Did she really think Melanie would sleep with her ex? True, Paul was a handsome devil, but he was off-limits to her—always had been. If she had her way, he and Kay would be back together before the week’s end.

Melanie had never seen Kay jealous before last night. Her actions spoke of the green-eyed monster. The whole debacle would have been funny if Knox hadn’t been the one to pounce on her.

No, Melanie wasn’t going to go there. She’d spent half the night thinking about Knox and why he’d shown up at her house. To rehash it again wasn’t worth the heartache.

Jumping out of bed, Melanie grabbed her robe and raced down the hallway. She found herself suddenly ravenous. “Good morning,” she said as she entered the kitchen.

Paul turned from the stove and smiled. “Morning. Hungry?”

Melanie rubbed her stomach. “Starved.”

His smile grew. What Melanie wouldn’t give for this man to be Knox, his smile welcoming her after a long, exhausting night in bed. That would never happen. Knox was seeing someone else, no matter what he’d said last night. Sure he’d told her it was his ex, but perhaps they’d been trying to work things out. She didn’t want to get hurt and in that type situation someone always did. And she had no doubt she would be the one left with the hole in her heart. She’d never been lucky in love.

Jason, her last steady boyfriend had turned out to be gay. “I didn’t know, Mel,” he’d said. Come on. A person knew those things, didn’t they? She’d dated him for two years and never once thought he was attracted to men—so why the sudden turnabout? Hell, maybe he’d lied to spare her feelings. Maybe he thought telling her he was gay would hurt less than admitting he’d met another woman.

That was water under the bridge. She hadn’t loved him anyway. She’d just been killing time until the right man came along. He had. Knox had something special, a charm and charisma that had Melanie yearning for him. She wanted Knox so bad she ached inside. That hurt could turn to real heartbreak if she allowed him into her bed. That much she did know.

The plate being placed in front of her brought her back to reality, on it rested a fluffy yellow omelet that looked mouth-wateringly delicious. “Looks great,” she said to Paul and picked up her fork to take a bite, her taste buds going crazy. “Perfect.” She dug in.

He smiled and took a bite of his own. “Do you think we should invite Kay in?” he asked. Melanie almost choked on a mouthful of egg. “What?” she managed after swallowing.

“She spent the night in your lounge chair outside. I saw her out the back window.”

Melanie found it painful that her friend would do such a thing. Thought she'd actually have sex with Paul.

She shook her head. “Leave her out there to stew awhile. She deserves it.”

Paul laughed. “Yes, she does. Why do you think she was worried about us?”

“I don't know. It hurts that she has no trust in me.”

“Why would she care anyway?” he asked. “It's not like she loves me. She proved that the day of our wedding.”

Melanie wasn't sure if she should tell Paul the conclusion she'd come to about them. Would he believe her—trust that Kay did indeed love him? That she'd regretted her decision not to marry him?

“I don't know what Kay's thinking, Paul. Maybe you two should talk.”

He cleared his throat. “I'm not ready to face her yet. When I am, I'll let you know.” He shoveled the last of his omelet into his mouth and washed it down with coffee. “Mind if I use your shower? There's more omelet in the pan if you want to offer some to her. She always did have a hearty breakfast appetite.”

Melanie smiled at Paul. The man was a gem. Thinking of Kay even after what she'd done to him.

“Go ahead on the shower. Towels are in the cabinet next to the sink.”

“Thanks.”

Paul turned and headed down the hall.

Once he'd entered the bathroom, Melanie rose and walked to the window. Kay lay on her side on the chaise, her mouth agape, her hair a tangled, ratty mess.

Melanie snorted. Paul had seen her like this and still wanted to take care of her. He had to be in love with Kay—had to be, and Melanie was going to get these two back together, even if they killed her for it.

Chapter Fifteen

Knox gathered the last of his samples from the Grainger house and placed them into his evidence bag.

He headed for the exit. He'd given up on Melanie and Nadar showing when a loud knock sounded on the sheet of plywood covering the door.

He tipped up the wood to see who'd arrived, though he assumed it had to be Melanie and her boyfriend.

Indeed, standing just outside, looking as fresh as sunshine in her bright yellow t-shirt and white Capri's was Melanie, with Paul Nadar towering behind her.

"Hello. Come on in. I've been looking around. Haven't come across anything suspicious. Almost everything in the living room was gutted."

They both ducked inside and Knox dropped the sheet of plywood to the ground.

Light streamed through holes in the ceiling and exterior wall that had taken the brunt of the flames. It allowed enough light inside for them to move around without flashlights.

"Watch your step. If you get hurt, I'll lose my job," Knox said, moving over to the spot near the interior wall. "This is where I found your art flier."

Paul and Melanie joined him. "Question?" Paul asked. "Is there anyway to prove that the flier burned during the actual fire?"

Knox shook his head. That very question had tormented him. “That’s hard. We don’t have the resources to even attempt to find that out.”

“So what now?” Melanie asked, sounding defeated.

Knox’s first instinct was to pull her into his arms and tell her it would all work out. He thought better of it. He was sure she wouldn’t appreciate it, not after his stunt from the night before. Talk about feeling like an idiot.

The last thing he’d wanted was for her to be dismayed by his actions, wonder why he was spying on her. The look on her face would be permanently engrained in his memory. The whole thing had been stupid. At least he’d had enough sense to leave after he’d been discovered, hadn’t stuck around like Kay had suggested.

“Later today I have to drive over to the warehouse fire and investigate. Maybe something there can shed some light on who’s setting these fires. Right now, I think it’s best if you two go home and wait to hear from me. I have to get these accelerant samples over to the lab. They’re waiting for them. I’ll let you know if I find out anything.”

Paul put out his hand. Knox hesitated, measuring the man, and then gripped it tightly. Jealous or not, he had to admit the guy seemed pretty decent. He obviously cared for Melanie and didn’t want to see her go down for something she didn’t do.

Hell, he didn’t want that either. After she’d told him she hadn’t set the fire in her youth, he knew she wasn’t the person who started this one. Now he just had to find out who did.

Knox lifted the board up again to let them out. His eyes caught a glimpse of something shiny lodged at the bottom of the half charred doorframe.

He reached down and picked it up. An earring. Cheap, from the looks of it. Not blackened by fire like everything else around it. The piece of jewelry couldn't have been there during the fire.

"Mel, did you lose an earring?"

She shook her head. "I'm not wearing any."

He rolled the earring around, noticing it was a clip-on.

He glanced at Melanie's earlobes, the small holes in hers apparent. She had pierced ears.

Knox wasn't an expert on women and their earring habits, yet most women who went to the trouble of piercing their ears wore pierced earrings. Maybe the earring was a clue. Was the torch a woman? One who wore clip-ons?

"What's going on?" Paul asked, his gaze questioning.

"I'm not sure yet. It might be nothing."

"What? Why would an earring mean anything? Mrs. Grainger lived here. It's probably hers."

"I'd say that's true, except the earring isn't black or melted in any way. If it were here at the time of the fire it wouldn't be in this kind of shape. I'd say it fell off a woman's ear after the fire had been extinguished."

"Do you think this woman placed the flier here?"

Knox shrugged. "I can't say. We can't dismiss the possibility either. Is there any lady you know of who would want to set you up?"

"The only woman I know who's angry with me is Mrs. Grainger."

Knox contemplated what Melanie had said. The woman might have a vendetta against her—he'd heard the anger in the woman's voice when she'd confronted Mel. There was a motive for framing her. Her sneaking into the house may have gone unnoticed by their neighbors. Yet was that enough to make her a suspect? He didn't know, though if the woman

wore clip-on earrings it might. He'd have to have a talk with Dean's wife, get a glance at her ears, and go from there.



"Kay, open up." Melanie pounded on the door again.

"Go away, traitor." Her friend glanced out one of the sidelights of the door and scowled. "I don't want to talk to you."

"Come on, Kay. Please let me in."

"Why should I? You went behind my back to put the moves on Paul."

Melanie inhaled and mentally counted to ten. "I didn't make any moves on Paul. I asked for his help. I needed to find evidence to exclude me from this fire. Besides, the day I told you about Knox's accusation, you suggested we ask Paul for help."

"Exactly, *we* ask, not you," Kay spat. "Where is Sherlock Nadar anyway?"

"He went back to his place to pack a bag. Surely you know I have no interest in your ex."

Kay said nothing, actually disappeared from the window.

Feeling defeated, Melanie turned and was headed down the driveway when the chain rattled. The door eased open. Kay smiled in the archway. "Okay. I believe you. Though the next time you do something crazy, I want to be included."

Melanie laughed. "Deal."

"You can come in. I'll warn you now, though, you will be interrogated."

"Interrogated?" An image of Kay shining a bright light in Melanie's eyes, asking in a bad German accent "is it safe" popped into her head. Obviously, she'd seen *The Marathon Man* one too many times.

"I want to know everything Paul said."

“Can I have a cup of coffee first?”

Kay stood back to allow her inside. “I think I could arrange that.”

Melanie entered the house, waited for Kay to lock the door and followed her down the hallway to the kitchen.

While Kay made coffee, Melanie sat at the table, tearing at a paper napkin. She had to find a way to clear herself. Even if Lori Grainger did plant the flier, how could they prove it?

Kay placed a steaming cup of coffee in front of her and sat down.

“So tell me,” Kay said, her attention riveted on Melanie.

“I think Paul still loves you.”

Her friend’s eyes lit up. “Really? Why do you say that?”

“Because he was the one to tell me you were outside on the lawn chair this morning and thought I should offer you breakfast.”

Her friend grimaced. “You mean he saw me? With my hair in ruins?”

“And your mouth hanging open,” Melanie added.

Kay’s cheeks flushed.

“How do you feel, Kay? Do you still love him?”

She sighed. “I do.”

Melanie reached out, draped her hand over Kay’s and squeezed it tight. “Tell him. Why live in misery when you could be happy with him?”

“Because, I’m afraid. What if he laughed in my face? Told me he never wanted to see me again? I’d be devastated.”

“Without him you’ll be miserable anyway. Why not take the chance?” Melanie related to her friends misgivings. She, in a way, was in the same boat, rowing toward uncharted territory with Knox. Afraid of what lay ahead. He’d crushed her, made her feel like she was just another warm body to satisfy his needs. The last thing she wanted to be. She’d been that to every other man in her life. She never wanted to feel that vulnerable again. Though here she was—open and defenseless with him.

Tears clouded Kay's amber eyes. "Are you sure he still loves me?"

Melanie had never seen her best friend cry and was taken aback. Kay was a tough bird, but from the emotion glowing in her eyes, she was having a hard time handling this.

"I do believe he does." Somehow Melanie had to fix this. She hated to see her friend so unhappy—so heart broken.

Kay wiped at her eyes, and took a deep breath. "So did you and Paul find anything at the Grainger's house?"

Melanie nodded. "Knox found an earring he thought might be evidence."

Kay's eyebrows drew together. "How so?"

"It wasn't burned. He assumed it wasn't there during the actual fire, that it might have fallen off a woman's ear after the blaze had been put out."

Her friend shrugged. "What does that mean?"

"That my flier might have been planted."

"Oh, I have a gut feeling Lori Grainger did it," Kay said, reiterating Melanie's exact thoughts.

"How do we prove it?"

"Well, *Nancy*. It sounds like we have a mystery to solve." Kay grinned like a Cheshire cat.

Melanie could only guess what her friend was scheming. "Okay, *Beth*. Where do we start?"

"How about we start with her jewelry box, see if she has an earring missing."

"Wouldn't that have been burned in the fire?"

"If indeed she set it, she made sure to take the things she wanted to keep. Women love their jewelry. I'd say there is an earring missing its mate. We just have to find it."



With evidence collected, Knox left the warehouse and hiked up the hill to his truck. Some type of accelerant was present, which meant it was another arson.

Someone was definitely trying to make it look like Melanie was involved. Why else burn the building she kept her sculpting supplies in?

He unclipped his cell phone and punched through his address list until he found Dean Grainger's cell phone number. Knox pressed dial, and on the third ring, Grainger picked up. "Hello."

"Mr. Grainger. Knox Manning. I'd like to get together with you and your wife. Go over what we've found."

"What do you mean?" Dean asked, his voice sounding strained.

Knox wasn't sure why, but it sounded as if the man was worried about something. If he hadn't done anything, why be nervous about meeting with him? "It's just routine, Mr. Grainger. We like to keep the homeowners informed of our progress."

"When would you like to meet?"

"Later this afternoon, if that's possible."

"I'll have to check with my wife and get back to you."

"That'd be fine." Knox closed his phone and jumped into the truck to head to the firehouse. He hadn't called Sandra yet and wasn't looking forward to doing so. Between the arson cases and dealing with her, he was about to come undone.

Melanie's beautiful face popped into his head. He yearned to be with her, but that was no longer a possibility. The prospect of living without her made him feel strange—almost sick inside.

Maybe it was time to talk to Tara. Get another person's perspective on the situation. Get her advice on what to do, maybe give him some options.

Marriage wasn't something one jumped into, especially when you didn't love the other person.

Knox heaved a sigh. Love. He barely tolerated Sandra, no way could he live with her day in and day out for the rest of his life. Both he and the child would be destroyed. But he planned to be a father to his child. That much he had in his power to do without reservations. He loved children—cherished his time with his nephews.

Clearly a visit to his mother's would be on the agenda after he finished his paperwork on the warehouse fire and met with the Graingers—work that would keep his mind off Melanie for a few hours at least.

Chapter Sixteen

Melanie and Kay sat in Kay's car, staring at the house the Grainger's would occupy until their insurance paid them to rebuild or buy a new home.

"Why isn't Paul here?" Kay asked more to herself than to Melanie.

Melanie smiled. Obviously Kay had hoped to spend some quality time with her ex.

"He'd planned to come. He got called away at the last minute. Something about a case he's been working. Maybe we should wait until he can join us."

"I don't think so. We may not get another chance."

Melanie's stomach balled into a knot. "We're not detectives, Kay. If we get caught, we'll go to jail."

"Where's your sense of adventure, Mel? We'll be in and out in no time flat."

"Sense of adventure? I'm not Huckleberry Finn. We're not sailing the Mississippi. This is called breaking and entering and, last I heard, it's illegal."

Kay's amber eyes lit up. "Not if we don't get caught."

"But the Graingers are home. What are we going to do? Wait for them to go to bed? This is not going to work."

Kay pointed to the front door. "Look, they're leaving."

Dean walked out of the house with a baby in his arms. Tracy trailed behind, two little girls in tow. All headed for the van parked in the driveway.

“See, now we can get in, look for the earring, and get out with no one being the wiser.”

Melanie sneered at Kay’s deduction. “Why do you make it sound so easy?”

“Duck, they’re going to see us.” Kay pushed Melanie down in the seat. Seconds later she released her. “Okay. The coast is clear.”

Melanie sat up and shook her head. “You watch too many crime shows.”

“No, not at all. I’ve been with Paul a few times on stakeouts. We did some undercover work when we weren’t under the covers ourselves. So what do you say? Ready?”

“I don’t know—”

“Nonsense, just follow me.”

Melanie inhaled deeply, opened the door, and crossed the street to the house.

Kay glanced left, then right and said, “Paul told me to always make sure no one is watching.”

Melanie gawked at her friend, shocked Kay had actually listened to anything her ex said about his job. It was so unlike her. “Maybe you should consider a new profession. Become an operative for the CIA or something.”

Kay shook her head. “Too much travel in third-world countries involved. I’d need a five-star hotel—with all the amenities—in which to lay my head at night. I don’t think the mountains of Afghanistan have accommodations like that.”

“No, they do have caves, though. Have you forgotten I know your ultimate fantasy? Being thrown over a big, brooding caveman-type shoulder and carried away to be ravished for days.”

“True, though he’d need an ornamented brass tub with hot, running water and a chef on-call for when we worked up an appetite. Do you think those Afghani guys have a five-star chef on retainer?” Kay sighed. “Who is that Italian dude who cooks for that morning show? I can’t think of his name, but he could serve me pasta any time.”

“I hate to ruin your fantasy, Kay. But if we stand around here much longer, we’re going to be spotted and no man, hot or not, is going to save our asses.”

“You’re right. Let’s get to the back.” The two crept around to the rear of the house, hoping for an open window or door to get inside. Luck was with them when they found a window ajar. With some effort, they raised it enough to climb inside.

“Now what?” The pair stood in the middle of the pantry and Melanie’s skin prickled with unease. Why were they doing this? If they got caught, they’d go down, and no amount of begging for leniency would get them out of such a mess. Breaking into someone’s home was a felony. And frankly, “Felony Melanie” didn’t have a ring to it.

Kay shoved her forward. “We have to look for their bedroom. That’s where Mrs. Grainger would probably keep her jewelry.”

Melanie took a step and tripped over something, flailing for the doorframe to keep herself from falling. Once she’d steadied, she looked down to find a child’s pull toy the culprit of the stumble.

She stared at the wooden duck. Why hadn’t she realized how many people Dean had hurt? He had children, toddlers, and that hadn’t stopped him from pursuing her. Hadn’t made him think when he offered to leave his wife for her. Why were some men so heartless? So uncaring?

“We don’t have all day, Mel.” Kay shoved her again. “They might have just gone out to eat.”

“Okay, okay, I’m going.”

Melanie dodged another toy, then searched room by room until she came across one that looked to be Dean and Tracy’s bedroom. “Here it is.” Melanie waved Kay into the room.

“Okay, you check that dresser, I’ll look through the armoire.” Kay made her way to the tall wardrobe.

Melanie dashed to the dresser directly in front of the bed and opened the first drawer, stunned by what was inside. Strange gadgets lay atop a multitude of sex books. She gasped.

“What did you find?” Kay raced to Melanie’s side. She glanced in the drawer and grinned. “Whoa. I’d say Dean and Tracy are a little kinky. “

Melanie didn’t know what to think. “If Tracy was willing to do all this for Dean, why would he want me?”

Kay shrugged. “Maybe this is all new, bought after she found out about you. The woman apparently loves her husband and is willing to do whatever it takes to keep him. Maybe even set a fire and plant evidence to incriminate you.”

Melanie’s blood boiled. “Let’s find that earring.” The idea that this woman might have stooped to such a level pissed her off. She hadn’t known Dean was married, so why try and ruin her life? An arson conviction would definitely do that.

“I found her jewelry box,” Kay shouted, drawing Melanie’s attention back to her friend.

Melanie inhaled and watched Kay open the large, wooden box. She looked inside, reached in and pulled out an earring. “This one seems to be the only hoop without a mate.” She dangled it in front of Melanie.

Excitement surged through her when she recognized it. “That’s it. It’s a clip-on.”

“Yeah, all of her earrings are,” Kay said, smiling. “Let’s get out of here. We have what we came for.”

The two retraced their steps to the pantry, crawled out the window, and inched it down to its original position. They had the earring, now they had to find out if it was enough to deflect the guilt from her onto Tracy Grainger. Melanie just prayed it would be.



“You have to think this out, Knox,” Sandra said, rising from her sofa. “What kind of life is our child going to have if you’re not living with us?”

Knox shook his head. “We can’t get married just because of a baby. It’d never work.”

“I love you, Knox. Have since the moment I laid eyes on you.”

Sandra’s comment floored him. Laid eyes on? What did that mean? His looks were all that meant anything to her—his physique? Damn. He suddenly felt like a slab of beef. Was this what women went through, feeling like an object, not a person? He wasn’t sure, yet one thing he did know, he didn’t love Sandra. It was Melanie he was in love with.

Shit, what was he thinking? In love with Melanie? Impossible. He didn’t know her well enough. It was lust. Pure and simple, and that he could believe. The thought of her drove him crazy, more directly, drove his body crazy. He’d taken more cold showers in the short time he’d known her than anytime before, icy showers that made his skin goose bump just thinking about them.

“Don’t you believe me?” Sandra asked in a sharp, snippy tone.

Knox got the feeling she knew his mind was somewhere else—something she felt threatened by. “Let me ask you this, Sandy. Do you even like me? I mean, me, as a person?”

Her amber eyes darkened, her lips thinning into a hard line. “I just told you I loved you, didn’t I?”

“Love is not the same as like, Sandra. I’m not surprised you can’t distinguish between the two.”

Her fisted hands flew to her hips. “What does that mean?”

This conversation was going nowhere as far as Knox was concerned. She’d never understand what he was trying to say. Hell, not once had she seen things his way. That’s why he’d ended their affair. “Let’s drop it.”

“Okay, what are we going to do about the baby? I think we should at least live together until the baby’s born. See if we can’t build on our relationship. Give it a chance to grow into something real.”

What she wanted wouldn’t work. No amount of living together would change things between them. She’d drive him crazy.

“I need time to think,” Knox lied, not wanting to say out loud that hell would freeze over before they’d share a bed again. She’d just argue further and he wanted to get out of her apartment before he said something he’d never be able to take back—something that might anger her to the point that she’d never let him see his child.

“We’re running out of time, Knox. I’m going to start showing soon and everyone will know. You need to make a decision right away.”

Knox caught a glimpse of something in Sandra’s eyes, a flash of panic. What was she afraid of? The emotion was so out of character for her. Something wasn’t right. She was in an awful big hurry to get him hogtied, saddled to her, especially when the baby was months from being born. He wouldn’t ask why now. Hopefully, he’d find out her reasons at a

later date. He needed to get out of her apartment. Talk of marriage and living together made him claustrophobic, a sensation that left him cold and in need of some space.



Melanie lay in Kay's guest bed and stared at the clip-on in her hand. Would the thing help her case at all? It was just an earring. No proof Tracy had set the fire in her own home. Melanie could still go down for the crime, especially with her previous arson charge.

Why had she allowed her mother to destroy her future in such a way? It's not like she owed her anything, not like the woman had been mother of the year.

Melanie snorted at the notion. Her mother had been nothing like June Cleaver. While her friend's mom's were baking cookies and going to PTA meetings, her mom was out looking for Melanie's next daddy—men no one else wanted. Drunks. Drug addicts. All sick sons-of-bitches hell-bent on making her life miserable. So why had she allowed her mother to manipulate her? Certainly, if she had it to do over, she'd never agree to take the fall for her step-dad.

Angry, she pushed the memories away. She placed the earring on the nightstand and switched off the lamp next to it.

Tomorrow she'd go to Knox and find out if the earring would be enough to eliminate her as a suspect. Right now, she'd try and get some sleep.

She closed her eyes and was about to nod off when she heard a plink.

Her eyes popped open and she listened intently. Another plink, followed by a slightly louder one. What was it?

No one knew she was here. She'd stayed at Kay's thinking it safer. Had Dean somehow found out? Was he sneaking around outside?

Plink!

This time Melanie saw something hit the window.

She got up and raced across the floor and pulled back the ruffled curtains. Down below, illuminated by a streetlight, stood Knox. He smiled when he saw her.

She slid the window up. "What are you doing here?"

"I need to talk to you. Would you come down?"

Melanie swallowed hard. What did he want at this time of night? Was he here to warn her that they'd decided to charge her in the fire? The mere thought brought a realm of emotions with it. Terror. A feeling of total helplessness. A sense that she'd brought all this on by dating Dean. Even though she knew none of it was her fault. "Okay." She closed the window, grabbed her robe off corner of the bed and slipped it on.

Quietly, so as to not wake Kay, she crept down the staircase, her anxiety increasing with each step.

She unlocked the back door and slipped out just as Knox came around the side of the house.

Melanie's heart accelerated at the thought of being arrested. If that happened, her life and reputation would be destroyed, her career over. That was one thing she couldn't bear.

"I hope I didn't wake you," Knox said, his casual remark relieving her fears somewhat.

"No, I'd just gone to bed. What did you want? How'd you know I was here?" She tried hard to keep the tension from her voice, but knew she'd failed. This was her life. Her whole world could change with three little words, "You're under arrest".

"Nothing really. I just needed to see you. Nadar told me you were staying with Kay." He stuffed his hands into his pants pockets and shifted his stance.

Relief washed over Melanie. It was quickly replaced by confusion. Why would he need to see her when he had a beautiful, sophisticated blonde to spend time with? Why wasn't he cuddled up in bed with her, having wild sex? "Why?" she asked, giving voice to the thought.

"Because I can't stop thinking about you, Mel. I was at home, trying to sleep. Thoughts of you kept me awake."

"Me? Why? Don't you have someone you should be with?" Melanie inwardly scolded herself for asking, was sure jealousy oozed from the question.

His eye widened. "No, I'd rather be here with you." The sincerity in his voice floored her. He'd meant what he'd said and it made her emotions soar.

In Melanie's heart, she knew she loved Knox and she wanted him to love her. She yearned to be held in his arms, for him to make her forget her troubles if just for a few hours. The only thing that could achieve that for her would be to make love to him. Here and now.

Chapter Seventeen

Knox's heart pumped faster when Melanie's powder blue eyes filled with unmasked desire. She wanted him. The gut wrenching realization was more powerful than anything he'd felt fighting fires, strange considering that had been a high nothing had even come close to before. He'd never desired a woman so completely. Denying himself when she obviously wanted him too no longer made sense.

His misgivings disintegrated and he reached for her, fusing them as one, the heat of her body warming his.

"I want to apologize—"

Melanie cupped a hand over Knox's mouth to stop his confession, and smiled. "It's okay. You don't have to say anything."

She removed her hand and hugged his neck, drawing his mouth down onto hers. The petal softness of her lips ignited a flash-fire deep in his belly, one that raged out of control.

He deepened the kiss, crushing her to him. His heart thudded dangerously fast, the drumbeat thrumming a mating ritual in his ears as her nipples hardened against his chest. The strange humming that had plagued him since he'd met her started again, a light vibration that only stimulated him more.

He applied light pressure to her mouth with his tongue, impatient to explore every nuance, each sweet recess of the woman he'd done nothing but think about since he'd met her.

When her mouth yielded to his gentle prodding, he took advantage and slipped his tongue inside. His reward...her warm, inviting tongue tangling with his, tasting of pungent peppermint and heat. The heady combination heightened his physical need. Every nerve in his body sensitized, stirring his lower region to painful proportions.

She tore her lips from his, her breathing labored, her liquid blue eyes panic-stricken. "Knox, we can't do this."

Disappointment slammed into Knox. He'd never wanted anything so bad in his life. "Why?" he asked, the word coming out as a raspy croak.

She waved her hands around them. "Where? We can't go into house, Kay would hear, and I'd never live that down."

Relief washed over him when he understood her dilemma. Hell, if location were her only concern, they'd be able to work around that.

He did a visual sweep of the backyard, a cushioned lounge chair catching his eye. A thrill raced down his backbone, shooting to his crotch. He pictured Melanie straddling him on the thing, her beautiful face hovering, her eyes filled with undeniable passion.

Knox pointed to the chair. "What do you think?"

Her gaze followed his direction. "What if it breaks?"

He grinned. "I'll buy your friend a new one. It'll be worth it, I promise."

"You're pretty sure of yourself." She sidled backward in the direction of the chair. "I hope you're ready to prove that."

"More than ready," he said, keeping in step with her.

"So, I have a question for you, Mr. Fireman."

"Yeah, what's that?"

She stopped when her calves bumped against the edge of the chair, her eyes widening. "Exactly how far does that hose of yours extend?"

He leaned in close to her ear and whispered, "Far enough."

As his tongue delved into her ear, Knox reveled in the fragrant honeysuckle scent of her rich, red hair. His hands laced through the strands, the silken texture a contrast against his callused fingers.

He pulled back and gazed into her eyes. At that moment he knew without a doubt he'd fallen in love. The woman before him had captured his closed-off heart.

He bent to kiss her, a tender union he hoped imparted what he felt for her.

His hands slid over her shoulders, drawing her near, deepening the kiss. He turned around and backed up to ease them down onto the chaise, the chair groaning in protest. The thought of the lawn furniture breaking crossed his mind, though he pushed the possibility aside and concentrated on the woman in his arms, kissing her as he untied the belt of her robe. They were going to make love and he wanted it to be the most monumental event in Melanie's life.

Melanie struggled to breathe as she helped Knox remove his shirt. She sat completely naked on his lap and could hardly wait to feel his warm skin under her hands, next to her body, as they experienced what she'd longed for since the Fire & Ice dance. Making love to him and only him.

Her stomach flipped at the sight of his bare chest highlighted by the moonlight, more muscle than she'd ever seen. He was like Adonis reincarnated—created to make all women swoon.

Melanie sighed.

"You okay?" he asked innocently, his hands trailing up her arms. Couldn't the man hear her heart singing?

She averted her gaze, afraid he'd see how awestruck she was with him.

Why was it so hard to hide her feelings like Kay, instead of being so transparent? And moreover, why couldn't she believe Knox wanted her as badly as she wanted him?

Inadequacy vanished when he unbuckled his belt and slowly worked his pants down, the erection beneath his shorts proof that he did desire her. She didn't care why—only that he did—to hell with anything else. "Its time for you to inspect my deck gun," he said and removed his boxers.

Melanie's eyes widened, a rush of intense heat infusing her body. Was this what they referred to as ladder up?

She swallowed hard. What was about to happen made her tremble with anticipation.

He crooked his index finger at her. "Come here, baby. I promise I'll make you come. At least twice."

"Again, you're pretty sure of yourself." Melanie crawled over to cover his body with hers, the contact electrifying.

"Oh, I've sized up the situation," he said, brushing his hands over her bottom. "The engine's running, just let me know when you're ready to take a ride on the ole' pumper."

Melanie giggled at his terminology, the glint of passion in his eyes feeding her wanton desire. She leaned in and kissed him with fervor as his hands squeezed her ass, drawing her up to his erection. The intimate contact was shocking as he rocked her against him, the gyration driving her to orgasm minutes later, an incredible light show playing in the back of her eyes.

"That's one," he whispered, laughing. "Now let's go for number two."

He held her on top of him and thrust upward, his shaft filling her completely.

Melanie had never experienced anything so incredible until he started to move. That's when she had to admit she'd been wrong. Knox in motion, inside her was the wildest, hottest sensation she'd ever felt. Her body and mind sailed on a sea of need. Sheer pleasure stirred her to life, fueling a flame only Knox had been able to ignite.

At a measured pace she moved against his cock, her body hot and aching for release, building in intensity until Knox climaxed beneath her. His throbbing release brought on her own, contraction after powerful contraction until she was left breathless, weak and totally satisfied for the first time in her life.

Melanie lay in Knox's strong arms listening to the beat of his slowing heart. The heat of his body kept her warm even as the evening started to chill around them. Melanie felt serene and groggy. A bullfrog croaked off in the distance, a peaceful sound that lulled her to sleep.



Knox glanced down at Melanie's sleeping form and his heart filled with tenderness. He'd never been in love before, and he had to admit, it felt pretty good. Made him feel whole somehow.

As he stared at the woman he loved, he came to the realization that being with Sandra for the sake of their child, to give him or her a traditional home and values, wouldn't work. The process would destroy him. Melanie was the woman he wanted to spend his life making a home and raising a family with—not Sandra Gallan. Hell, picturing Sandra as a nurturing mother was hard to do. Caring for a child. His child. She'd probably hire someone to do it. She'd be too busy running off to her social events and parties until all hours of the night.

He didn't want to think about that right now.

He held the most precious of women in his arms and that's all that mattered. To be able to do this for the rest of his life, he had to clear Melanie's name.

The thought brought back the meeting he'd had with Dean and Tracy Grainger earlier in the day. A confrontation that only served to make him more suspicious of them.

Indeed, Tracy wore clip-on earrings, and had accused Melanie of setting the house fire.

Knox knew better. Yet, how was he going to prove that the woman he loved had been set-up? Could he coerce the truth from Tracy Grainger? Get her to confess to setting the fire herself with the intent to frame Melanie in a bid to keep her husband? The circumstantial evidence he had now did nothing to clear Melanie—earring or not. How did he even prove it was Tracy's? Admit that Melanie had told him she'd broken into the Grainger's home and found it? That would just add to her troubles.

First thing in the morning, he'd call downtown and find out if the accelerant used to set the warehouse fire was the same used at the house. If so, he'd see if Tracy Grainger had access to the substance and go from there.

Melanie shivered in his arms and Knox knew it was time to wake her and send her off to bed. He hated to leave her after what they'd shared, but they had their whole lives to be together if everything went according to plan. Right now he had to keep her from catching a chill.



“Mel, wake up,” Kay said, and shook her when she refused to open her eyes. “Are you always this lazy?”

“No,” Melanie snapped, her eyes popping open. She glared at her friend. “Only when I've been up half the night.”

“We went to bed at the same time. Why didn’t you get enough sleep?”

The last thing Melanie wanted was for Kay to learn about her late night rendezvous with Knox. She’d want to hear every single detail and her night with him was too special to share with someone else. At least for now.

“I had a hard time sleeping,” she said instead, hoping her eyes didn’t give the fib away. She wasn’t good at lying, and being so in love made her want to shout it from the rooftops—not keep it a secret.

Melanie smiled as the vivid memories of Knox’s tender expression of last night came rushing back. If she’d read his eyes correctly, he had strong feelings for her, maybe even loved her, a staggering fact. The only other man to confess his love was Dean Grainger, though he’d had nothing to back it up, no show of emotion at all.

Once she’d awakened last night, she and Knox had quickly dressed, neither saying a word, Melanie basking in what they’d shared in each other’s arms. Knox had walked her to the back door and kissed her, a soft union that she still felt with clarity. What she wouldn’t give to have him next to her now, his body draped over hers as he slept. Would they ever have that—or was last night all they’d share?

At the prospect of not being together again, Melanie’s stomach clenched, the sick, vice-like feeling spreading, twisting its way to her heart.

Maybe they should have talked before he’d left. At least she’d know where she stood.

Did she expect too much from their being together? Had their night been anything more than two people sharing an evening of unbridled passion?

Kay shook her again. “Let’s go down and get some coffee. You can tell me why you had such a hard time sleeping.”

“Okay, though I’m just going to bore you.”

“I doubt that.” Kay winked at her, a gesture that made Melanie blush. Did she know what happened?

Oh God. Her friend did have covert training, taught by Paul (P.I.) Nadar. She could have been outside watching them the whole time, witnessed for herself how incredible Knox was beneath his clothes—how user-friendly.

“Are you okay?” Kay touched her forehead. “You look flushed. Are you coming down with something?”

Coming down. What an understatement. She was coming down all right, from a high no drug could even come close to. Making love to Knox had been a mind-altering experience, something she might find addictive, adding yet another thing Melanie found impossible to control.

She hated that about herself. Always falling for the wrong guy.

“I’m okay,” she said, brushing Kay’s hand away.

Okay, it was a lie, but Kay didn’t have to know that. She’d probably try to convince her that sex, even without love, was worth having—as long as the sex was good. Good or not though, Melanie loved Knox with all her heart, and until she knew he returned those feelings, she was going to be on pins and needles praying he did.

Chapter Eighteen

Knox sat in his pick-up and studied the results Greg Emory had given him earlier that day. The accelerant used in the warehouse and the house fire came from the same source, a source accessible to most people. You could buy paint thinner at the local Wal-Mart or art supply store. If Tracy did indeed purchase a can in the last month or so with a check or credit card, he'd find that out. The bad news about the accelerant, it only strengthened the case against Melanie. Tracy Grainger was no dummy. She'd been smart enough to use a substance that Melanie would have on hand.

So, where did he go from here? How was he going to prove Melanie's innocence? No way would he allow her go to jail for a crime she didn't commit. Somehow he had to unravel Mrs. Grainger's scheme to incriminate Melanie, and he needed to do it quickly, before this information became public knowledge. An arson investigation wasn't something you could keep under wraps for long.

Tracy might go to the media and leak Melanie's name, which very likely could destroy her life, even if the truth came out later. Melanie's art career—something very important to her—would be tarnished. No way was he going to let a bitter woman like Tracy ruin Melanie's chances to achieve her dreams. Anything that was important to Melanie was significant.

The cell phone clipped to his belt vibrated. He reached for it and flipped it open, instantly recognizing the number.

His heart stopped.

He pressed talk, hoping this was a, “Why haven’t I seen my son in days” call from his mother instead of about another attempt by Tony to see his boys. “What’s wrong, Mom?” He waited for her sweet voice to say “nothing dear”. It didn’t happen.

“Knox, Tara and the boys are missing.” The tremor in her voice crushed his reserve. She thought Tony had them.

“Have you tried calling her cell?”

“Yes. No answer. Your father is out looking for her right now. Would you mind calling in some favors, ask the police department to put an APB out on her and her car?”

“I’m on it. As soon as I contact them, I’ll be out looking myself. Stay by the phone. Call me if you hear from her. I’ll call you if she phones me.”

Fifteen minutes later, after making some calls, Knox drove past Tara’s house. He thought that she might have gone home, but there was no sign of her car.

A number of scenarios rattled through his brain. Why would Tara turn off her cell if everything were okay? Could there be a valid reason for her to do so, besides Tony taking it? Perhaps she’d left her phone in the car while she went shopping? A possibility, yet what if Tony did have her? Where would he have taken Tara and the boys?

Think, Knox!

Where had the pair gone on their first date? To dinner and a movie, if his memory served him right. What was the name of the restaurant? Riley’s or something, a hole in the wall joint on the edge of town. A place Tony could afford. He’d been tight with his money even back then.

Knox took the next right and headed for the other end of town. He hoped his hunch was right and he'd taken her there to remind her of how it had once been between them. A ludicrous idea.

Was Tony stupid enough to think that bringing back the past would help? With those years came the abuse, almost from the beginning of their relationship, something Knox learned only after Tony had hightailed it out of town.

Knox turned right onto Oak Street and caught a glimpse of a red Pontiac—one that looked like Tara's—parked in front of the Dairy Freeze. At a table outside, Tara sat with the boys on either side of her, both of them holding ice cream cones in their small hands. A man with his back to Knox sat across from Tara. He had the same build and hair coloring as Tony.

Rage filled Knox. The man had some nerve taking them for ice cream.

Tara smiled, a response Knox assumed was brought on by something the man said. He watched her closely, noticed she didn't look at all frightened or intimidated by her company. Actually looked pleased to be with him.

Knox whipped the truck into the parking lot and killed the engine. Murder was on his mind. He jumped out and stalked to the table, his full attention on the man sitting with his sister.

Tara spotted him and smiled brightly.

"Knox." She stood and came over to hug him.

"What's going on?" he asked.

She pulled away and frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, Mom's been trying to get a hold of you for hours."

"Oh, I forgot to bring my phone."

"She's worried sick, Tara. She thought Tony might have kidnapped you."

Tara hands flew to her mouth.

Knox gripped her shoulder and squeezed. "I'll call her, tell her you're all right." While he waited for his mother to answer her phone, Knox studied the man at the table. He turned and Knox was floored. Brent James.

As Knox relayed to his mom that his sister was fine, he eyed Brent and Tara, who flushed a pretty shade of pink. There was something going on between them, or Tara wanted there to be. Strange. They were two totally opposite people.

His friend wasn't at all right for her. Tara was a responsible, caring person. Brent didn't have a reliable bone in his body when it came to women. Or children. Rarely ever acted like an adult. And talk about a womanizer, far worse than Knox had ever been. He was not the type of guy Tara and the boys should be having ice cream with.

What was Brent thinking? No doubt something nasty. Probably picturing himself licking ice cream off Knox's sister. Not something wholesome and pure that would include Tara's boys.

"Hey, Knox. I was lucky enough to run into your sister," Brent said, his gaze clearly honing in on Knox's reaction.

"Right. Well, I'll take care of her now. Surely you have a date, it being Saturday and all."

"Actually, I don't," Brent shot back, his steely gray eyes turning darker. "Tara was talking about taking the boys to the park and I offered to tag along."

"Really?" Knox took a ragged breath. No way in hell was Brent doing anything with his sister. He'd make sure of that. "I have a better idea. I haven't seen my nephews for a week. Why don't I take them to the park?"

"That's a great idea, Knox" Brent interjected with zeal. "That way Tara and I could go see a movie or something."

The idea of the “or something” spiked Knox’s anger further. What could he say to get the point across that he didn’t like the idea without ending their friendship? He didn’t think he could. Not now. It was best to wait. Get Tara alone to tell her about Brent’s reputation with women. Until that time, he’d pray Brent didn’t try anything.

“Okay, I’ll take the boy’s to the park, then over to Mom’s where I’ll be waiting for you, Tara.”

Something akin to annoyance flashed in Brent’s eyes. Good. Let him be steamed. He obviously understood what Knox was trying to tell him in a none-too-subtle way. If Brent laid a hand on his sister, Knox would be the first to know, a deterrent Knox assumed would keep Brent’s hands to himself, at least for today.



As she drove, Melanie’s mind drifted back to her night in Knox’s capable arms. All she wanted was to be with him again. Touching him. Making love to him for hours. She actually hurt inside wanting to be near him.

She passed the park and spotted Knox’s truck in a slot directly adjacent to a large wooden swing-set.

Her heart jumped and she debated whether to stop or not. Her brain told her no. Her heart said yes. Her heart won.

She pulled into a space three car-lengths from his truck.

Would he be upset if she searched him out? Think she was crowding him?

She glanced around. Knox stood next to a jungle gym, watching two little boys. Whose children were they? Were they his? They had the same dark hair.

Melanie's stomach somersaulted. Here she was in love with Knox and she barely knew anything about him. Only what he felt like inside her. The man might be divorced—and have children.

Children.

She swallowed hard as a realization hit her.

She and Knox hadn't used protection last night. Oh God. At this very moment she could be carrying his child. She sucked in a ragged breath and laced her hands over her belly.

Why hadn't she thought about this? She knew better than to sleep with someone without using a condom. Yet she'd been so caught up in the moment, she'd completely forgotten about it—until now.

Had this crossed Knox's mind? Was he worried? Or was he used to something like this? Casual sex. Maybe he never used a condom. Maybe he had unprotected intercourse with every woman he slept with. Another thing she should have found out before she made love to him. The man might have any number of diseases for God's sakes. Melanie's stomach tightened at the thought.

What were the odds of an unplanned pregnancy after having sex once? Surely it was slim. Probably impossible. Right? When was her last period? She started counting back the days. At least two weeks ago. She swallowed again. Wasn't that around the time a woman ovulated? What would she do if she were pregnant and Knox refused to help raise the child?

Melanie shook the thought off. It was stupid to worry over something that wasn't going to happen. There's no way she was pregnant. She was just over-emotional from last night. Her hormones were running amok.

For quite some time, she sat and watched Knox with the boys. He seemed very attentive, quite capable at handling them. Maybe he was their father. Would that change anything? How would she feel about

being part of an extended family if she and Knox were to become an item? Would she be a caring stepmother?

Melanie had so many questions running around in her head that she knew talking to Knox now wouldn't be smart. She needed time to think about what she would and wouldn't be able to deal with in a relationship with him. Until she had answers, it was best to stay away from him.



“What would you do?” Melanie asked Kay as she plopped down into a chair.

“So you're asking me, if Paul had children from a previous marriage would I still love him, right?”

Melanie nodded.

Kay sat across from her and placed her fists under her chin. “No, it wouldn't keep me from loving him. I would, however, be angry he didn't tell me himself.”

“What should I do? Should I ask him?”

“I guess I wonder why it matters, considering that nothing is going on between the two of you.” The question was Melanie's opportunity to confess to everything.

“I'm scared, Kay.”

“Scared, why?”

“Because I slept with Knox and we didn't use protection.”

“What? That was stupid, Mel, especially in today's disease ridden world.”

“I know, I know. I was swept up in the moment. I wasn't thinking, period.”

Kay shook her head, and her eyes widened. “What about pregnancy? You might be knocked up at this very moment.”

Uncanny that her friend's thoughts mirrored Melanie's to a tee. All the things Kay mentioned, Melanie had to worry about. How could she have let herself get into such a precarious situation?

"So was he good?" Kay asked out of the blue.

Was he good? Good wouldn't even come close to describing Knox in bed. The man had made her body quake, shaking her to the core. By far the best experience she'd ever had in her life—the highest high.

"I guess that's a yes," Kay said with a smirk.

"You wouldn't even believe how good."

"Maybe not, though you can try. I want a blow-by-blow, literally."

Melanie wasn't shocked by Kay's choice of words. The woman had to have been a construction worker in a previous life. There was no way she was going to tell Kay every detail of her and Knox's night together, yet she would be willing to generalize.

"Where did this happen?"

Melanie's face heated at the question. What was Kay going to say when she told her they'd christened her chaise lounge?

Kay frowned. "What? Why is your face turning red? Come on, spill."

"You know your lawn furniture?"

Her friend's mouth dropped. "Are you saying you did it on my lounge chair?"

Melanie nodded, too embarrassed to say a word.

"You little whore, you. I'd almost be proud of you, if you'd have used a condom."

"I know, I know. Believe me, I've been beating myself up about this all day."

"Mr. Manning is as healthy as a horse. He surely had to pass a physical, blood work and all. I'm sure he's clean of disease. The pregnancy thing concerns me. Where were you in your cycle?"

“Two weeks in.”

Kay pursed her lips. “You’d better hope your cycles are different than most women’s, because that’s the perfect time to get pregnant.”

Melanie’s glimmer of hope plummeted. The only thing she could do was to wait and see if she got her period. If she didn’t, she’d have to decide what to do next—with or without Knox at her side.

Chapter Nineteen

Knox lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, going over what he'd witnessed earlier that day. Everyone he'd thought normal had done a one-eighty on him.

When he'd dropped the boys off at his mom's that afternoon, his father's car had been parked in the driveway. Not surprising considering he'd been out looking for Tara. When they'd entered the house, he had caught his parents in a passionate embrace. Knox found it hard to shake the image, to his disgust.

How could his mother even think about taking the man back after what he'd done? She was smarter than that. He wouldn't feel comfortable coming by on a regular basis now, not if his dad would be hanging around. He'd make sure to call first.

Had Tara known about this? If so, that bothered him too. He thought they told each other everything. Would she have admitted to it given enough time? Or was this a family secret, kept only from him because of the way he felt?

He shook his head.

Everything he knew as a constant in his life had changed overnight. Tara suddenly wasn't who he thought she was, especially if she was interested in Brent. Why would she go from bad to worse? Not that Brent was abusive, but he wasn't a guy to take on a ready-made family. Hell, he'd never settle down. A fact he himself had voiced to Knox on more

than one occasion. So what was she thinking? Why hadn't she confided in him that she was interested, asked about what type man Brent James was? Maybe he and his sister weren't as close as he'd thought. Was she keeping anything else from him? She might be dating the whole 901 for all he knew.

One thing he did know, Brent James and Nathan Manning were not right for his sister and mother. Both were simply not husband material. You'd think his mom would know that after their failed marriage.

Shrugging the troubling thoughts off, Knox's mind changed gears to the other woman he loved, Melanie. He wished she were lying next to him right now. Not just for them to make love, but to talk to her about how he was feeling. He'd thought about calling her—asking her to come over—but he was afraid he'd sound pathetic. He didn't want to scare her off. Especially if she didn't know how she felt yet. A gentle nudging might be the way to handle things if he wanted a future with her.

Since they'd been together, his thoughts had centered around marriage, the white picket fence scenario. Her standing next to it, greeting him with a sweet kiss every night. How would she feel about that? Would she say yes to the offer? Welcome sharing a life with him? Or was he just a distraction to her for the time being?

Knox shrugged. What the hell had happened to him? Weeks ago women were nothing more than warm bodies to bury himself in.

What a turnabout. Damned if he hadn't fallen madly in love with Melanie, so much so that his thoughts were fuzzy. She'd snared him big time.

A loud knock on his front door gave him a start. He glanced at the clock on the nightstand and frowned. Nine-thirty. Who'd be dropping by so late?

He rose and headed for the door. He was surprised to find Melanie standing in the hallway when he opened the door. She was the last person he'd expected to see, especially since he hadn't given her his address.

"Is this a bad time?" She shifted from one sandaled foot to the other, clearly uncomfortable.

"How did you find out where I lived?"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come." She turned to dash down the hall stairs.

Knox caught up with her and grasped her elbow. "Don't go. I'm glad you came, Mel. We need to talk."

"Talk?" she asked, her eyes widening. "About what?"

"You don't want to talk?" Her reaction caused a vice-like twisting in his gut. So what he thought earlier was true. She just wanted to fuck. Clearly a relationship was the furthest thing from her mind.

"Yes, I do. I ah—"

"You what?" he shot back, unable to disguise his anger.

"I'm scared."

Her confessed fear confused him.

"Scared? Of what?"

She glanced around them. She nodded in the direction of his apartment door. "Can I come in?"

Knox heard the edge to her voice and moved to allow her inside his apartment, closing the door behind him.

"Okay, you're in. What's going on?" He crossed his arms over his chest. "What are you scared of, Melanie?"

"Last night we didn't ah...use..." she stuttered.

"What?"

"Protection."

Stunned would have been an understatement for how he felt. What the hell did she think? “Do you want to know if I have a disease or something?”

Her eyes filled with tears. “What if I’m pregnant?”

Knox hadn’t thought about using a condom, a religious practice up until he’d met Melanie. The idea hadn’t even crossed his mind, though it should have. The timing for them to have a child wasn’t good with Sandra expecting. Besides, from the stricken expression on Melanie’s face, having a child with him was the last thing she wanted.

What was he supposed to say? Did she want him to tell her not to worry? That he was sterile? He couldn’t do that.

“Do you even care?”

Her question drew his full attention. “I’m not sure what you want me to say.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she snapped. “Maybe that you’d be here for me if I was.”

Knox smiled. The woman he loved did care, and she had spunk—more than he’d first thought.

“What? You think this is funny?” She raced around him before he had time to react, heading straight for the door.

Just as her hand turned the doorknob, he grabbed her around the waist and drew her up hard against him. As she struggled in his arms, he whispered, “I love you.”

She stilled instantly. “You don’t mean that.”

He spun her around and his hands cupped her cheeks. “I do, and if you’re pregnant, we’ll have a baby. Together.”

She stood on her tiptoes and kissed him, her lips warm and inviting to a man in love. Not thinking about tomorrow or what it would bring, Knox lifted her into his arms and carried her to the bedroom.

She wasn't leaving him tonight. They were going to make love, and for the rest of the evening, he was going to hold her in his arms as they planned their future together.



Melanie sighed as she watched Knox remove his jeans.

She'd come to his apartment to talk to him, find out where she stood. She'd been furious about his nonchalance until he'd said the magic words she'd longed to hear. I love you. What a shock to learn he felt this way about her. Now she lay on his bed, waiting for him to come to her.

With shaky hands, she pulled her t-shirt over her head, losing eye contact with him for only a few seconds. His gaze devoured her, and caused a fluttering in her lower stomach. Her skin heated under the scrutiny.

She'd just begun to work her jeans down her hips when Knox knelt onto the bed, completely naked, and stopped her.

"Let me do that." His eyes radiated an intensity she'd never witnessed before now. The magnitude of his feelings took her breath away.

His hands moved slowly over her shoulders, gliding over her arms, the skin warming where his hands caressed her. He tugged the jeans down her legs and tossed them behind him.

Her whole body trembled as he stared at her.

Melanie sailed in uncharted territory with Knox. He drove her body to a heightened state, over the edge to orgasm faster than she ever thought possible, his touch so powerful that she hovered above herself, in some altered state.

He reached around her and released the hooks and eyes on her bra, sliding the straps off her shoulders.

She glanced up into his eyes as his palms molded over her breasts, his gaze darkening.

Dipping his head, his lips grazed the sensitive mounds and her nipples tightened in response. She arched her back, moving closer to him as his dark hair tickled her skin.

He laved at her nipples and drew one into his mouth, his tongue swirling around it in sweet torture.

Melanie tensed against the pillow her head lay on, an overwhelming desire rendering her senseless. Wet heat pulsed between her legs and she felt a maddening need to touch him.

She ran her fingers over the sparse, springy hairs on his belly, and with purpose, grasped his shaft, amazed at its velvety softness. She stroked him and smiled in triumph as he grew harder between her palms, his groans exciting her to immeasurable heights. The power she held over him was intoxicating. How she fed his desire as he did hers.

To her surprise, Knox covered her hands. “You have to stop, Mel. I don’t want to come in your hands. I want to save that for when I’m inside you.”

His words gave voice to her need—to feel his powerful cock, driving hard and fast in her until she came, bringing forth the most intense orgasms she’d ever experienced. “I want you now. Please, Knox,” she pleaded in his ear.

“Not yet,” he said smiling. “I want to taste all of you first.”

Melanie swallowed hard, her lower belly contracting in anticipation. Her body trembled as he hooked his thumbs under her panties and, with slow intent, slid them down her legs and tossed them aside.

His eyes turned deep emerald as he stared at her. He gently nudged her legs apart, sliding his hands up her inner thighs, both meeting at the triangle of hair between her legs.

She jumped when his head bent to kiss her intimately, his tongue delving into her delicate folds, licking until she thought she'd splinter in two. Each flick of his tongue erased a bit of the world around her until she felt nothing but his hot demand. When she thought she'd surely die from it all, her body exploded into a spectrum of brilliance.

He moved up her body, peppering light kisses here and there until he stared into her eyes. "You taste damn good," he said and brushed his mouth over hers.

His kiss ignited a hunger deep inside her again, strange after what he'd just given her. Would she ever get enough of him?

Her heart began a steady acceleration as Knox kneed her legs apart and drove into her, so deep she sucked in a breath. Her world folded in again. Each thrust became more powerful than the next until they both climaxed.

Knox rolled to his side, taking her with him.

When her breathing steadied, Melanie studied him. He lay watching her as well, his iridescent eyes soft, satisfied. He smiled, and her heart melted. "You're so beautiful," he said, brushing a strand of hair away from her cheek.

No one had ever told her she was beautiful before.

She shook her head. "No, I'm not."

His brows knitted together. "Yes you are. You're breathtaking."

Pure emotion made it hard to breathe. It was hard to believe he felt this way about her. What had she done to make her luck change? Knox could probably have any woman he wanted, though he'd chosen her. Suddenly, that afternoon at the park came rushing back to rain on her happiness. Were the boys he'd been playing his? Did he plan to tell her about them? Should she ask?

“What’s going on in that gorgeous head of yours,” he asked, giving her an opening if she wanted to take it.

Best to get it out on the table now if they planned to have a future together. “I was driving by the park this afternoon and I saw you with two boys. Are they yours?”

He smiled. “No. They’re my sister’s kids. Cody and Ty.”

Relief washed over her. Melanie didn’t know how she’d have felt if the answer had been yes.

“Would that be a problem if they were?”

Why did he have to ask that? She didn’t know the answer.

“I’m not sure. But for now, is there anything you do need to tell me, some hidden skeletons? Something you think I should know?”

The softness in his green eyes faded. Melanie knew there was. But how bad was it going to be? Did he have a whole slew of children somewhere? Had she fallen in love with a man who pollinated from one flower to the next? And, to her utter dismay, Melanie realized that they hadn’t used protection again. Now her chances of getting pregnant had doubled.

“Mel, I’m going to be honest with you because I don’t want there to be any secrets between us. I hope you’ll still want to be with me after what I tell you.”

At his words, Melanie wasn’t positive her heart still beat. Here it comes. The ten kids just a confession away.

“My ex-girlfriend is pregnant. I have no clue how it happened. I used a condom every time we were together. It was a casual thing. I never loved her, Mel.”

Melanie didn’t know what to say. Not ten kids, though one that was due to arrive any day. She’d have to deal with that child if they were to become a couple. Would she be able to? She wasn’t sure, but that

decision had to be made before she told him how she felt. Before she confessed her love for him.

Chapter Twenty

Knox stretched his arms out and brushed against something solid, something that stirred.

He smiled.

Melanie—all warm and naked under the covers. This was the first time he'd allowed anyone to spend the night, the only woman he'd ever actually fallen asleep with.

Her body felt good next to his. He could spend the whole day loving her, leaving the bedroom just long enough for them to replenish their energy.

He rolled over to gaze at her and slid the blanket down to admire her perfect breasts. Less than a handful had been unappealing to him until he'd met Melanie, but the sight of her ivory skin and rose-colored nipples left him hard—his balls pulsing, ready for action.

He brushed his thumb across her nipple, it peaked in instant response.

Melanie's eyes fluttered open as a soft moan escaped her lips—sweet, tempting lips he wanted to kiss.

Knox was never going to get enough of the woman lying next to him. She sent his blood coursing wildly through his veins. His body ached to possess her—to taste her again. No woman had been sweeter tasting to his tongue. She made him want to experience the pleasure over and over.

It was hard to believe his cold, uncaring heart had been kick-started by a skinny, fiery-haired waif with a temper to match.

He loved her so much. He just hoped his fathering another woman's child wouldn't keep Melanie from sharing a life with him.

No longer able to resist, he slid his hand down her chest to her stomach, skimming the petal soft skin with his fingertips. Her belly was flat and firm against his palm. What would it feel like as it expanded with child? The mere thought flooded him with tender emotions. How wonderful it would be to have their child growing inside her. For them to start a family and share a life filled with love and happiness. The mere image clogged his throat.

Hell, he sure wasn't the same person he'd been weeks ago. Somewhere along the way he'd changed from womanizing jerk into a man head over heels in love with one woman. He never would have thought it possible.

Snaking his hand down further, his fingers connected with the tangle of hair between her legs. Desire worked its way through his body as he stroked her, her small sighs a sign she enjoyed what he was doing. That's all that mattered now. That she craved his caresses.

He leaned in and kissed her and her mouth instantly opened, her tongue searching his.

A loud banging sound came from his living room.

Shit! Someone was at the door. Maybe if he ignored it, they'd go away.

He continued his exploration, his finger dipping into Melanie's heat, her moans of pleasure vibrating against his mouth, exciting him more.

The knocking didn't cease, only got louder.

Go away.

A familiar feminine voice shouted his name, loud enough to wake the dead, and more importantly, the neighbors.

Knox tore his mouth from Melanie's and sucked in a breath. "Sorry," he said and rose to reach for his jeans, tugging them on. Sandra was at his front door and from her obvious persistence, wouldn't leave until he talked to her.

He'd reached the front room when another round of banging started. "Okay, I'm coming," he hollered at the door.

Once he'd unbolted the lock, he took another deep breath, in no way looking forward to this confrontation, especially with Melanie lying naked in the next room. He prayed she'd stay there. Sandra would not be nice if she saw her.

He eased the door open to find an irate Sandra standing before him. She brushed past him and made her way into his living room. She stopped, slamming her purse down on the coffee table. "What took you so long?" she snapped, glancing around the room, her gaze ending at the bedroom door.

"I was sleeping, Sandra. What do you want?"

"What do I want?" She flung her fisted hands on her hips, her amber eyes emitting sparks. "Surely you know? I gave you ample time to think about what we discussed. You need to make some decisions about our future."

Knox closed his eyes, his frustration building. This was the last thing he wanted Melanie to hear. She might just decide their relationship wasn't worth the grief of dealing with an ex-girlfriend carrying his child.

"Well," she prompted.

"I don't love you, Sandra, and a child isn't going to change that."

She huffed. "You haven't given us a chance. I love you. I want to be your wife."

Knox prayed Melanie had fallen back to sleep. "I can't marry you. It'd never work. I'll live up to my responsibilities, be a part of my child's life. That's all I can give you, Sandra."

"Is there someone else?" she asked in a calm tone, yet her eyes spoke an all-together different story.

What was he going to say? Should he tell her the truth? Or lie and tell her no? Either way, if Melanie was listening, he was in deep shit. Maybe the truth was best in this case. He nodded. "Yes, there is."

Sandra's face distorted. If looks could kill, he'd be dead in a few seconds. The coming tirade would be massive. Nothing new. He was used to everything being blown out of proportion with her.

"Who is she?" Sandra hissed. "Some bimbo you met on the job? Does she know about the baby?"

"Yes," Melanie said, as she stood in the entrance to his bedroom, wrapped in the blanket off the bed.

Oh Shit. This was going to get ugly. An image of the two women wrestling on the floor, trying to tear each other's hair out, flashed in his mind. He needed to dispel the tension before that happened.

"Who are you?" Sandra spat, her gaze flicking over Melanie and finding her lacking by the look of disgust on her face.

"I'm Knox's lover." Melanie's gaze held a sexually satisfied glint.

Not a hard sell considering she was wrapped in his blanket.

If it were possible, Sandra's expression darkened even more. "She's hardly your type, Knox. Getting a bit hard up, are you?"

Melanie gasped at her cutting words, and Knox's anger flared. No one was going to talk to the woman he loved like that. "I want you to leave, Sandra. I'll come by tonight and we'll talk."

"You mean leave so you can screw this skinny bitch. I don't think so."

Melanie charged at Sandra.

Knox pulled her back before she did any damage. “Unless you want to get ripped to shreds, Sandra, you’d better get the hell out of here.”

Sandra’s jaw clenched as she stared at him. “Daddy’s going to hear about this, Knox. You’ll be lucky to have a job tomorrow.”

“Do what you have to do.” He tried to sound unaffected by her threat.

Tears clouded Sandra’s eyes. “I can’t believe you’d choose that,” she pointed to Melanie, “over me. She’s nobody.”

Melanie lunged forward. Knox held her firm, gripping her tightly around the waist. He couldn’t blame Mel for wanting to attack. Sandra was a snobbish bitch. She thought the world revolved around her. Was used to getting what she wanted. In this case, him.

Sandra snatched up her purse and stormed to the door. She turned back to glare at him. “You’ll be sorry.” The door vibrated on its hinges as she slammed it and left.

Now it was time for him to face the music with Melanie. He just prayed she’d understand and accept that he couldn’t change the past, yet he wanted her in his future.



Melanie wasn’t sure what just happened. One minute Knox had her on the verge of climax, the next she’s in the middle of an argument between him and his ex-girlfriend. A woman who clearly wasn’t nice people.

Why had Knox even dated her? If the woman had her way, he’d be without his job come Monday morning and, without Knox to champion her cause, Melanie might find herself in jail.

She looked into Knox’s eyes and the anger and confusion she experienced vanished. There was a glow of love in his intent gaze that weakened her knees.

“I’m sorry, Mel.”

She swallowed a lump of emotion. What she read in those green eyes of his was genuine. He felt bad about what the woman had said, how it made her feel.

Brushing his cheek with her fingers, she said, “It’s okay.”

He shook his head. “No, it’s not. Sandra can be a real piece of work. Believe me. Because of her social standing, she thinks she can demand whatever she wants and get it.”

“She wants you,” Melanie said, smiling. “I can’t really blame her for that.”

He cleared his throat. “No, she never wanted me. She wanted what she thought she could make of me.”

“What’s that?”

“Something I’m not, a white-collar clone.”

Melanie cringed at the thought. Frankly, she liked the Knox standing before her, the man she’d come to love with all her heart. A man who wasn’t afraid to get his hands dirty. “Is she your commanding officer’s daughter? Can she really get you fired?”

“She is, yes, but I don’t think she can get me axed. I’d have already been gone if that were the case. Daddy Gallan can make my life pretty miserable, though.”

“I guess I should have stayed in the bedroom.”

He gripped her shoulders and pulled her to him. “She needed to know about us, Mel. I want you in my life.”

“What about the baby? She might make it impossible for you to see your child. Could you live with that?”

“Sandra wouldn’t do that. It wouldn’t play in to her plans. I know how she thinks. If she harbors any hope our child would somehow draw me back to her, she’ll hold on to that card.”

“Are you sure it won’t?”

“I don’t love her. I love you, Mel.”

Melanie wished she were as sure as he about how he’d feel once the child was born.

“What do you say we go back and finish what we started before we were so rudely interrupted?” Knox pressed feathered kisses over her shoulder.

Melanie felt the world tilt. The idea thrilled her to the core.

“Only if you promise to feed me later.” She lifted the bottom of the blanket and moved backward toward the bedroom door.

Like a cat stalking a juicy mouse, he followed her. “Okay, but you have to feed me first.”

She giggled and raced for the bedroom, Knox hot on her heels.



“Do you think it’s enough to exonerate me?” Melanie asked Knox as they made their way to her car.

He didn’t think so. It was just an earring. Evidence-wise, it wasn’t much. At least now they had a direction to go in, someone to watch in case the authorities chose to go after Melanie for the fire.

“Let’s wait and see what happens. I’ll give the chief my findings and observations in the morning and hope he can see the bigger picture. Meanwhile, get your detective friend to keep an eye on the Graingers. Maybe Tracy will do something stupid. Give herself away.”

“What did she say when you talked to her?”

“She told me to look to you as a suspect.”

Melanie snorted. “Right. I should have figured that.”

“I’ll get her, Mel. Just give me a little more time. Mrs. Grainger will regret setting that fire to frame you. I promise you that.”

When they reached her car, she fumbled to find the keys in her purse. Knox took the opportunity to pull her into his arms and kiss her. “What are you doing tomorrow around six?” he asked.

“Nothing that I know of. Why?”

“I thought if you weren’t busy, I’d pick you up and we’d go to my mother’s. I’d like you to meet my family.”

“Family?”

Why did she look as if he’d just given her a death sentence? Was she that averse to meeting his mother?

He frowned as he released her. “You don’t want to meet them?”

“It’s not that,” she said, shifting her footing. “What if they don’t like me?”

He grinned. “What’s not to like?”

“Do they know I’m an arson suspect?”

Now Knox understood her reluctance. She was worried about the way she’d be perceived. Somehow he needed to reassure her they’d have no preconceived notions about her, even when he knew differently. No need to make her more uncomfortable about the meeting.

Directly after he talked to Sandra, he’d call his mother and make sure she knew he was bringing Melanie by. He wanted his mom to know that Melanie was no longer a suspect in his eyes. He hoped that would be enough for her. Their meeting was paramount now that he knew Melanie was his future wife, would be a part of the Manning family. She had to be assured she’d be accepted as such.

Chapter Twenty-One

The last thing Knox wanted to deal with was Sandra Gallan, but there was no way out of it. If nothing else, he had a responsibility to the child she was carrying.

He knocked lightly and waited.

When she opened the door, her gaze narrowed and darkened at once, not boding well for the conversation ahead.

“Can I come in?”

“I don't know why I should let you.”

“You want me to leave?” His tone was sharper than he'd intended. “I wouldn't be here if there weren't some pretty damned important things for us to discuss.”

She leaned on the doorframe and crossed her arms over her chest. “I guess you've got other places to go, right? Like off to screw some skinny-assed bitch with no tits. I wished I'd have known you were into the boyish look.”

“Can we air this shit in your apartment. Do you want the whole damned place to hear how cheap and petty you are?”

For a moment, she hesitated. She moved aside to let him in, closing the door behind them.

“What are you going to do, Knox? After this morning, I never expected to see you again. Have you come by to do the right thing?”

Knox found it hard to believe she actually expected him to forget they had nothing in common and marry her. “What is the right thing exactly?”

“I don’t understand you,” she snapped. “Why did you get involved with this woman, knowing I was having your child?”

Knox shook his head. “A child can’t solve relationship problems, Sandra. You of all people should know that.”

She turned and headed for the kitchen. “Leave my parents out of this, Knox. Just because it didn’t work for them doesn’t mean it wouldn’t for us.”

“At least your parents started out loving each other.”

She stopped and whirled around to glare at him. “You didn’t seem at all adverse to sleeping with me a few months ago. If you didn’t care about me, why pretend to?”

“I never once told you I loved you. I assumed I was your way of getting even with mommy. You knew she’d never approve of us, and that’s why you went after me. Not to mention the fact that I worked for the man she’s still holding a candle for. You knew it’d stir up her hackles.”

“Nonsense! I didn’t date you because of my mother. I was attracted to you the moment I met you. Two weeks into our relationship, I knew you were the man I wanted to spend my life with. I really don’t care how my mother feels about it.”

Knox heaved a sigh. Anything he said now was going to hurt her deeply. “I don’t feel the same way, Sandy. I never have.”

She walked to the table where grocery bags sat. He’d clearly caught her just getting back from the store.

With tears clouding her amber eyes, she opened a bag and began to put the items away. “You’re selfish,” she said in a ragged voice.

“How?”

Sandra kept her hands busy, going through the grocery bags. “Choosing that woman. You’re making a mistake. I could give you anything and everything, Knox. “

“What I want isn’t for sale.”

She balled an empty bag in her hands. “Oh and what’s that? A good fuck?”

“What I feel for her has nothing to do with sex, Sandy.”

She opened another bag, and glanced at him. “Okay, what do you feel? What does she have that I don’t?”

“A heart” came to mind. He bit his tongue. She’d just fly off the handle again if he said it. “I don’t want to discuss my personal feelings for her with you. I’m here to come to some understanding about the child we’re having.”

She worked her way through another bag, and placed a carton of milk in the refrigerator. “I don’t think we have anything to talk about now.”

The casual way she dismissed Knox infuriated him. He stormed to the table and slammed his fists down on the wooden top. “Listen, this kid is mine, too. You’re not going to shut me out of his or her life.”

Knox was tired of her attitude, everything having to be her way. He’d hated that about her from the beginning. This time it was going to be different. Things were going to go his way for once.

When she didn’t respond to his tirade, he hung his head in frustration, catching a glimpse of something in a grocery bag in front of him. Something that didn’t register. A box of tampons? Why would she need tampons when she was pregnant?

Reaching inside the sack, he grasped the box and pulled it out. “What are you using these for?” He wanted to strangle her for a second or two.

Her face paled and Knox's stomach dropped. What the hell was going on? Why would she be worried? Unless...

"You're not pregnant are you?"

Her face bleached of all its color.

"You don't have to answer. I can see that you're not." Why would she do such a thing to him? The more he thought about her betrayal, the madder he got.

Best to leave before he blew sky high. He'd never in his life been so disillusioned. Lying about being pregnant had to be the worst thing any woman could do to a man.

Knox turned and stalked out of her apartment, the sound of her screaming his name the last thing he heard before slamming the door.

First thing he'd do was call Melanie and tell her the news.



"Let's go in here." Kay dragged Melanie to the door of a fancy boutique.

Melanie dug in her heels, never having entered a place as ritzy as the one Kay was trying to talk her into. "I can't afford anything in there."

"Sure you can. You just sold all your paintings, or have you forgotten?"

Strangely, she had. With the arson hovering over her head, she hadn't thought much about her successful art showing.

"Come on. We'll find you something wonderful to wear to the Manning's." Kay tugged on her arm again.

"I don't want to think about that. I wish Knox hadn't suggested it."

"Nonsense. It's not every day a man asks you to meet his mother. He clearly has strong feelings for you."

Melanie's stomach did a backward flip. "I'm nervous. What if Mrs. Manning doesn't like me?"

"Get serious." Kay opened the door and shoved her inside. "What's not to like? Let's find something conservative, yet sexy."

Melanie turned to face Kay. "Nothing can make me look sexy."

"Knox apparently doesn't think that. That reminds me, I want to hear about your night. What happened?" Her best friend's eyes sparkled. She expected to hear all the juicy details. "Don't leave anything out."

"I'm not going to tell you about my sex life, Kay."

"Come on." Kay placed her hands on her curvy hips. "I tell you about mine."

"I don't ask you to. You just love reliving the tales."

"True. Can't you at least tell me something?"

"Sure."

Her friend's face lit up.

Melanie hated to disappoint her, but she wasn't planning to tell her anything private. "We were in bed. Story over."

Kay frowned. "That's it? Nothing in depth about how large his fire hose is or anything? Come on."

Kay's sad, disappointed look made Melanie feel bad. Almost. Okay, so she'd give her a teaser. "It's really none of your business, but let's just say he comes well-equipped."

"I knew it," she bubbled.

"Can I help you?" a nicely dressed blonde asked as she made her way toward the front of the store.

"I'll bet she works on commission," Kay whispered to Melanie. "We're just browsing," she said openly to the salesclerk with a sugary smile.

The woman eyed them with distaste before heading behind the counter to neatly fold an array of angora sweaters.

Kay gripped Melanie's arm and pulled her to a rack hanging nearest the entrance. "Now let's find you the perfect outfit."

An hour later, after trying on seven different dresses, Melanie chose a flirty aqua-colored number with a halter-top and full, swingy skirt that flounced about when she walked. Sexy yet understated. Perfect for meeting his family.

They left the shop and walked down the street to have lunch at O'Malley's. The last time they had lunch there, Mel had left smiling from ear to ear. Embarrassing to think about now. Knox's jaw had practically dropped to the floor at her hose comment.

A lot had changed since that day. Her art show had been a success, and she'd fallen in love with the most amazing man. The only thing that could possibly make life better was if she were cleared of this arson.

"Mel." The voice behind her sent a chill skittering up her spine.

Please don't let it be...

"Melanie," he called again. Nope. No mistaking the voice. It was Dean. The only bright side to the encounter was that Kay was with her. This way if things went south, Kay could intervene.

Melanie turned, her skin prickling from the look he gave her. His eyes were dark, almost menacing.

"Have you been talking to Manning about the fire?"

What the...? Had he expected her to hang herself? "I had no choice. Apparently your wife accused me of setting it."

"So what did you tell him?"

Melanie's gut instinct told her to stay calm. "Nothing. I don't know anything," she lied. No way was she going to spill her guts to him about what she knew or didn't know about the blaze. Trusting him once had been a mistake, doing it again would be suicide.

“You’re looking good.” He reached out to touch her arm. Melanie moved in time to avoid the contact. Just standing next to him made her sick, no way was she going to let him touch her. Her skin crawled at the thought.

“I’m sorry about everything, Mel. I had no idea Manning would finger you.”

“Grainger, why don’t you get lost,” Kay interrupted. “Can’t you see she doesn’t want to talk to you?”

“Stay out of this, Kay. If it weren’t for you...” He shook his head. “Forget it. Melanie, I’ll talk to you later.” He retreated to the other side of the street to where his car was parked.

Melanie took a much-needed breath. Since their encounter at the warehouse, the man scared her to death. He was one of those obsessive people who didn’t take no easily and she’d do well to avoid him. “I’m glad you were here,” she said to Kay, hugging her tightly. “I don’t know what he’d have done if I were alone.”

“If you’re that afraid of him, get an order of protection against him.”

Melanie grimaced. “Those things don’t work. They can actually make the situation more volatile. I don’t want that. I’m just going to have to steer clear of him and hope Tracy keeps him on a short leash.”

“Yeah, and maybe neuter him while she’s at it.”

Melanie laughed. That would definitely keep him down awhile. Too bad they didn’t do that to men who strayed. It’d cure the infidelity rate and in turn make the world a much safer place for women.



Knox parked in front of his mother’s home and killed the engine. He glanced at Melanie, who fidgeted like a thoroughbred with its first racing saddle. The moment she’d opened her apartment door, he’d seen the look

of sheer terror on her face at the prospect of meeting his family, though it had been hard to concentrate on anything other than how gorgeous she looked in her dress. The woman had the best legs he'd even seen. Perfectly shaped. Long enough to wrap around him good and tight.

The thought caused him discomfort. They could always skip the trip to his mother's and spend the evening having marathon sex instead.

Not going would definitely make Melanie happier, yet she was a part of his life now. He wanted her and his mother to get to know each other.

"Come on. I promise my mom won't bite." He gripped the door handle. Melanie reached across to stop him, the deep lines etched on her forehead giving away her nervousness.

"Are you sure we're ready for this?" Her powder blue eyes searched his. "I mean, how about we wait a few weeks?"

Knox pulled her into his arms and whispered, "Mel, honey. If I love you, Mom will too. So stop worrying."

"O...kay," she said, her voice quivering. It really mattered to her what his mother thought of her and the sentiment touched Knox's heart. Sandra wouldn't have given a moment's thought to that. She was too into herself to care what other's felt. There was no doubt that Sandra and Melanie were two very different women. He knew his mother would like Melanie because of who she was and he wished there was something he could do to relieve her concerns on that matter.

He got out of the truck and came around to open Melanie's door. He smiled and grasped her hand. She returned a wary half-smile.

Hopefully, once the initial introductions were over, she'd relax. Both his Mom and Tara would see how wonderful she was, know why he'd fallen in love, and accept her as a member of their family. Because once he worked up enough nerve, he'd ask Melanie to be his wife.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Melanie unlocked the front door to her house, nervous, yet excited about spending the night with Knox again. After the confrontation with Sandra at his apartment, they thought it best to go to Melanie's for the night. Neither wanted any interruptions.

She wanted to be alone with him, to reexperience the mind-blowing passion they'd shared in each other's arms.

They entered the house and Melanie locked the door behind them. Nothing was going to ruin their night.

Meeting his mother had been nerve-wracking to say the least. No way would she have gotten through it if not for Knox being at her side. Carol Manning's gaze had the intensity of a hawk, staring her down, no doubt assessing the type of person Melanie was. She hoped she'd passed the woman's scrutiny.

Knox's sister, Tara, had been another story all together—warm and friendly, no searching looks or probing questions. The woman had made Melanie welcome from the moment she stepped into the house. Given time, Melanie knew they'd become good friends. Though she'd sensed a little tension between Knox and his sister and wondered about it.

"Are you hungry?" she asked him once they stood in her living room.

He leaned in and kissed her lightly on the mouth. "I could eat."

"Okay. I'll warn you now, I'm not very talented in the kitchen."

“I can live with that.” He glanced around him, his gaze landing on the covered painting on her easel. “What are you working on? Can I see?” He strolled over to the stand and started to lift the canvas.

“No,” she screeched, racing to stop him.

Too late. He flipped the cloth up and stared at the painting.

Seconds passed.

The look he gave her made Melanie swallow convulsively.

“How did you...”

Shame warmed her face. What would he think about her painting his portrait? She tried to cover it. He stopped her.

“It’s terrific, Mel. How do you paint without the subject sitting for you?”

She shrugged. “I’ve always worked from memory.”

He pulled her into his arms. “I love it.”

“I’m glad. Let’s hope the meal I fix is as well received.” Melanie grimaced for effect.

He laughed and allowed her to tug him toward the kitchen.

“Hopefully there’s something edible in the house. I haven’t been grocery shopping in days.”

Once in the kitchen, Melanie opened the refrigerator and looked inside. She sighed at its paltry content of eggs, cheese and a loaf of bread.

She glanced at Knox. “How do you feel about an omelet?”

He shrugged. “Whatever is easy, Mel. I’m not picky.”

She smiled. “I’m glad to hear that.”

She took the carton of eggs out and went to find a mixing bowl.

As she cracked eggs, Knox came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. He nibbled on her ear and stirred up a hornet’s

nest in her stomach. Only his touch made her weak-kneed and melting into a puddle of desire.

“Have I told you how much I love the way you smell? How soft your skin is? How you make it impossible for me to stay away from you?” Each word vibrated against her earlobe, sending a current of electricity rocketing through her body. Any restraint she held on to until this point slipped away. She wanted him, buried deep inside her, any thought other than making love to him pushed to the side.

Melanie turned in his arms, sure her intent was clear in her gaze. “Why don’t I put the eggs back in the fridge and we can eat later?”

He kissed her soundly. “Sounds good.”

Out of the blue, a conversation she and Kay had had popped into her head. Men liked to role-play and do different things in bed. “Want to be adventurous?” she asked.

He grinned. “What did you have in mind?”

“How about something with an artistic flare?”

He looked confused, yet interested. No telling what was running through his mind.

“Have you seen the movie Ghost?”

He shook his head. “I must have missed that flick.”

“That’s too bad. We’ll have to rent it some time. Anyway, in the film the female lead is into pottery, has a wheel and is practicing on a bowl, wet clay working through her fingers. The male lead sits down behind her...and the rest you can imagine.” She pulled him toward the living room, her heart thudding in her chest. “I thought instead of using clay, we could use finger-paints.”

His eyes narrowed, then sparkled like a beveled-cut emerald. “I’ll give it a try. But don’t expect a master *piece*.”

Melanie caught the emphasis on piece and decided to have fun with his word play. “Did you know that there is a rhythm and motion to painting? That is what I want to teach you.”

He grinned devilishly. “I’m up for that.”

Her hand slid down to lightly cup his crotch. “I have to say you have great form.” Her eyes widened with delight.

“Can I paint you? Naked?” he asked, brushing his knuckles across her breast, her nipple tightening in response.

She sighed. “You think you’re ready for that?”

“It’d give me inspiration.”

Melanie smiled as she reached around her neck to untie the halter-top. She let it drop. His shirt was the next to go, along the rest of her dress. Soon they stood naked, staring at each other.

Melanie picked a paintbrush off her easel and handed it to him. “Now, your first lesson. Soft, slow, feathery strokes are best.”

His gaze traveled over her boldly, lingering on her breasts. The intimate appraisal made her nipples draw up even more.

“Do I focus on the tip?” he asked, grazing the end of the paintbrush with his thumb, his gaze never leaving her breasts. “Or make use of the whole thing?”

Melanie swallowed hard. This game was getting harder to play. All she wanted was to get down to business. Make mad, crazy love to Knox. “For concentrated purposes, the tip works best.”

“Care to show me what you mean?”

Nothing would thrill her more. She moved closer, inhaling his fresh, spicy scent. “I forgot,” she said, pulling the paintbrush out of his hand and tossing it behind her. “We were going to use our hands.” She pulled his head down to her breast.

Without hesitation, he drew the nipple into his mouth, swirling it around his tongue. Melanie threw her head back and reveled in his expertise—sensations that made her body tingle with anticipation for what was to come.

Tremors of desire gripped her belly as he worked his way down her stomach, his hands cradling her hips as his warm tongue stole its way inside her heat. Fiery need consumed her as he worked his magic. She thought she'd lose her mind, knew she could take no more when his tongue left her swollen folds and moved up her body again, leaving her yearning for his hard cock in its place.

Knox needed her so badly it hurt. Melanie's soft moans of pleasure drove him to the edge. She was close to orgasm, but he wanted to prolong the sweet torture until they came together, be one with their release.

He worked his way up her body, picked her up and carried her to the sofa, where he placed her down gently, covering her body with his. The heat of her body drove him wild. He kissed her. Her mouth opened to invite his tongue to play with his as his hands glided over her breasts. No woman had ever stirred him so completely, hardening him to steel against her belly. He needed to pace himself or he'd explode the minute he entered her, leave her unfulfilled, the last thing he wanted. Loving Melanie drove him to please her in every way, made him selfless when it came to her needs.

“Now, Knox. I want you now.”

To show her intent, she encircled his erection, drawing him to her sex, arching up to offer herself to him. Knox hesitated only a second before driving deep inside her, a groan of satisfaction his reward for filling her.

He thrust hard and fast until she spasmed around him, spurring on his powerful release, leaving him exhausted and satisfied.

When his breathing slowed, Knox shifted his weight and looked into Melanie's eyes, blue pools that shook him to the core.

He truly loved this woman, knew he didn't want to be without her from now on.

She smiled, and brushed a stray strand of hair away from his forehead. "I love you, Knox."

The confession was music to his ears. "I love you, too."

"What are we going to do?"

"About what?"

"About finding out who set the fire at Dean's. Before we can make any plans for our future, I need this to be behind me."

Knox took a weary breath. She was right. Before he asked her to become his wife, the arson case had to be closed. They had to nail the person who started the fire. Only then could they think about beginning a life together. She knew that. He knew that. Now all they had to do was to figure a way to flush this arsonist out into the open and get the person to confess to the crime.

"I don't know yet, Mel. I promise you, I'll think of something."

Chapter Twenty-Three

A persistent, annoying ringing of the doorbell woke Melanie. She turned to find Knox lying next to her, naked and asleep. Her gaze moved down his body and up again. The man was hotter than a comet hitting the atmosphere.

When the bell rang again, his eyelashes fluttered. She tried to ease over him to get off the sofa. His hands snaked around her and held her in place.

“Where do you think you're going?” he asked in a husky voice. His tone sent a tingle up her spine and made her forget about the doorbell. His body stirred beneath hers, igniting her own passion.

Would she ever get enough of him? Every touch or brush of his body sent her hormones raging like a brushfire in dry season.

It was hard to believe she'd actually told him how she felt. Her confessed love for him. It was a first. She had thought she'd loved Jason all those years ago, though she'd never told him so. Knox was the only man who'd brought out that urge, the only one she'd trusted. A crucial element when building a relationship.

Her mother had never gained any man's trust, or trusted one in return. Melanie'd had no example of that growing up. But, she knew what she felt for Knox was real—a love that could withstand the pressures of day-to-day life.

Hell, they'd already made it through a number of obstacles, including his ex-girlfriend's imaginary pregnancy and Knox thinking she'd started the fire. Two huge hurdles they'd worked through that only strengthened their bond for each other. As far as Melanie was concerned, there was nothing they wouldn't be able to work through together.

The bell rang again. Pounding started seconds later, loud and insistent. Was this déjà vu or what? Like the last morning they were together. Sandra at the door? No. Not after what Knox had told her. Melanie didn't think Sandra would have the nerve to show her face for months to come.

She sighed and looked at Knox...and saw the same disappointment at being interrupted mirrored his eyes. "I'd better get that. Care if I throw on your shirt?"

"Not at all. I'll bet you look a hell of a lot better in it."

She ran her hands lightly over his chest and then crawled over him to where his shirt was draped over her easel.

"Hurry back," he said, smiling.

Melanie donned the shirt on her way down the hall.

She unlocked the door and eased it open to find Kay standing on the porch, her eyes red.

"What's the matter?" Melanie asked. "Did something bad happen?"

Kay sniffed, nodding. "Can I come in?" Her voice was weak and Melanie's heart went out to her. She'd never seen her best friend this upset.

"Yes, of course." She opened the door further and stepped back.

Kay headed straight for the living room where Knox lay, naked. "Kay," she called, slamming the door and racing after her. Her only hope was that Knox had found something to cover himself with.

Entering the room, she found Kay staring at him. Knox sat up on the sofa, an accent pillow strategically placed over his package. He looked at her, his eyes pleading for help.

“I guess I came at a good time,” Kay said, one of her eyebrows arching. “My, oh my, you’re a big man.”

“Mel, could you get me my pants and ask your friend to turn around so I can put them on?” Knox asked. From his tone, he didn’t like being ogled by Kay.

“Kay.” Melanie gestured for her to turn around. “Why don’t you and I go to the kitchen and make some coffee? You can tell me what’s upset you.”

“Actually, not getting to stare at your man irks me a little. “

Knox growled at her comment.

Kay laughed. She followed Melanie to the kitchen.

Melanie went straight to the coffeemaker and turned it on. She then turned to face Kay. “So?” She leaned against the countertop. “Why were you crying when you got here?”

“First, I have to tell you, Knox is hot. My God, what a ripped body.”

Melanie smiled despite the fact her best friend had checked out her man. She couldn’t blame her. He was built. “Yes, Knox is very sexy and he’s mine. You’ll do well to remember that.”

“I know. I don’t want him anyway.” Kay plopped into a chair at the table. “I want Paul. He refuses to see me. I called him early this morning and I heard giggling in the background. He was with another woman. How could he do that to me?”

“Well, Kay. He is a man. You can’t expect him to be celibate forever, you know. Besides,” Melanie sat down across from her, “you haven’t been without lovers since you two broke up. Why do you expect him to?”

“I know I’m not being rational, Mel. When I think of him with another woman, I feel sick inside. I want to break things, mainly this woman’s neck.”

Melanie reached across the table and grasped Kay’s hand. “Maybe you should tell Paul this? If you want him back, you might have to tell him how you feel. Beg him to forgive you.”

Kay shook her head. “No. I can’t do that.”

Her friend’s stubbornness grated on her nerves. If it were Knox, she’d do whatever it took to get him back. “Why?”

“Because he might laugh in my face. Think he has the upper hand. No man has ever had that with me and I’m not about to alter that now.”

Melanie had no idea what to say to her reasoning. If Kay refused to acknowledge her mistakes, there was no way to repair her relationship with Paul. Paul hadn’t been the one to run away. Kay had destroyed any feelings that had existed between them. She would have to be the one to make things right. Melanie knew her best friend. She was the most pigheaded person she’d ever known. No way was she going to change her mind.

“Am I interrupting?” Knox stood in the doorway, his arms crossed over his chest. “I need coffee.”

Melanie’s heart swelled with love for him. All the mundane things in life seemed brighter now that he was here. God, she was a goner—goo-goo over the man before her.

She jumped up to get them all a cup of coffee.

“So what’s the problem, Kay? You couldn’t find a man to spend your morning with?” he asked, taking the cup Melanie offered him.

Kay snarled at his remark. “I could have half a dozen if I wanted.” She studied her nails. “I needed my best friend this morning. That’s what friends are for, in case you didn’t know.”

“Yeah, right. Women have a need to talk. Ask advice they never use.”

“That’s right. We don’t need our problems solved. We just want to discuss them. Have someone listen. I know how hard that is for a man to comprehend.”

Knox laughed and shook his head. “That’s funny. But if you don’t want answers to your dilemmas, why talk about them at all?”

Melanie hated what was happening in front of her eyes. The two people she loved the most fighting. Or were they?

Kay stood. “I think its time for me to say goodbye. Your man is obviously upset I came and cut in to his *me* time.”

“No, Kay. He’s just...”

“Don’t make excuses for me, Mel,” Knox interjected. “I can speak for myself.”

“Yes, and I’m sure it would be done with such eloquence, too.”

“Kay,” Melanie snapped.

“I’m leaving. You two go back to what you were doing before I so rudely interrupted. Maybe a good roll on the floor would help alleviate his cantankerous mood. Don’t worry, Mel, I’ll deal with my own crises from now on.”

“Come on, Kay. Don’t be like this.”

“I think she’s the one who needs the lay.” Knox scowled at Kay. “Maybe she wouldn’t be so bitter.”

Melanie couldn’t take anymore. “Stop it...both of you! I don’t need this. Right now, I need your support, not the two of you going for each others throats.”

“You’re right, Mel. I’m sorry.” Knox squeezed her shoulder. “And, Kay, I apologize for what I said. You’re right. I want Mel all to myself and that’s selfish. You two talk. I’ll go and take a shower.”

Melanie nodded and grasped Kay's hand. "Sit." She hoped her tone was friendly yet firm enough for her to listen.

"Oh, Knox, towels are in the cabinet next to the sink."

"Thanks."

Knox left the room and she sat at the table across from Kay. "I have a plan," Melanie said, a spark of an idea forming in her head. She'd tried to get Paul and Kay alone together. Then it was up to Kay to convince him to take her back, with or without an apology involved.



Knox parked in his mother's driveway and killed the engine. He had so much he wanted to talk to his mother about. The most important thing, finding out what she thought of Melanie.

While he was here, he needed to have a chat with Tara about Brent. She had to know there was no future with the man, that he was in no way daddy material for her boys. Brent James was a player in the worst sense. Heck, the man had screwed a gal in the firehouse, with no regard to regulations or propriety. He wouldn't put it past Brent to record his sexual escapades and watch them while having sex with other women. No way was he going to allow Tara to be the star in his next raunchy romp. The titles could read, *Take-Two with Tara*, or *Firefighter's Sisters, and the Men who Screw Them*.

No frickin' way. He'd have to beat Brent within an inch of his life, a career killer to say the least. More than likely prison time and that wouldn't work into his plans. He had a life to start with Melanie, and being sent to the slammer wouldn't fit into that. Best to put a wrench into any plans Tara had before trouble started.

Knox jumped from his truck, images of Melanie's naked body bringing a smile to his face. He loved how playful she was in bed. Sex

with her would never be boring. She'd keep him on his toes and off his feet for their entire marriage.

At the door, he knocked, shocked and angered when his father answered the door. "What are you doing here?" Knox asked, his voice gruff.

Nathan Manning's green eyes narrowed. "I take it you haven't heard?"

It was Knox's turn to alter his gaze. "Heard what?"

"Come inside." His father stepped back to let him in. He led Knox into the living room. Tara and her mother were sitting on the sofa, Tara in tears.

"What happened?"

Tara looked up and sobbed louder.

"Mom, what's wrong?" Knox asked.

"Tony was in a car accident this afternoon. He'd been drinking and, according to police, overcorrected on a turn. The car hit loose gravel, went down into the ditch and flipped. He was thrown from the vehicle and pronounced dead at the scene," his mother announced, her voice quivering with emotion.

Knox couldn't say he was happy about the news, after all Tony was his nephews' father, though his death made Tara's life easier. Though she wouldn't be able to see that now. "I'm sorry, Tara. Does Cody know yet?"

Tara shook her head. "I don't know how to tell him."

"Do you want me to talk to him?"

"No, this is something I need to do alone. I would appreciate your help with planning Tony's funeral."

"I'll do anything you want me to do, Tara. I'm here for you."

Tara rose and ran into his arms. Knox crushed her to him, feeling guilty about what he was dwelling on earlier. This wasn't the time to

discuss his friend or Melanie. He needed to be supportive and help Tara through the next couple of days, hold her up when she faltered. After the funeral, when the time was right, he'd warn her about Brent James and the man's other side.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Melanie picked up the phone and punched in the number scribbled on the scrap of paper in front of her.

Was there a way to pull this off? Or would the whole thing backfire in her face. The phone rang three times, then Tracy answered. "Hello."

"Tracy, this is Melanie."

"What do you want?" she snapped.

"I need to meet with you."

"Why would you expect me to do that? I have better things to do with my time."

"Look, Tracy," Melanie said, her tone just as sharp. "If I were you, I'd think about this. Unless you want me to take the earring I found at the fire, yours, I might add, and have a little talk with the police about who might have set the blaze at your house."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. Are you insinuating that I burned my own house down?"

"Yes, I am. Now are you going to meet me or not?"

"This is crazy. But if you insist on meeting, tell me where and when?"

"At the warehouse on Vine. At five o'clock. Don't be late."

"Fine," she said. The line went dead.

Melanie placed the phone in its cradle, looked at Paul and nodded. "We're on."

“Okay, I’ll have a wire on you the whole time and we’ll get the confession on tape.”

“If this doesn’t work, what then? Is there anything else we can do?”

“Let’s just see how tonight goes. We’ll worry about what’s next if we need to.” Paul squeezed her shoulder. “Have you told Knox what we have planned?”

Somehow Melanie knew if she told Knox what they were doing, he’d try and stop her. She needed this to be over, her name cleared of all charges, and this seemed to be her only hope of doing that. “I hate to bother him with this right now. He’s trying to be there for his sister, Tara, and her boys. She lost her husband in a car accident last week.”

“Weren’t they separated or something?”

“Yeah, but this was tough for the family. She wished him no harm. Her oldest boy is taking it hard.”

“You don’t think Knox should hear what Mrs. Grainger has to say? He’s the lead investigator on the case. I think with him there we might be able to clear this up sooner, if indeed Tracy spills her guts about starting the fire.”

Melanie would love to have Knox there for moral support, but with what was happening in his life, and him worried she’d get hurt, she didn’t want to ask. Besides, she might come across as unsympathetic. They’d had misunderstandings before relating to Tara and she didn’t want to add insult to injury. “Bothering him right now just isn’t an option.”

“All right. We’ll deal with this ourselves. No problem.”

“Kay has offered to help if we need it.” Melanie watched Paul’s reaction to the offer.

The grimace he gave spoke volumes as to how he felt about the idea. He hated it. If they needed backup, would he refuse to let Kay help? That

could be one way to get the two together without it looking as if Kay had orchestrated it.

“Let’s just see what happens.” Obviously he wanted to move on to another topic.

Okay, if that was what he wanted, she needed to respect that.

She’d think of another subject, one she needed answers to before she tried to bring them together again. “So, how’s life been treating you?” She thought a subtle approach would gain her more details.

He grinned. “Pretty good. The P.I. business is never in recession. There are enough cheating spouses to catch in the act to keep me fed nicely. Unfortunately, infidelity never goes out of style.”

Melanie knew that from personal experience. Dean was one of those cheating spouses that Paul talked about—a man with three little girls who still went out looking for something better. Why Tracy would have stooped to something as low as setting a fire to keep him was beyond Melanie’s comprehension. The man wasn’t worth it, especially if Tracy went to jail. What would happen to her girls? Dean was too selfish to put his life on hold to raise them.

What Melanie wouldn’t give to have seen through his lies when they’d first met. None of this would have happened, though she probably would have never met Knox if that were the case.

She shook the thought and returned her attention to Paul. Time for another question, the one that might make or break her plans to get her friends together again.

Here goes. Don’t sound too interested. “What about your personal life. Anyone special?”

His blue eyes narrowed.

Oh, no. He knows what you’re trying to do.

“Melanie, why don’t you just ask me what you want to? Who was the woman at my house when Kay called the other morning?”

Melanie tried to appear bewildered by his comment, yet knew she’d failed. Paul wasn’t buying it. Not at all. And what had she expected. He was a detective. Good at reading people. “Okay. Who was she?”

“If I tell you, will you go running to Kay and blab?”

“Honestly?” she asked.

“Please.”

“Yes, I will.”

“If nothing else, I appreciate your truthfulness, Melanie. She’s a woman I’m seeing. Nothing serious.”

Should she ask the question Kay most wanted to know?

“Ask me. I know you’re dying to.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, the question Kay wants so badly to know. Am I sleeping with her, right?”

Melanie swallowed hard. The man was either a damned good detective or a mind reader.

“So are you?”

“Damned right I am. I’m sure as hell not going to remain celibate just because Kay wants me to. I know she hasn’t been. I even know who she’s been with. And don’t think that didn’t eat at me for the longest time. She can’t play the field and not expect me to. It’s over. She proved that when she walked away the day of our wedding.”

Melanie’s hopes for a reconciliation faded with his angry admission. He wasn’t a pushover. Not when it came to Kay. His love for her was gone and there was nothing Melanie could do to change that.



As he walked up the driveway to Melanie's house, Knox's dark mood lifted a little. What a rough couple of days his family had had, what with dealing with funeral arrangements and getting through the day of Tony's burial. The only upside to Tony's death, if there was one, was that Knox and Tara had grown closer. He'd even managed to be civil to his father, who had apparently been seeing his mother secretly for quite some time. Tara had blurted that fact out when Knox was voicing his opinion about Nathan Manning the day after Tony's funeral. His sister had said to get used to having their father around, because he wasn't going anywhere this time. A hard pill to swallow.

Tara was right. Hell, she always was, except in the case of Brent James. Tara saw what she wanted to see with him, didn't want to know what the man had done in the past. She was enamored with his handsome face and charm. Knox was just grateful she wouldn't feel up to seeing anyone for quite some time. Tony's death had taken a toll on her, even after his abuse. She'd loved him once and Knox was sure it was hard to say goodbye to the father of her two boys. He had hated Tony for what he'd done to Tara, though dying the way he had hurt even him. Cody's face at the funeral would be etched into his memory forever.

Shaking all the negative stuff off, he knocked at Melanie's door. He was excited about seeing her, couldn't wait to hold her in his arms and tell her he loved her.

With the death of Tony Ansene came the realization that life was fleeting. That you should grab what you want in life and hang on tight. Melanie was that something for him. By the end of the night, they'd be engaged and planning a wedding. He wanted to start a family of his own with her. Make some cute little red-haired babies to love and nurture.

When Melanie didn't come to the door, Knox frowned. He knocked again. Maybe she was in the shower and hadn't heard him. He glanced at his watch. Four-thirty.

Disappointed when he got no answer, he retraced his steps to his truck. He jumped into the cab and grabbed his cell phone, quickly punching in Melanie's number.

The phone took him to her voice mail. "Shit!"

"Leave a message after the beep," the machine said.

"Hey, Mel. Call me as soon as you get this message. I miss you." He closed the phone and took a deep breath. In his side mirror, he noticed Kay's car pulling behind his truck. Maybe she knew where Melanie was.

He opened the truck's door and walked back to her car. She got out, her eyes narrowing on him. "What are you doing here?"

What was her problem? Was she still steamed about what he'd said to her? "I came to see Melanie. What do you think?"

She frowned. "I thought you'd be with Paul monitoring Melanie and Tracy's conversation.

Knox's stomach dropped. "What? When? What the hell's going on, Kay?"

"Melanie talked Tracy into meeting her at the burned out warehouse. She told her she had evidence linking her to the fire."

"She went alone?"

"Of course not. Paul's with her."

"Why didn't you go?" Knox asked, eyeing her closely.

"I wasn't invited," she said in an annoyed tone. "Paul's in some sort of snit or something. Mel told me to wait here for her. I thought you'd be there."

"Why would she pull a stunt like this? She might get hurt."

"You love her don't you?"

“Yes. I have to get to the warehouse before something bad happens. Do you want to come?”

“Damned right, I do.” She went around the side of the truck to get in.

Knox circled back to the driver’s side, his mind racing. When cornering a criminal, anything could go wrong.

He had to get to the warehouse, had to make sure nothing happened to Melanie, the future mother of his children.



“Can you hear me?” Melanie asked through the mini-microphone taped to her chest.

“Loud and clear.” Paul’s voice crackled through the earpiece. The device was so small you couldn’t see it. That was one good thing about knowing a private detective. They had everything they needed to catch Tracy’s confession on tape.

“I believe it’s show time. I see her van coming. Remember, if things get heated, I’m going to need you.”

Melanie’s mind raced. She prayed this whole thing would be over and behind her soon. When it was, she’d be able to concentrate on her relationship with Knox, along with building a name for herself in the art world.

The van pulled up next to her car and Melanie noticed the tinted windshield. So dark she’d say it was illegal. The door came open and her heart stopped when Dean Grainger exited. What the hell was he doing here?

Melanie inhaled deeply, contemplating if she should lock her door and refuse to talk to him. “Paul,” she whispered. “It’s Dean, not Tracy. What should I do?”

“See why he’s here. I’m only seconds away. If I sense you’re in danger, I’ll be there in the blink of an eye.”

“Okay, but I’m not comfortable with this.”

“I won’t let anything happen to you, Mel. Trust me.”

With apprehension, Melanie got out of her car, her heart thudding against her chest like a woodhen pecking feverishly against a tree.

He started toward her, his eyes glistening with an intent that made Melanie jittery as hell. The closer he got, the harder her heart worked to stay in her chest.

“Why are you here?” she asked him when he was within ten feet of her.

“My wife confessed what was going on. She told me she had a meeting with you and I insisted on coming in her place. I thought it was time to get everything out on the table. Tell you what I’ve been doing to finally get us together.”

Melanie was confused by his remark. What he said made no sense to her. “What are you talking about?”

He smiled. “I wasn’t sure if you knew what I’d done or not until today when Tracy told me what you’d told her.”

Knew what? The man talked in riddles. “Look, Dean. I have no idea what you’re saying. Why don’t you speak in laymen’s terms?”

“Sorry, Mel. I’m just excited to be alone with you again. The other day when I ran into you, I wanted to pull you into my arms and hold you so bad. Kay was with you and was being a bitch. You really need to lose her as a friend. I’ll never get along with her.”

Like she cared if he liked her best friend or not. This conversation was getting her nowhere and that wasn’t helping her demeanor one bit. “Please tell me what is going on? Why didn’t Tracy come? She’s the one I need to talk to, not you.”

“Not true, baby. I’m the one to thank. Tracy has no idea what I did.”

Melanie frowned. “Did? What did you do, Dean?”

He laughed. “I thought you’d figure it out. Of course, I never wanted you for your brains.”

Melanie did a double take. Had he just hinted that she was stupid and he didn’t care? No way was she going to take this from a man who was dumb enough to think they had a future together. Not too smart considering hell would freeze over first. “Just get to your point, Dean, or I’m leaving.”

“Don’t get upset, sweetheart. I’ll tell you.”

She backed up as he started toward her. “Don’t come any closer.”

He raised his hands and stopped. “Okay.”

“I’m waiting,” she said impatiently. This whole thing was going sour. She’d hoped that today this mess with the fire would be over. Now there was no hope of that. And, she had to get away from Dean without him trying to stop her. Her only consolation was that Paul could be at her side in a matter of minutes if need be.

“I did all this for us, Mel. I didn’t want Tracy. She didn’t do anything for me any longer.”

The sex manuals and toys they’d found in their nightstand spoke differently. What a liar this man was.

“All I wanted was you in my bed, you making love to me. So I came up with this elaborate plan. Made you the prime suspect. I knew about your past. I knew they’d look to you, especially after planting the flier.”

Melanie’s heart stopped again. Was this really happening? Had this man just admitted to loving her, yet trying to send her to jail in the same breath? She felt the blood drain from her face.

“No wait, baby. I knew you’d be exonerated.” He tried again to touch her.

Melanie jumped away.

“I planted my wife’s earring two days later. I was damned lucky to toss her jewelry box out a window during the fire. Anyway, I knew Manning would find the earring, see that it wasn’t burnt and assume she was at the house after the fire—had planted the flier to set you up. Tracy had motive. You’d been messing around with me. It was the perfect plan, don’t you think?”

The cavalier way he spoke shocked Melanie.

She swallowed convulsively. She could barely believe what she’d heard. The man was evil incarnate. How could he do such a thing to both her and his wife? Thank God this whole conversation was being recorded. Dean deserved to go to prison for what he’d done. She almost felt sorry for Tracy. The woman had no idea how badly her husband had betrayed her. Yet she would, and soon.

“Are you going to thank me?” he asked when she didn’t say anything.

Melanie’s jaw dropped. “Thank you? Are you serious? Why would I do that? You set me up.”

“No, not really. I planned this carefully, Mel. I gave them enough to convict Tracy. You were never in danger of going to jail. That would have defeated my purposes. For you and me to become husband and wife and for us to raise my children.”

“Did you even consider what I wanted?”

His eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

She knew it wasn’t wise to tell him the truth now, yet she didn’t want him to continue to think they were anything to each other. The thought made her sick. “I never loved you, Dean. When I learned that you were married, any respect I had for you was gone. We have no future together. With or without Tracy.”

“How can you say that? I did all this for you. You have to love me.”

His tone raised the hairs on the back of Melanie's neck.

She shook her head. "No, I don't have to love you. I love someone else. I should thank you for that, too. You brought Knox and me together. He's the man I plan to share a future with. Not you. I love Knox Manning and if he'll have me as his wife, I plan to marry him."

Dean's eyes went from amber to dark-brown in a matter of seconds, and he snarled. "No way is that man getting his hands on you. I'd rather see you dead."

Melanie's stomach lurched into her throat. "Paul, I need you to get here, now," she screamed, running for her car.

Before she'd made it to the door, Dean caught her. "Who the hell were you talking to?" He grabbed her shirt and ripped it open, his face filling with rage when he saw the microphone.

Sirens bellowed in the distance.

"How could you do this to me? I loved you so much." His hands went around her neck and tightened. The next thing Melanie knew Paul and Knox were tearing Dean off her.

Paul tackled Dean to the ground as Knox came to her side and folded her into his arms to hold her tight.

She gulped air as the police arrived. They handcuffed Dean and placed him into a patrol car.

"Are you okay, Mel?" Knox loosened his grip just a hair.

"I think so. Did Paul get everything on tape?"

"Yes, he got it all. It's over, Mel. And to answer your question...yes."

"Yes?" she asked, confused.

"Yes, I'll marry you."

Epilogue

Melanie looked out over the crowded backyard and her heart filled with joy. In twenty minutes she'd be Mrs. Knox Manning.

In the month since Dean had been arrested, she'd been dreaming of her wedding to be held at her very own home. Everything was beautiful—the flowers, the altar where they'd become husband and wife—all arranged by Kay, Knox's mother and his sister, Tara. All she'd had to do was find the perfect dress, a white silk design with a high lace collar. She loved the dress and knew Knox would as well.

Kay came up to her. She wore a mint-green gown, in a similar design as Melanie's. The dress fit her curvaceous body to a tee. "Are you ready?" she asked. "Or do you want to hop in my car and forget the whole thing?"

Melanie shook her head. "Not in a million years. I just hope Knox doesn't get any ideas."

Kay smiled. "No way. I just saw him. I've never seen a man so happy. By the way, thanks for inviting Paul. He might think things are over between us now, but I have time at the reception to work my wiles on him. If you can't find me when it's time for the maid-of-honors toast, I'll be in the guestroom with him, changing his mind."

Melanie laughed. "If anyone can make Paul see that you are the only one for him, it's you, Kay."

The music started up, sending Melanie's heart racing. It was time.

Kay reached to pull the veil over her face. “Who’d have thought you two would work.”

“Why not? We’re like fire and ice—put us together and we sizzle.”

Jerri Drennen

Jerri Drennen is married, has four children and resides in a small southwestern town in Missouri. Her hobbies include Drawing, gardening, cooking and reading.

She's been writing romance for 6 years, and loves to create characters that stay with the reader, to write stories that leave them smiling.

To learn more about Jerri Drennen, please visit her website.
<http://www.jerridrennen.bravehost.com/>.

SAMHAIN PUBLISHING, LTD.

It's all about the story...

Action/Adventure

Fantasy

Historical

Horror

Mainstream

Mystery/Suspense

Non-Fiction

Paranormal

Red Hots!

Romance

Science Fiction

Western

Young Adult

<http://www.samhainpublishing.com>