

ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



ANN JACOBS

GRIDIRON
LOVERS



Forward
Pass

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Ann Jacobs

Book 2 in the Gridiron Lovers series.

Keith Connors, widowed All-Pro quarterback, has never been one for the groupies or casual sex after a big game, unlike some of his teammates. And the last thing he's looking for is a woman to replace his dead wife. Until gentle Tina Black walks into his life and captivates his baby son's heart.

Still feeling the pain and shame of an attack by her perverted, dead-beat stepfather, Tina is looking for a fresh start. When Keith offers her a job as a nanny for his boy, it's a sanctuary, a place to heal that she can't resist.

From a tremulous relationship founded first on friendship, Keith grows to love the innocent, softly sexy woman inside Tina who turns him on like no other, while Tina sees behind the handsome quarterback façade to the loving family man, and together they decide to take a second chance on life—and love.

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Forward Pass

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FORWARD PASS

Ann Jacobs

Dedication

To Joey W. Hill, the best writer friend and critique partner on Earth, for her keen eye, her frequent nudges at me to let my story people's emotions fly. And to Jaid Black, who in her wisdom got us together to critique each other nearly seven years ago. I hope I've helped Joey's beautiful stories one tenth as much as she's helped mine.

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Author's Notes and Glossary

I'm a rabid football fan, or rather a rabid fan of several generations of quarterbacks I've watched play on TV and in person. This fandom caused me to come up with an idea for the Gridiron Lovers, a series of erotic romances about four star quarterbacks who just happened to have grown up in the same small west Texas town and who went on to fame and fortune as professionals. All of these guys and their teams are fictional, and any resemblance to an actual NFL player or team past or present is purely coincidental.

The four books' titles apparently need some explanation for readers who haven't been watching games every fall since...well, for quite a few years. Suffice it to say, I've watched every Super Bowl since number three, when Broadway Joe Namath came through on his guarantee of a win for the New York Jets. I was just a baby then (wink-wink).

So here we go. Mind you, these definitions may not all be technically correct, since they're based on my personal observations and comments I've digested from the media personalities who call the games on TV every Sunday from August through December and early January. Take a minute and read these pages first, or as my Aussie editor says, you may become totally confused.

Naked Bootleg. This is a play where the quarterback takes the snap, fakes a handoff to a running back but keeps the ball. He runs the opposite direction from the runner without a lineman protecting him – this makes the bootleg “naked” – and either passes to a receiver downfield or runs downfield himself. I thought it was a great play for Bobby Anthony to make during his first NFL appearance, as well as a sexy-sounding title for the first Gridiron Lovers book.

Forward Pass. The quarterback drops back from the line of scrimmage and throws the ball forward to an eligible receiver downfield. Eligible receivers, I think, are the

backs, tight ends and wide receivers. Keith Connors is a master of the forward pass on the field, but he's pretty hot in the bedroom, as well.

Clutch, as in *Hot in the Clutch*. A player, usually a quarterback, who's especially good at coming through with points when the team needs them most. Dave Delaney's career is almost over, but he can still be counted on for a great play in the clutch, whether it's on the field or in a woman's bed.

Coach, as in *Coach Me*. The masterminds of the game, often former players great or average. Each team has several coaches, with the "head coach" in charge of it all. Colin Zanardi's playing days are over, but he's still in the game, not only with his team but also with the hottest of the local ladies.

Now for the glossary, which I'm putting in alphabetical order so you can refer to it as needed while you read:

Athletic waivers: A certain number of exceptions a college coach can use to recruit top athletes who don't meet minimum academic standards for the institution, which are determined by a combination of high school grades and standardized test scores.

Audible: When the quarterback calls out a change of the play at the line of scrimmage.

Block: What linemen do to keep defensive players away from the quarterback, as in "throw a block" or "miss a block".

Center: The player on the offensive line who snaps the ball to the quarterback when he's "under center" or "in the shotgun".

Clipboard: The object that all backup quarterbacks almost always have in their hands while standing on the sidelines; a backup quarterback's assignment, as in "carry the clipboard".

Depth chart: W chart that shows each player's status at his position—starter, second string, third string, etc.

Double coverage: Two defensive players are covering (chasing) one potential receiver for the offense at the same time.

Field position: The spot on the hundred-yard field where the ball is spotted—the closer to the defense's goal, the better the field position is for the offense.

First down: When the offense starts a series or moves ten yards down the field toward the opponent's goal—can be a longer or shorter distance if penalties are involved—and is then given four more tries to make another ten yards or a touchdown, or kick the ball away.

Fumble: When the football gets loose from whatever player had it in his hands and is fair game for any player, either offensive or defensive, to pick up and claim—called a fumble recovery.

Groupie: A woman who's obsessed with professional athletes and wants any athlete, but preferably a star, for a day or night's fun and games.

Handoff: When the quarterback takes the snap from the center and immediately hands it to a running back.

Huddle: A gathering of the entire offense around the quarterback, who gives them the play the coach has sent from the sideline or via a speaker in the quarterback's helmet.

Interception: When an opposing player catches a pass, thereby causing the defense to get the ball.

Linebackers: Defensive players who often break through the offensive line and go after the quarterback (there are three of them in some defenses, four in others); they also break up pass plays down field by stopping the receivers who are trying to catch passes and/or get additional yards after catching the ball.

Line of scrimmage: The point on the football field where the ball is placed.

Nose tackle: A defensive player who lines up in front of the center, usually a huge beast of a man who opens up holes in the offense so other defensive players can get to the quarterback (Note: this assumes the defense is what's called a three-four where the nose tackle and two defensive ends line up in front, with four linebackers behind them—the setup is different, although I can't explain how, if the defense is a so-called four-three with two tackles and two defensive ends in front and three linebackers behind them).

Penalty: A misdeed on the part of an offensive or defensive player that causes the team to be penalized from five to fifteen yards, and sometimes—in the case of a penalty on the defense—to create an automatic first down for the offense. Some of the reasons penalties are imposed are for holding, roughing the passer, unnecessary roughness, illegal motion before the ball is snapped, extra man on the field, or illegal formation.

Pick-six: An interception that the defensive player runs back for a touchdown.

Punt: Kick on fourth down, so the opposing team will get the ball as far as possible downfield; *punter:* the player who kicks punts.

Receiver, or wide receiver: An offensive player whose main function is to catch passes from the quarterback.

Running back: Offensive player who takes handoffs from quarterback and runs the ball, or who catches short passes “out of the backfield” and then runs for yardage.

Sack: When a defensive player gets to the quarterback before he passes the ball, and throws him to the ground.

Scout team: A team of non-starting players who study and then try to duplicate the plays of an opposing team while the first team practices against them during the week before the actual game (the backup quarterback usually runs the scout team, although sometimes that job goes to the third string guy).

Shotgun: A formation where the quarterback stands a good distance back from the center to take the snap.

Snap: The movement of the ball from the center to the quarterback.

Taking a knee: When the quarterback takes the snap and goes down on one knee instead of initiating a play as the time is winding down to zero at halftime or at the end of a game.

Three-and-out: An expression that describes an offensive series where the offense goes three snaps without getting a first down.

Tight end: Offensive players who generally line up at the ends of the offensive line (if there are two of them in for the play) and who block as well as catch passes.

Turnover: The offense gives the ball to the other team because of a fumble or interception rather than after three-and-out or a touchdown.

I hope you all enjoy this series as much as I've loved putting it together.

Ann Jacobs

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Prologue

For the first time since Jackie died nearly eight months ago, Keith Connors felt a heavy weight of responsibility start to lift off his shoulders. Finally, after six months of looking, he'd found a nanny he could trust to take care of Jack. And from his own postage stamp-sized hometown, no less. Tina Black had the confidence of Keith's older sister as well as recommendations from rookie Maulers quarterback Bobby Anthony and Bobby's mother, who'd known Tina well while she'd been growing up in a town too small for anyone to have any serious secrets.

Now Keith could get back to the field and concentrate on playing football. Much more time away and he'd have lost his starting slot to Bobby. He knew now he'd been a fool to suggest that the Maulers draft the talented rookie from Hedgecock County High this spring, but in those first dark days after Jackie's death he hadn't known if he could, or even if he wanted to go on playing. Plus, Bobby was a good guy who'd deserved the shot and Keith wished him well in his NFL career.

On the way inside the house Jackie had chosen soon after they moved to Memphis, he paused in the foyer and looked at her portrait—one her parents had commissioned and given them when they'd moved in more than nine years ago. The portrait was beautiful, but it wasn't Jackie as he wanted to remember her. It looked too much like the Jackie she'd become before she died—brittle, cold and so determined to have her way that she'd ended up dying, leaving him lost without her.

Keith turned away from the lifeless painting. He'd spent plenty of time grieving, wondering how he'd ever go on living and bring up the little boy his wife had wanted so desperately. Now he wouldn't have to face the weekly calls from her mother, offering to take Jack and raise him so he could keep on "playing children's games" as she generally referred to the career that had made him a multimillionaire before his

twenty-second birthday. And he wouldn't have to listen to his own mom's worried voice almost every day, asking if he was ever going to find the right nanny to take care of her grandson.

Glancing to the right, at the formal dining room he hadn't been in since the day of Jackie's funeral, he continued through the entryway past a curving staircase to the game room and bar where he spent most of his time at home. As he stared out the window and watched a brisk October wind making ripples along the usually calm shoreline of a man-made lake, he tried to picture the young woman who'd be arriving anytime now to take care of Jack.

Funny, though she'd come with Bobby to meet him and his son just two days ago and he'd seen her again this morning at the team's training facility, he was having a hard time remembering what she looked like. The first time, he'd been most captivated by how Jack had responded to her. He remembered her on her knees in the nursery, lifting his laughing baby in the air while Jack latched onto her hair with both his tiny fists. She'd been young, he remembered that. Just twenty-two, and unlike most women he encountered, she seemed shy around him. That was okay, because she exuded a strong sense of self-confidence when she handled his son. Jack obviously had loved her at first sight. When Bobby's fiancée had brought her over to meet him and Bobby after practice, his impression had been that looks-wise, Tina didn't hold a candle to Marly.

He'd scoured his memory, but the only impression of Tina from Hedgecock, Texas, where they both grew up, had been a young shadow of a girl hanging to the back of the group of boys who used to like pestering him to throw a football with them. His sister Diane had coolly reminded him that she'd been best friends with Tina's mom and that Keith had also run into Tina when he occasionally came to her house to get a ride home from Diane after practice.

Yeah, Diane was still pissed about how he'd turned his back on where he grew up. He'd shoved a lot of childhood memories of Hedgecock deep in the back of his mind. Though he remembered the Black family's modest frame house a stone's throw from

the school, and he could still picture a tire swing in the backyard and almost taste the homemade cookies he'd eaten in Tina's mother's kitchen.

Hedgecock hadn't been so bad. He'd just wanted to get the hell away from there so much, away from the empty, dead-end lives so many of the men working the rigs had. He hadn't wanted that to be his future.

Tina was only twenty-two now, but she apparently had taken care of her mother until her death a few months ago. Despite her problems with him, Diane spoke highly of Tina's sense of responsibility, which gave Keith a degree of comfort.

It helped, too, that Bobby recommended her. Some problem had come up back home, bringing Tina to Memphis, but Bobby had assured him it wasn't anything that would interfere with her being a nanny. The two had been close friends since they were kids, and Keith imagined they'd been lovers too. If so, that was in the past. Keith couldn't imagine Bobby's fiancée putting up with him messing around now, just weeks before their wedding. Marly didn't strike him as a woman willing to share her man. Tina would have had a hard time competing for Bobby's attention with the incredibly sexy Marly, anyhow. And that was fine with Keith.

In the past few months he'd interviewed at least a hundred women, most of whom seemed more interested in sleeping with him than taking care of Jack. Tina's appearance hadn't stuck in his mind, but her attitude impressed him. She didn't seem like the type to chase him around the house, trying to seduce him. If anything, he'd sensed a "don't touch" attitude about her that he'd have wondered more about if only he weren't so relieved to be getting his life back in order.

Picking up the phone, he speed-dialed his mom to let her know Tina had agreed to be Jack's nanny and that she'd be moving in later today. Afterward he hesitated then called Jackie's parents too, bracing himself as he dialed the number for the inevitable tears and thinly veiled accusations that accompanied every contact he'd had with them since Jackie's death. Nothing he could say or do would bring her back or make her parents believe she hadn't died entirely because he was a selfish bastard.

Once he got off that difficult conversation, he took a deep breath. After the struggles and grief of the past months, he felt sure Tina was going to be the first good thing that had happened to him and Jack in a while. It almost felt like a new beginning. A good one.

Chapter One

A month later, after a tough Maulers loss

Why the hell hadn't he just retired when Jackie died? Or, if not then, when he took the hit that had kept him off the field six games of this miserable season? His shoulder still ached, a constant reminder that he was nowhere near invincible.

Keith heaved himself out of the ice tub and shivered all the way to the shower, where he thawed out under what felt like fiery needles pounding at his abused body. Yesterday's game had been brutal, but not nearly as much so as the ass chewing he took from Coach Lyle before the team meeting this morning.

He fucking knew he was rusty. It didn't take his genius coach to point that out, only a glance at the stats that said he'd thrown three picks and only one touchdown against a surging Savannah team the Maulers should have beaten. He'd work out the kinks before the last three regular season games though, and Coach damn well knew it. Keith hadn't needed to be bellowed at as though he were a green rookie.

It would serve Coach right if he had to play Ellis Tripp at quarterback. After all, the team had traded talented rookie Bobby Anthony away right before the late October deadline, so the thirty-eight-year-old journeyman would be Coach's only choice if he benched Keith the way he'd just threatened to do. Ellis, fine friend and backup that he'd always been to Keith since his rookie year, hadn't played a regular season down in at least three years. Ellis would show Coach what rusty really was, Keith thought uncharitably.

Still fuming inside at his coach as well as himself, Keith dressed and headed home. Maybe playing with Jack for an hour or so would help him cool off and concentrate on getting his mind right for another night of studying film, a day off tomorrow that would involve more film study for next Sunday's game, as well as a public service

appearance Coach Lyle had dumped on him as punishment. At least it seemed that way, because the coach had tacked on his order for Keith to show up at the team's pre-Thanksgiving turkey giveaway at the end of the tirade, almost like an afterthought.

His gaze taking in the last of the fall colors dotting trees along the river as he drove, Keith let his mind wander to his son. And, as he'd found himself doing a lot lately, it also wandered to Tina.

She'd been a godsend and more. He hated to say it even to himself, but she was more loving and giving to Jack than he imagined Jackie would have been. One thing for sure, Tina made him want to be a better dad, seeing the difference her stability and nurturing had already made to the baby's life.

But it was the mystery of the woman, not the efficiency of the nanny, that had been creeping into his brain of late.

He didn't know why. Tina certainly hadn't made any advances toward him. As a matter of fact, he suspected he put her on edge when they were in the same room and Jack wasn't around. It wasn't anything she said, only that air of reserve that perversely made him notice how attractive she was, in a quiet, unassuming way. He wasn't used to women acting as though they were hesitant to get close to him, and Tina gave him that impression. She even acted skittish when their paths crossed by accident.

Just yesterday when they almost bumped into each other on the stairs while she had a hamper of clean clothes in her arms, Keith had reached out to steady her when she looked as though she might fall. The momentary look of panic in her blue eyes as he caught her arms bothered him. He certainly didn't want her to be afraid of him. Yeah, he was incredibly grateful to Tina for making it possible for him to concentrate fully on the career he'd nearly walked away from one bleak day last January.

He found himself wanting to put her at ease with him, wanting her friendship for himself as well as the love she showered on his son.

* * * * *

Something was bothering Jack's dad. Tina sensed it, though Keith was going through all the right motions, playing with the baby on the carpeted nursery floor and riding him piggyback before helping feed him an early supper. She hoped it wasn't something she'd done to upset her moody employer.

Of course it wasn't. Tina scolded herself for her lack of self-confidence. If Keith was angry with her, she was certain he'd have said so. It must have been something that had happened while he was at practice. And she'd guessed from his silence and his scowl last night that he'd come home unhappy about yesterday's game. If she hadn't watched most of it on TV, though, she never would have known he'd thrown two or three interceptions or that the Maulers had lost, because he hadn't uttered a word about the game while helping tuck Jack in his bed.

She'd never known anybody before who was so close-mouthed about his work. Even Bobby, who'd been preoccupied with Marly and his upcoming wedding during the few days she'd been their guest, had given what amounted to a daily report about what he'd done at practice during the short time she'd been staying with them.

It was as though Keith had two lives, one here with Jack, the other as the Maulers' quarterback. He didn't have teammates dropping in, the way Bobby and Marly often did. That had been fine with her at first, not having a lot of guys around. But it didn't seem natural, either, for him to isolate himself in the house, even from Mrs. Gardner, the housekeeper who'd apparently worked there ever since he and his wife had moved in years ago.

As far as she knew, Keith didn't have a girlfriend. Of course, it had just been nine months or so since his wife died. Still Tina imagined he had to be lonely. He was so handsome, so tall and muscular, most women would fall all over themselves to have him notice them. A lot of them probably made a point to run into him every time they had half a chance.

He wasn't happy. That was easy to tell from observing him in person and seeing him in TV ads looking happy and sexier than any man she'd ever known. He made his

living playing football. The season was under way. One would think he'd talk about practice, or games, or his teammates, but during the month she'd been there, Keith had never talked about his work at all.

"It seems like you may have had a rough morning," she said just to break the silence.

"Yeah. Trust me, you don't want to hear about it." When Jack began to fuss, Keith set him in the playpen then paced restlessly around the room. It couldn't have been good for him to bottle up whatever was bothering him. And it wasn't good for the baby either. Tina was sure Jack picked up on his daddy's moods, because the little guy had been uncharacteristically fussy all day.

She curbed a sudden urge to go to Keith, comfort him the way she would little Jack. She smiled at him instead, met his somber gaze. "Try me."

Did she really want to know? Keith paused, looked Tina in the eye. "I didn't play worth crap yesterday. Coach bounced plenty of words off me this morning, most of which I won't repeat in front of my kid, reminding me just how bad I was. If he hadn't traded Bobby away last month after my shoulder healed enough so I could play again, I'm certain he'd bench me."

Tina met his gaze, her expression serious. "With all the awards you've won, I doubt your coach would do that. Would it help to talk about it? I've been told I'm a pretty good listener. Jack and I watched the game on TV, so you don't have to rehash every play."

She sounded sincere enough, so he sat on an upholstered window seat near the baby's crib and rested his chin on his knees. "I'm not used to this. Jack's mom had a rule, no talking about my job once I was home. Unless you're seriously interested, we can keep that rule in force."

"No. I'd like for you to tell me. The game wasn't what fans hoped for, but I thought you did plenty of good things." She smiled as she recounted the ninety-five-yard

touchdown drive he'd led, and a couple of long passes he'd thrown well only to have his receivers drop or fumble the ball. "I'm not an expert on football, but even I could tell that one of those interceptions was your receiver's fault. He let a perfectly thrown ball go right through his hands."

"You really do like football, don't you?" That shouldn't have surprised Keith, he guessed, as he recalled that skinny little girl following a bunch of the boys who'd always pestered him when he was a teenager. "You know, I remember you hanging back behind Bobby and those other boys who always followed me around when I was playing high-school ball. Did you want to get me to throw you the ball, too?"

"A little." The flush on her cheeks made her look downright pretty.

"I bet you did. Did you ask Coach Williams to let you play when you got to high school?" He doubted she did. She was much too delicate to risk getting smashed by a bunch of rowdy high-school jocks.

"Not me. I went out for cheerleader and made it only because there weren't that many girls to compete." She grinned. "My sophomore year, there were only twelve girls compared with sixty or seventy boys in the entire school. There was real good boy-hunting there for a while." She paused, shrugged. "Unfortunately, the good hunting didn't last. The next year's freshman class was mostly girls."

"Nature sort of averages things out over time. My class had more boys than girls. I remember how getting a date sometimes took some serious pre-planning."

Tina laughed. "I doubt you ever had trouble getting a date."

"Well, I *was* the team's starting quarterback." Keith shot her a grin. "That had to have counted for something."

"I'm sure it did." She paused, as though visualizing the game that had led into this reminiscing about long-ago days back home. "I don't think you should feel guilty about yesterday's game. Your receivers didn't play well. And that one guy should have caught your first pass that got picked off."

"You're right about that." Thinking about how Willis had dropped that well-thrown ball reminded Keith how hard he'd fought to keep the man out of the lineup, partly because he was a disgrace to pro football but largely because he'd spent the last few weeks sitting out, or rather sitting in a Los Angeles jail, until a judge finally set bail and let him walk, pending a trial that wouldn't take place until next spring. "Coach Lyle shouldn't have let him play."

"Bobby mentioned something about him and his buddy getting drunk and beating up on a couple of women while the team was out west for a game. I don't understand why the league lets players who act like that go on playing."

Keith didn't understand either, even though he could see some merit in the commissioner's position of waiting for the law to punish errant players instead of doing it based on a player merely having been accused. "Innocent until proven guilty," he said, shaking his head. "Still, even if Willis didn't do what he's accused of, he got out of shape, sitting in a jail cell for all that time. Just like I got rusty while I rehabbed my shoulder, as Coach so kindly pointed out to me this morning."

Tina bent over Jack's playpen, rearranged the blanket over the baby's well-padded butt. Then she curled her feet up under her in the rocker where she usually sat to give him his bottle. Looking over at Keith, she smiled. "I bet he didn't even consider the difference."

"Huh?"

"What I meant is that you're a little rusty because you got hurt and missed a few games. That wasn't your fault. Your receiver's not playing for a few weeks was because of his own doing."

She looked pretty when she smiled, all soft and pink and touchable. The way her blue eyes flashed, he felt her indignation—a righteous anger that warmed him and swept away much of the resentment he'd been harboring since the talk with Coach Lyle.

Jackie would never have understood. She hadn't wanted to share the part of his life that belonged to football, and she'd resented every moment the game took him away from her. Even so, he missed her, wished...

Hell, he didn't know what it was that he was missing. Sex? There'd been little enough of that during the pregnancy that began in a sterile lab and ended in tragedy. Companionship? Sure. He'd loved Jackie, liked having the most beautiful woman he'd ever met smiling up at him. He just hadn't loved her enough to give up football and take her dad up on his offer of a cushy executive job he'd neither wanted nor deserved. He hadn't loved her snobbery either—her way of judging everybody she met by the length of his pedigree or size of his bank balance.

Fuck, he wasn't about to feel guilty for talking football with his son's nanny. Or for enjoying a quiet afternoon with another adult who seemed genuinely interested and sympathetic. It wasn't as if he were seducing Tina, treating her like one of the groupies who crowded around him before and after every game. She was Jack's surrogate mom, too young and unsophisticated for him to think of as a potential lover even if he was looking for one, which he wasn't.

With quiet amazement, he realized he wanted to get to know Tina better. What she offered Keith was an easy friendship he wanted to explore, one he'd never experienced with another female. He wanted to get to know her better, spend time with her apart from the hours they shared each day with his son. *Whoa*. Keith took a mental step back, told himself to take it easy.

She looked at him, smiled. "Am I right about how that chewing-out made you feel?"

Tina had hit his emotional reaction to that chewing out squarely on the head. "Yeah, you're right. The unfairness of it had me furious. I've given almost ten seasons to the Maulers. I've played hurt, never missed a game until I got my shoulder separated right after Labor Day. I've taken the team to a Super Bowl, been league MVP twice. I didn't deserve to get my ass raked over the coals for one bad game. And I especially

didn't deserve to be ordered to show up tomorrow for the team's annual Thanksgiving turkey giveaway."

Her smile broadened. "No, you didn't. Don't you feel better now, after letting it all out?"

"Yeah. Thanks. I can almost pleasantly anticipate signing autographs tomorrow. How about you and Jack bundling up and going with me? I'd like the company." What he'd like was to have Tina and Jack at his side, insulating him a little from the groupies who'd hopefully back off from the usual pawing and propositioning if he had not only his baby boy but also a woman at his side. He found himself looking forward to mingling with teammates outside practices and games, something Jackie had never been willing for him to do.

"We'd like that."

"Good. I'll go work out in the morning then come get you and Jack around lunchtime."

"All right."

Tina didn't say a lot, but when she did, he realized it was sincere and honest. It made him wonder if his invitation was sincere and honest the same way, or if somewhere along the way he'd started thinking about the nanny who took such good care of his son taking good care of his dad in a similar, but much more adult way.

Get that out of your head, Connors. You need a great nanny more than you need a good fuck. But he couldn't help noticing her smell, her hair as she bent over the playpen again, the supple way she moved. And wondering why, when he could have his choice of supermodels, this quiet, kind woman was starting to draw more and more of his attention...

* * * * *

Before noon the next day, Tina was searching through her closet for something decent to wear. Jeans and something warm on top seemed in order for spending several

hours outside on a chilly November day, but all her sweatshirts and heavy sweaters looked more suitable for raking leaves outside than for going to some outdoor event.

Darn it, she wanted to look good for Jack. *Don't lie to yourself, Tina, it's his daddy you're trying to impress.* She was crazy, thinking Keith Connors would look at her *that* way, no matter how she wrapped the package.

Then she realized someone had come in, tensed momentarily and let out a little yelp. Concerned, she turned toward Jack, who'd been playing with a ball on the carpet in her bedroom, saw a pair of big, booted feet instead. She followed them up a pair of muscular jeans-clad thighs to see Keith holding his son in his strong arms.

He peered inside the closet. "I hope I didn't startle you."

"Oh no. I just..."

"You thought somebody got past the security at the gate? It won't happen, I promise."

"It's okay. I shouldn't be so jumpy. You look great." Tina looked up, noticed he was wearing what looked like the top of a red-and-black Maulers home uniform, minus the shoulder pads. Not that he needed them, of course.

When he stepped inside the closet and shot her a questioning look, her skin prickled. His body heat filled the small enclosure. It felt to Tina like he was using all the air, making it hard for her to breathe.

"Looking for something?" he asked.

"Something to wear today. I think I need to stop by Target on the way to wherever we're going and buy some decent sweats. All the ones I have date back to my high-school days." The words tumbled out as she clambered to her feet. She couldn't stop them even though she knew she sounded like an idiot.

He dropped a Maulers jersey and a black hooded undershirt onto the chair beside the closet door. "Will these do? I stopped by the front office and grabbed some stuff on my way out."

He'd thought about her, brought her some team gear. A gift. For a minute she stood, speechless, staring up at him and Jack. She loved that he'd...but no, she shouldn't be having him buy her clothes. Finally she found her voice. "Thanks. But you didn't have to. You pay me well enough that I can go buy clothes when I need them."

He looked sheepish. "I know. But I thought you'd look cute in Maulers colors, so I grabbed some for you while I was picking up some baby stuff for Jack."

"I'm sure he'll look adorable. He always does." Keith had called her "cute". She didn't know whether to be flattered or insulted, but she decided "cute" was good when it came from Keith's lips.

"So will you. How about us getting you two dressed, and we can stop by the Fifth Quarter for lunch on the way to the stadium. Several players will be there."

"That sounds good. But we'd better take some baby food for Jack." Tina had heard Bobby and Marly talk about the spot where a lot of the Maulers hung out after games, and she imagined burgers and ribs were probably the usual fare customers washed down there with pitchers of draft beer.

Keith grinned as he lifted Jack high in the air. "You're right. Guess this one's not quite ready for grown-up junk food."

"All right." It would be nice getting out of Keith's house, as gorgeous as it was. Tina picked up the black fleece shirt and a red-and-black Maulers jersey with Keith's name and number eight on the back. His jersey, not just a generic Maulers team one. She smiled, enjoying the fantasy of being his girlfriend and wearing his jersey for a second or two before crashing back to reality. "Thanks for these. They'll keep me nice and warm."

"You're welcome. I'll go get Jack dressed while you change, and start gathering up his stuff so we can leave. I worked out hard this morning and right now I feel like I'm about to starve."

Those two smiles, Keith's and Jack's, could have lit up midnight. As Tina slipped off her top and tucked the soft undershirt into the waistband of her jeans, she let herself

fantasize once more that her smokin' hot boss might have some slight interest in her other than as the caretaker for his son. Just for a minute though. She slipped the oversize jersey over her head and smoothed it over her too-skinny curves. *You're Jack's nanny and that's all you'll ever be*, a voice inside her head whispered nastily.

Maybe, but I'm not going to think about that today. Today Tina was going with her boss and his baby to a Maulers team event, and she intended to enjoy every minute of it. She filled Jack's diaper bag and toted it downstairs while Keith took care of the stroller. It was almost as though they were taking off for a family outing, she thought as she turned her head and looked in the backseat of Keith's Lexus to make sure Jack was securely fastened in the car seat. Then she quelled the thought. She'd been thinking way too much about things lately—things that would only bring her heartache, not to mention possible unemployment.

Chapter Two

In the years he'd been playing for the Maulers, this was only the third time Keith had been inside the Fifth Quarter. It felt right, bringing Jack here to show him off to fellow players who'd stopped in for lunch before the turkey giveaway. "Hey, Dan," he said when he spotted running back Dan Morales sitting in a quiet corner booth with a small, dark-haired woman Keith assumed was his wife. "Mind if we join you?"

"Sit down. Myra, this is Keith Connors."

Keith took the hand Myra offered. "I take it you're Dan's wife?"

"Yes. For nearly five years now. This must be your little boy," she said, shooting a big smile at Jack, who was holding onto a handful of Tina's hair while she held him and a waitress set up a high chair.

"Tina, meet Dan and Myra Morales. Tina's Jack's best girlfriend, and my lifesaver." While Keith rescued Tina's hair from his son's determined clutches, he couldn't help noticing her soft, smooth earlobes. He couldn't blame Jack for wanting to hold onto the silky strands of light-brown hair either, even though the baby was being a little too enthusiastic about it. "Hey, kid, let go of Tina's hair so we can put you in this high chair."

Tina laughed at something Myra said—something about Keith not having spent much time around teammates that had sounded like an accusation thinly veiled with humor. "Tina, slide on into the booth, I'll take responsibility for Jack while we eat." When she did, he took the spot beside her.

Myra and Dan had looked a little surprised when they joined them, but Keith was gratified that they seemed cautiously welcoming. For years he'd felt something missing in his relationship with teammates and particularly their wives—but to keep peace at home he'd avoided socializing with his fellow players as much as possible. What the

fuck was he supposed to say now? If he blamed Jackie they'd think he was a prick because she couldn't defend herself from the grave, not that she ever would have bothered. If he didn't... Well, most of the guys probably thought he was an asshole anyhow, at least off the field.

As if she sensed his discomfort, Tina reached over and took his hand. It felt good, so good he wanted to lace his fingers through hers, prolong the moment. But he didn't. Instead he froze. As though she realized her gesture was a bit familiar, she laid her hand back on the table, her expression worried.

The air seemed unnecessarily charged. He saw a knowing, speculative look on Myra's face and didn't want her to assume anything bad about Tina, so he quickly threw in an explanation he hoped would clear the air. "Tina and I go way back, since we were kids."

That comment seemed to relax her some. He wondered how she'd react if he put a familiar hand on her thigh, enjoyed the lean feel of her beneath the denim, something casually intimate people would do. "Don't we?" he asked instead, caressing her with his voice.

"Yes. Since I was in first or second grade and he was a high-school football hero." Tina smiled, seemingly more at ease now. "Keith wanted to show his little guy off to his teammates, so he brought me along to be an extra pair of hands. Not that I mind. I love football, and I'm thrilled to meet some other Maulers stars." Her smile at Dan brought out a hint of a blush on the swarthy tailback's face. "And you too, Myra. Do you have any children?"

"Not for another month or so. I don't imagine you told Keith we're expecting." Myra gave Keith a careful, quick look that made him wonder how hard his teammates had tried to keep their mouths shut about kids, wives and pregnancies when he was around, things they'd known had been stress triggers in his personal life. Damn, they'd been a hell of a lot more sensitive to him than he'd been to them.

"Now, Myra..." Dan shot a "shut-up" look at his wife. "I'm sorry, buddy."

"No problem. I appreciate everybody's concern, but I'm okay. Nobody needs to tiptoe around me. Tell the truth, I wish you'd all talk about your kids occasionally so I'd have an excuse to talk about Jack." Tina's smile hinted that he'd handled the awkward moment okay, and that made him feel better.

Tina made him feel better. What the fuck? He wanted that casual physical contact she'd offered. Looking into her eyes, he grabbed her hand, laid it on his thigh and covered it with his own. *Yeah. I liked you touching me, and I hope you don't mind me touching you back.*

A light flush touched her cheeks. She swallowed but didn't lose the eye contact that felt comfortable, reassuring...just the least bit arousing if he were to be completely honest with himself. Suddenly the feelings inside him were getting too intense. Almost frightening.

He turned to Myra and Dan. "What say we order something to eat? I threw the ball with a couple of receivers on the practice squad this morning, and the outdoor workout got me ravenous. Tina, what would you like?"

For a minute Keith watched her read the handwritten menu above the bar, imagined her declining to get anything, as Jackie would have done if he'd brought her to the family-run sports bar and grill. Then she saw something and grinned. "It's been too long since I got to eat some good old-fashioned barbecue. I'll have a sliced beef sandwich with coleslaw and fries. And a Coke."

"Myra?"

"We ordered before you got here," Dan said, his tone apologetic.

Keith motioned for the waitress and ordered for himself and Tina. "Go ahead and bring theirs first if it's ready. You might as well make it a pitcher of Coke." Glancing at the bar, he saw the team's two bad boys ordering shots and beer. Although he didn't actually have the authority to stop them, he didn't want the day spoiled for everybody so he lowered his voice and spoke to the waitress. "You see those two guys at the bar?"

"Yeah. The two with big mouths and no manners?"

"That's them. Do me a favor and tell the bartender that Keith Connors suggested he not serve alcohol to them."

The waitress nodded then stopped by the bar on the way to putting in their orders. Keith sat back, enjoyed the light pressure of Tina's hand above his knee. It felt comfortable. Warm and reassuring, as much so as Jack's grip on the little finger of his free hand. Not exactly arousing, just...right.

He was enjoying himself and imagining, unbidden, having some of the guys and their wives over, or meeting them like this more often, the way he'd always thought relationships with his coworkers ought to have been. The picture looked pretty damn good, with Tina a big part of it.

"Why'd you tell the waitress no beer?" Myra asked. "I can't drink because of the baby, but that's no reason everybody else can't enjoy one or two."

Keith tensed. "I overheard Willis and Mort ordering shots and a pitcher. I wanted to make sure they don't get any. I'm sure you heard about what they did the night the team got to LA."

"Yes. I heard. The only way I could not have found out about that was if I'd been buried in some underground cave with no TV or radio." Myra shook her head. "Those guys..."

"Then you probably understand why I don't want them getting in trouble again, especially when they have to show up at the turkey giveaway." Willis and Mort might pitch a fit, but it wouldn't be as bad as listening to Coach Lyle read the entire team the riot act if anybody showed up at the media event anywhere close to being tanked. "Are you expecting a boy or girl?"

Myra smiled, the first genuine look of pleasure Keith had gotten from her since they arrived. "A boy. He's due the last game of the season, so we hope he comes a few days early or late."

"That would be nice of him." Jack had arrived early, but still after the Maulers had been eliminated from last season's playoffs. It stung, the memory of losing Jackie, of not

knowing how he'd manage to care for his tiny, helpless baby. But when Keith concentrated on the warm weight of Tina's hand on his leg, the mental anguish started to go away and he made a conscious effort to smile. "We can't afford to have Dan missing any games if it can be helped."

"Uh-oh. Here comes Willis." Dan put an arm around Myra, as though that might protect her from any nastiness that might be coming.

Willis stopped in front of the booth and shot Keith a dirty look. "Look, Mr. Perfect. I ain't drunk. Haven't even had a drink yet. Who the fuck do you think you are, telling the bartender not to serve us?"

"Watch your mouth. There are women and children here." Keith struggled to hold on to his temper, while his fingers were itching for a chance to rearrange Willis' smart-ass face. "I was doing you and your pal a favor. You're already in Coach's doghouse, and if you show up drunk at the stadium this afternoon you might as well clean out your lockers."

"Hear you're chewin' doghouse bones too, golden boy. Coach didn't like them picks you threw last Sunday."

Keith felt Tina getting tense, saw her eyes darting to Jack who was less than a foot from Willis. He wouldn't let anything happen to his baby or to her, but he understood how living with an abusive stepdad might have made her jumpy around nasty-mouthed men, and Willis definitely was that. He put pressure on her hand, reached over and touched Jack. *It's okay. Everything's under control. I won't let anybody hurt you or Jack.*

He scowled at Willis, even more furious because he was frightening Tina. "If I were you I'd watch what I do and say. If I had my way, both you and your pal Mort would be long gone. I kept hoping the judge out in LA would decide you should stay around until your trials. By the way, you weren't playing any too well yourself last weekend."

“Stuff it. If I want a beer I’ll find me one. Enjoy your lunch.” With that Willis stomped off. Keith didn’t see him leave but assumed he had taken his business elsewhere, since he didn’t make any more appearances at their table.

Slowly, he felt Tina’s tension lessen until her fingers finally relaxed against his thigh just as the waitress brought their food. Keith dug in, surprised at just how comfortable he felt, surrounded by teammates, Tina and his baby boy. He found himself almost looking forward to signing autographs...and showing off his family.

* * * * *

He hadn’t intended to show Jack and Tina off quite so visibly, Keith decided that evening after taking back-to-back phone calls from his mom, Jackie’s mother and Bobby. When he grabbed the remote and replayed an NFL network piece about the Maulers’ annual community service project, Keith understood what had everybody taking notice.

He, Tina and Jack really did look like a happy family in the short segment that made its way to network TV. He rewound the TiVo, replayed it again.

His mom mentioned how happy he’d looked in a shot where he had his free arm around Tina while she held Jack and he signed an autograph for a young fan. Jackie’s mother apparently had seen him having fun with his baby and a strange woman when she felt strongly that he ought to have been teary-eyed and grieving, and anywhere but at the nationally telecast event. Bobby had seemed almost as protective as a father or big brother might be toward Tina, apparently having sensed a man-woman connection that Keith himself hadn’t consciously felt at the time the video was being shot. Of course he realized after the fact that him having his hand on Tina’s jeans-clad thigh while they knelt and played with Jack hadn’t exactly looked like a nanny-employer kind of move.

He lay back against the pillows and flipped off the TV. Morning and a full-pads practice would roll around too soon. Keith tried to ignore the tightness in his shoulder and closed his eyes. Remembering the day, and the joy he’d felt while mingling with

fans, he realized what a huge part Tina had played in turning the chore he'd dreaded into a pleasurable experience.

When they'd come home, he hadn't been able to resist brushing his lips across her soft, sun-kissed cheek when he bent to kiss a sleepy Jack good night.

His bed felt cold in spite of the down comforter he'd pulled up to his chin. Empty. Keith drew an extra pillow to his chest, seeking...a woman's warmth he hadn't consciously missed since Jackie died. At least until now. Sex wasn't what he missed, at least not as much as he yearned for the company of a warm, female friend.

Or maybe it was. A lazy twinge of arousal made its way through his veins. Keith squeezed his eyelids shut, tried hard to visualize Jackie. But the picture in his mind was Tina, laughing at Jack's baby antics. Soft, sweet Tina, whose comfortable presence beside him had evoked emotions he hadn't felt for years, since long before Jackie died.

It had to have been the day, the excitement of the fans and the reassuring sense of grounding Tina and Jack provided in the atmosphere that could easily have bubbled out of control. If not for them, Keith might have bought into the quarterback myth and taken up offers from a few brazen groupies—or worse, he could have shrunk inside himself and made a mental escape from the festivities. Smiling at the memory of having Tina at his side, holding Jack and chatting easily with some of his fans, Keith hugged the pillow and tried to clear his mind.

You look like you're in love. Keith's mom was a romantic, her main concern his emotional well-being. She made no secret of her fondest wish—for him to find a new lover who'd make him happier than Jackie ever had. But Mom was wrong. Keith wasn't in love with Tina, just relaxed and happy with a newly found friend.

Wasn't he?

It looks as though you've found yourself a new lover. What Georgia Bern said first wasn't all that different from his own mom's words, but her tone had been terse, as though she thought he'd done something very wrong. She also had made some snide remark about him getting awfully chummy with Jack's nanny at home—something she

hadn't learned from the video or from him. After a few minutes' consideration, Keith figured Georgia probably milked Mrs. Gardner for information.

He made a mental note to have a chat with the housekeeper. For a long time he'd been cutting Georgia slack because she'd lost her only child, but it pissed him off that she seemed to think he should have buried not only himself but also her grandson along with Jackie. And it made him goddamn furious to think Mrs. Gardner was spying on him and giving his mother-in-law reports about what went on inside his house.

But Georgia had made him admit, at least to himself, that he had some need for Tina that went beyond her taking care of Jack. Fortunately Bobby's obvious concern for Tina's well-being tempered the sudden arousal that had slammed into Keith's belly when he took second and third looks at the picture of the three of them looking so happy and carefree. He promised himself he'd ignore the sexual attraction, that he'd be Tina's friend but not let his hormones push them into a relationship that might end up with her getting hurt.

After all, as Bobby had mentioned earlier tonight, Tina had gone through a lot in her short life, and it wouldn't be fair for her to fall hard for him unless he saw possibilities for something more together than a brief affair. Keith wondered briefly what difficulties Bobby had been talking about then decided he didn't need to know. He wasn't ready for another lifetime commitment yet. He might not ever be.

* * * * *

Every once in a while when they played with Jack or watched game tapes over pizza and beer, Tina got the feeling Keith was starting to see her as a woman, not just a friend who happened to be female. Occasional yearning looks, fleeting touches that seemed almost accidental, brief hot glances that disappeared almost as soon as she noticed, added up to make her wonder.

Of course she knew she was only dreaming. Keith Connors was miles out of her reach. He'd moved past Hedgecock, Texas, years ago, become a household name with

football fans worldwide. He'd married a debutante, learned to move easily in social circles where Tina knew without trying that she'd stand out like a sore thumb. In case she hadn't been smart enough to know for herself that she'd never fit into Keith's life, Bobby and Marly both warned her every time they spoke on the phone, since that day Keith had taken her and Jack to the Maulers' public service event last month.

He wasn't leading her on. In fact, after the game yesterday he'd told her he was done grieving for Jack's mother—and that he intended to bring his long celibacy to an end. "I'm going to sample some of what I've been missing out on for a long, long time," he'd said as they ran the gauntlet of groupies outside the players' exit. Not that Tina could blame him. He'd married really young—younger than she was now—before his face and hot body had been plastered on TV ads and billboards to cause the frenzy of females chasing him at every turn. She just wished sometimes that he wanted to sample her.

They'd had good times, though. Warm, happy days when she and little Jack joined Keith in the massive dining room for Thanksgiving turkey, and when he began joining them for strolls along the lake behind his house. Even when he insisted she start bringing Jack to his home games, she felt right at home, getting to know his teammates' wives and girlfriends when she sat with them and cheered at every Maulers' play.

Some of the hard-eyed players like Willis made her nervous when they came in casual contact, but she wasn't afraid because she felt confident that Keith's protection would keep them from acting on their anger. She'd noticed almost from the first that she didn't have the wariness around Keith that she usually had around men. He was...comfortable, even though that seemed a strange way to describe the hottest, sexiest, best-looking guy she'd ever seen.

Keep your head out of the clouds, Tina. He's not for you.

Being sensible was hard, though, when she was beginning to anticipate Keith's smiles as much as Jack's. She'd stupidly begun keeping count of his casual touches like a schoolgirl.

Like today. They were out in front of the house, putting strings of lights on the evergreen shrubs in the front yard while Jack was taking a nap. Every time Keith passed her a new string, or when they had to brush bodies to connect a new set of lights, her body registered it like an embrace. A libido she hadn't recognized she had come to full, embarrassing life, nipples tightening against her bra, dampness soaking into her panties. She leaned forward against the ladder, where she'd been standing a couple of minutes, arguing with herself about whether or not to acknowledge these unfamiliar feelings.

"Are you okay?"

She gave him an absent glance and a smile. "Yeah. I guess I was doing a little daydreaming."

"Me, too." He put his hands at her waist, ostensibly to steady her down the ladder, but instead he turned her into him, reached up and cupped her head. Sliding his fingers through her hair, he claimed her lips. His big hands circled her waist, holding her steady when she'd have melted like a falling snowflake on this not-quite-freezing day. He didn't devour her. Instead he sampled her mouth, urging her lips to open for a lazy, sweet exploration.

He drew her close, so close she felt his arousal through the layers of their winter clothes. It wasn't insistent, just there, warm against her belly, reminding her he was male...a good male, a male who'd protect her, who'd never hurt her the way her stepfather had. When he released her mouth, he kept her close, rested his bent head against her shoulder.

"I guess I should apologize, but I'm not sorry." His damp breath warmed her throat while the heat of his body kept out the chill of the brisk wind whipping across the lake. "Merry Christmas, Tina."

He said he wasn't sorry, but Tina felt him draw back a little, emotionally. As if he needed to explain his action. "Merry Christmas to you, too." She steadied her hands on his muscular biceps, daring to look up at him, return his smile. "I'm not sorry either."

"It was an impulse, maybe brought on by the season, the bright lights. I don't think either of us is ready to take this further."

He wasn't. That was obvious. He might feel a certain desire for her, because of close proximity and their growing friendship. Most of the time, though, Keith treated her like a favorite younger sister. Despite the heat of his body next to hers, the quick beat of their hearts as they stood outside his house, she sensed this wouldn't go any further. He might want her, but he was fighting the desire. He wouldn't act on it with her.

As if she were damaged goods. No, Tina wouldn't go there. She wouldn't ruin this beautiful day by thinking of her stepfather or the rape. And she wouldn't let that one experience color the way she felt toward other men. There were plenty of other reasons, such as Keith not wanting to disturb her relationship with his baby, such as her being too young and green for him, that might make him think twice about initiating a sexual relationship with her.

He hugged her then loosened his grip on her waist and let her slide down his body to the ground. "I'm not sorry, but...it's getting cold out here. Let's go inside." Keith's tone made her think of warm beds and crackling fires, of his hard, fit body entwined with hers.

But she dared not dwell on what wasn't going to happen. Instead she stepped back, smiled up at him. "All right. It should be about time for Jack to wake up from his nap so we can take him around the gated community to look at all the decorations and lights."

When they turned to face the house, Tina thought she saw Mrs. Gardner staring at them from the French windows in the dining room. "I think Mrs. Gardner was watching us," she said as they carried the ladder to the garage.

"I imagine she was. She seems to enjoy spying more than she does polishing the furniture we never use." Keith set the ladder down, pulled Tina to him and hugged her, hard. "After the season's over, I'm going to have to let her go and find another housekeeper."

"I could..."

"No, you couldn't. You have enough to do, taking care of Jack. I won't have you taking on Mrs. Gardner's work, too." He bent, kissed the tip of her nose. "Thanks for offering, though. You know, you've already made yourself indispensable. I've got no intention of overworking you and losing you."

He wouldn't lose her. Tina had a feeling Keith knew it. Baby Jack had her wrapped around his little finger. But she was afraid Keith had, too. "You won't," she whispered, so quietly she doubted he heard her.

* * * * *

The last Monday in January, Keith tossed a travel bag into his car. After that far too brief kiss on Christmas Eve, he'd done what he'd told himself to do after that possibly unwise impulse and reined the relationship with Tina back to friendship. When he'd wavered, he reminded himself how having her as a nanny and friend had turned his house into a home, maybe for the first time ever. That was true, no matter how disloyal to Jackie's memory it sounded.

He itemized all the good things about her being his "friend". But he'd miss her as well as Jack this Super Bowl week.

Tina was...comfortable. When she asked if he'd like to play with his son, he never felt pushed. But he rarely said no. He found himself getting as much pleasure riding the boy piggy-back and pushing him in his stroller, while Tina walked along beside them, as he did playing ball or studying film for the next game. In the evenings, after Jack was asleep, they watched game film or talked about what had gone on at practice.

It was more than that. His feelings for Tina had crept up, from gratitude that she seemed to love his little boy and made juggling his responsibilities so much easier, to easy friendship to—although he'd tried hard to deny it—a desire to take the relationship between them to the next level. To see if what he felt for her was love or merely need born of long self-denial.

He'd even started expecting to see her at all his games, even ones that involved road trips. At his insistence, she and Jack had watched last week's division championship game from a warm luxury box in Pittsburgh's outdoor stadium while the Maulers eked out a three-point win during a nasty snowstorm. Knowing they were there had warmed Keith's heart even though his body had been damn near frozen.

Maybe he should have taken them with him this week. But Keith quickly discarded the idea. Super Bowl week in New Orleans was no place for a baby – and no place to take the young woman who was becoming more important to him each day. He'd use the time away from them to end his widower's period of grief and sample how life as a football hero could be, at the highest level. Bobby's frequent warning, "Don't mess with Tina's mind if you're not serious, she's been hurt way more than she deserves," rang in Keith's ears. But rather than anticipating a feast on augmented breasts, painted lips and women who knew how to turn a man inside out in bed, he was already thinking of what would happen if he found out that lifestyle truly wasn't what he wanted. He could come back and pursue Tina, with no worries about his motives. And that thought had his groin tightening in a way the groupie images hadn't.

He turned away from the car, looked at her standing on the steps. Then he went to them. "Take care, you two," he said, ruffling Jack's fair hair and nuzzling his cheek. Then, before he could talk himself out of it, he pulled them both into his arms and brushed his lips briefly but emphatically across Tina's inviting lips. "And wish us luck."

* * * * *

The first person he called when the game was over was Tina.

"We won." Keith imagined Tina curled up on the couch in front of the big-screen TV, flushed with excitement while Jack bounced up and down in his playpen by the bar.

"I know. You were incredibly good today. Congratulations on getting the MVP award." Her soft voice had him half hard in spite of his exhaustion. "Jack and I will have a celebration for you when you get home."

Keith let himself fantasize over a celebration that would involve just him and Tina, but only for a minute. The din in the locker room was drowning out their conversation, and everybody was yelling for him to get dressed and go talk to the waiting reporters.

"See you when I get home. Give Jack a hug for me." Keith figured, by the time he got home, he'd have a pretty good idea of what it was he wanted—the playboy life or...one woman who'd love him, appreciate his career and be a mother to his son.

Later. Dressing quickly, he went out to accept the accolades that meant far less than the joy he'd just heard in Tina's voice.

Chapter Three

New Orleans, Maulers' post-Super Bowl Celebration

"Way to go, Keith!" Bobby and Marly Anthony found the MVP quarterback surrounded by a horde of players, coaches and family members gathered for the presentation of league awards, including the Lombardi Trophy that Keith had hoisted on the field after the win an hour ago.

"Wish you'd stayed around long enough to earn your ring." Keith felt bad. Bobby had stepped in and won six of the Maulers' sixteen games while he'd been laid up with a bum shoulder.

Bobby grinned. "That's okay. I'll get mine next year."

Wishful thinking, Keith figured, because Bobby's new team was rebuilding and wasn't likely to have a winning season, let alone win its division, for several years. "You'll have to beat us to get it." Just as he'd had to beat the Savannah Rebels and his old idol, Dave Delaney, today. He had no doubt Savannah would be rebuilding next year since Dave had said he'd be retiring and the Rebels had no immediately recognizable replacement for him at quarterback.

"See you at the party later?" Marly asked.

"Yeah, I'll be there." He could hardly wait to start celebrating.

Today he felt alive. As though he'd come back to life and let go of the blue funk that had surrounded him since Jackie died. Nearly a year had gone by, and Keith was up for pretending his life was as good as he hoped his grin would look in a few minutes when he accepted the key to his MVP prize, a new Cadillac model of his choice.

"Which Cadillac are you gonna choose?" Bobby asked.

"The Escalade." Keith hadn't realized until now that he meant to hand over the MVP prize to Tina and Jack for their trips around Memphis. Right now, though, his

main interest was in finding a girl to party with, a groupie who wouldn't expect anything but a good time celebration. "Is Liz around?" he asked Marly. He knew the Maulers had brought their cheerleading squad down for today's festivities, but he'd been too busy playing and planning his next offensive drives to notice the eye candy on the sidelines.

"She's here. She'd fall over if you'd actually go talk to her a little bit." Marly scanned the crowd, pointed out her friend. "See her? She's over in the corner talking with Ellis and his wife, and Jeff Gregory."

Jeff, their punter, looked as if he was already putting a hit on the hot blonde groupie, but Keith figured he'd have a pretty good shot if he went after her. After all, they weren't exactly strangers since they'd stood up with Bobby and Marly at their wedding a couple of months ago. Liz had told him then that she had a thing for signal-callers while dropping thinly veiled hints that he could take her home and enjoy a one-night honeymoon instead of collecting Jack and his nanny and spending another lonesome night in his own bed. "I'll go catch up with her after I do my thing on stage."

* * * * *

After they polished off a meal fit for kings, a band came out and the party began getting interesting. The music was loud, a mixture of New Orleans jazz, disco and raucous rap. Keith was finding it hard balancing one groupie on each knee while downing champagne as though the fountain at the center of the table was about to run dry.

He didn't remember the Maulers' post-Super Bowl party having been quite so wild three years ago when Jackie had been at the party with him, looking pretty scandalized. For certain, Jackie hadn't been gyrating on him then the way Liz Grady and another Maulers cheerleader were doing now. He hadn't caught the redhead's name but his cock was getting well acquainted with her hot little pussy, through his slacks and whatever it was she had on under the barely-there dress that was hiked up over her thighs.

He tweaked one of her impressive, silicone-enhanced boobs. "Hey there, you. Unless you want to get fucked right here in front of God and everyone, quit the teasing." He freed one arm from Liz and lifted the redhead off him. Liz took over, straddling him and giving him a lap dance he wasn't likely to forget when the band started playing something that sounded strictly carnal. He thought he'd once heard the bump-and-grind cadence in a strip club some of his teammates had dragged him to after an out-of-town victory a few years ago.

In a way he was glad Jackie wasn't around to purse her pretty lips and drag his butt upstairs before things got rowdy. He was even gladder he hadn't brought Tina and Jack, because while Tina wouldn't have complained, he was pretty sure she'd have been hurt watching cheerleaders gyrate all over him the way Liz was doing.

He was wired, high on the atmosphere and buckets of vintage champagne. His offensive linemen were doing a conga dance around the table while their wives and girlfriends laughed over their drunken antics. Oh fuck. Liz knew how to move her ass against him, and she ground harder and faster when the guys started chanting encouragement.

She bent close and nibbled on his ear, never missing a beat of the stripper music. "You can fuck me anytime you want. Anyplace."

Would she have liked it if he said, "Here and now"? Having sex in public had never been one of Keith's fantasies. He'd even been shy about gettin' it on with his high-school girlfriend under the old bleachers at Hedgecock County High.

Something inside his fuzzy brain suggested he should feel some sense of sadness over his memories of Jackie, but right now he wasn't feeling any guilt or grief. Amazing what alcohol could do to dull emotions. Especially the copious amounts of champagne being served to celebrate the biggest win in football.

Liz felt hot, reeked of pure lust that had nothing to do with any other emotion. And Keith was pumped up as well as pleasantly buzzed and horny as hell. "Why don't we

try dancing standing up first, you sexy thing?" He set her off him and stood, a little unsteady on his feet from the champagne bubbling away in his brain. "C'mere."

She was tall. And stacked like a brick outhouse, too, as one of his college teammates used to say. Her generous breasts burrowed into his chest when he wrapped both arms around her and swayed to the tune of some blues song about strangers fucking in the moonlight on a one-night stand. The song turned Keith's thoughts toward ending a long, sexless dry spell with this woman who so obviously was eager to sample Keith Connors, Super Bowl MVP and out-of-practice stud desperately in need of a few orgasms.

There was always a first time to indulge in the sort of debauchery some of his teammates enjoyed talking about pretty much all the time. The win had been a high unto itself, while the champagne and all the public foreplay had his hormones on fire. When the dance was over and they sat back down, Keith winked across the table at Marly and Bobby, who seemed not at all shy about indulging in some pretty obvious sex play of their own.

What the hell? He nuzzled Liz's smooth, silky neck and whispered, "How about sliding under the table and giving me a blowjob where nobody will see?"

She turned, placed a wet, champagne-flavored kiss on his lips. "I was hoping you'd ask. I've always wondered what an MVP's cock would taste like." Laughing, she slid off his lap and landed at his feet, on her knees. When she unfastened his belt and unzipped his slacks he had a brief second, time for one uncomfortable and unexpected thought about what the fuck he was doing here.

Then her full lips closed around him, and he forgot any reservations that might have been lurking in his fuzzy brain. *Yeah. Suck me, baby, suck me hard. Like that. Omigod.* He held out his glass, let Coach Lyle pour him more champagne from a giant bottle he was carrying around the ballroom. "Having fun, Coach?"

"Hell yes. My wife went upstairs, so now I'm gonna party." Coach did a double take. "What happened to the hot blonde that was on your lap a minute ago?"

Keith didn't know if he should laugh or cry when Liz's hand came up and touched his lips. "She's under the table," he croaked, figuring Coach knew anyway that he was getting some head there in the middle of one of the Hotel Monteleone's very elegant ballrooms. Marly was down there, too, blowing Bobby, or else she'd slipped away to the restroom. Probably Keith's first guess was right, from the ecstatic look on his former backup's baby face. "Don't stop now, honey," he said, knotting his fists in Liz's bright blonde hair. "You don't know how good that feels."

She paused. "I'm hoping I'll find out, though." Then she sank on him again, took him down her throat and swallowed. If she didn't stop he was gonna come, and right now he wanted to give as good as he got.

"What say we go up to my suite?" It had a hot tub and a king-size bed with a mirror above it. Right now he was more interested in the bed, but he figured they could have some more fun later in the hot tub. "Zip me up. Before you know it, we'll be naked and fucking like minks, if the elevators will cooperate." While she stuffed his throbbing cock back in his pants and zipped them, he grabbed a handful of the condoms someone had smartly included as part of the table decoration. He'd have picked her up and carried her, if only he hadn't already consumed more champagne than he should have.

* * * * *

Liz was firm and female and all Keith needed to top off the most successful single day of his career. And she made him feel all male, a mindless animal, full of a driving lust that stirred him to fuck her fast and furious, give her everything she asked for.

"I'm not a tender little girl, Keith, you won't hurt me. Fuck me hard."

"Like this?" He grabbed her wrists and pounded into her like a jackhammer, bending to bite her neck, consume her mouth. She writhed beneath him, urging him on, screaming with pleasure as she convulsed around his cock, drew out his own climax. He yelled, a shout of triumph he'd never felt so strongly before then collapsed on her, spent. Their hearts pounded in unison.

Until now he'd never had sex without tenderness, without some form of affection beyond the animal need for a woman. Any woman. But Liz evoked that heat, the pure sexuality that was nothing less, nothing more than carnality at its finest.

Not wanting to crush her, Keith rolled over and dragged her so close he felt her heart pounding against his chest. "Thank you," he said, not knowing if he should change condoms and fuck her again or try for a show of post-sex affection. "Wanna relax in the hot tub?"

"Sure."

This was a fantasy, one he'd occasionally acted out in his dreams. But tonight it was real. A semi-nympho groupie was clawing at his back as hot jets of water poured over them. His cock was buried deep in her steaming cunt. She asked for nothing but his cock to pound her pussy so she could tell her friends she'd been fucked by the Super Bowl MVP the night after the big game.

It felt good. Weird, but very good. Surreal in a way, he thought as the fog of champagne was beginning to wear off. Lifting Liz off him, he stepped out of the tub and toweled himself off. "Come on, baby, let's go back to bed before we drown." He kissed her full on the lips, felt for the first time that this was wrong. That something important was missing from this scene. As fast as he'd fallen for her blatant invitation, he now felt cold.

He didn't know exactly when things shifted, maybe after they'd fucked two or three times, but he found himself staring at the mirrored ceiling while Liz blew him off again, his thoughts wandering somewhere else. To a young, quiet woman with silky hair who'd stood on a ladder on Christmas Eve. To the hopeful smile on her face, the soft touch of her lips.

Keith pushed that thought away, did what he needed to do. But when it was over this time, he rolled away, feigning a not completely fake exhaustion. The adrenaline was burning off, and his cock was no longer calling the shots.

Yeah, it was a great high, while it lasted. But he was no kid. Tomorrow was Jack and practice and bills to pay, the ups and downs of every day. He needed a companion, someone to share his life, not just a hot chick to blow him. If he'd had Tina beneath him in a bed, after he brought her to a screaming orgasm he'd want to hold her in his arms, hear her whisper in that soft, sweet voice that she was going to check on Jack, anticipate her coming back to him.

Something right and complete, and not just spur of the moment. That's what was missing. He felt it keenly enough to know he was going to wake up in the morning and realize this had been a mistake.

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Yeah. He was right. This had been an interlude, pleasant enough. Liz must have sensed his withdrawal, because when he woke the next morning, she was gone, sparing them the awkward goodbyes. But she'd left a note, written on a piece of the Monteleone's complimentary stationery.

Hey, Keithie baby, don't feel bad, I wanted last night as much as you did. I could tell toward the end, though, that your heart wasn't in it. I'll be watching you on the field, and available any time if you ever want to play. Thanks for the memories... Liz.

She'd made it easy on him, and that made him feel bad. He had the world's worst headache. *Your own fault, you should have laid off the champagne before your brain started swimming in it.* He didn't know if it would have been better if he'd been so drunk he couldn't remember he'd had Liz give him head in the middle of the postgame celebration or that they'd fucked at least three times before he started to sober up and came to his senses.

This wasn't the kind of life Keith wanted for the rest of his career. Partying hard might do it for a lot of pro athletes. Fellow Hedgecock County star Dave Delaney had turned postgame carousing into an art form, if half the rumors around the league were true. But Keith had been domesticated early. He'd do without sex before fucking any

willing female that walked just so he could blow off steam and maybe hurt some woman who should have been looking for a lover, not a one-night stand.

He lay alone in the big bed, his eyes closed. The playboy image wasn't for him. He wanted a woman to want him because he was Keith Connors the man, not Keith Connors the Super Bowl MVP. He wanted a woman, not a trophy wife to make all his teammates drool with envy. A woman who could make him feel again, who could be a mom to Jack and love him as if he were her own child. The way Tina did.

Unexpectedly, he recalled Bobby and Marly's wedding, a brief flash of how Tina had looked. At the reception, she'd sat holding Jack, nuzzling his curls. She'd worn a wistful expression, seemed sad as she watched Bobby and Marly take their first dance as man and wife. He'd been fighting off the maid of honor's determined passes, but he remembered it now, clearly enough. No doubt about it. Tina was the sort of woman a man could take home. She was no sex bomb, but she fired his blood. Every time they were together, if he was going to be completely honest about it.

There was that kiss on Christmas Eve. And the warm feelings that flowed between them when they came home from the team's turkey giveaway and he brushed his lips across her soft cheek.

The warmth had stayed with him for a long time after he kissed her and Jack goodbye before coming here a week ago today. The sweet, minty taste of her mouth suddenly came to the forefront of his mind, along with the feeling of rightness that had swept over him when he held her, his son laughing between them.

She's too young. Too tender. Unless you're in love with her – unless you want her not just now but for the rest of your lives – you mustn't hurt her. Lying back against the pillows in a room that smelled obscenely of fresh sex and stale perfume, Keith closed his eyes and waited for the pounding in his head to go away.

Chapter Four

Memphis, eight days later

Keith tossed back a shot of single-malt Scotch, hoping it would shut down the fast-forward mode in his brain. It didn't. Neither did staring at the flames in the fireplace or reviewing a tape from a game he'd missed during the season that just ended. Jack was fast asleep upstairs, and Tina had turned in for the night. The housekeeper, Mrs. Gardner, had long since retired to her apartment over the garage.

A fierce wind whipped through the trees outside, pushing water from the lake up onto the dock and patio where it immediately froze into a treacherous glaze of ice. Limbs crackled, the sounds ominous. The girl on The Weather Channel had predicted several inches of snow tonight, a relative rarity in Memphis, and if she was right they'd be pretty much confined in the house until the mess melted off. Memphis didn't have enough snow plows to get that much of it off already icy streets.

Normally Keith played golf nearly every day during the off-season, but this wasn't exactly golfing weather. Staring out the bank of windows and French doors, he watched snow come down. Shit, he probably wouldn't even be able to drive to the Maulers' training facility to do his daily workout, and talking with the trainers and a few fellow players who lived in Memphis year-round was about the only pleasurable human contact he looked forward to these next few weeks, outside of playing with Jack and Tina.

He paced around in the game room, finally picking a pool cue from the rack on the wall and listening a moment later to balls breaking on the table with a satisfying splat. It was okay that he'd dumped the cue ball. It wasn't as if he'd thrown a pick-six, or even an incomplection. Playing quarterback for the Maulers was his job. Playing pool was supposed to be fun.

Fun, hell. He guessed he was cranky because, in the aftermath, he realized that even winning this Super Bowl hadn't brought the lasting emotional high it had the first time he and the Maulers did it together three years ago. He guessed the celebration and his drunken interlude with Liz had been an aberration.

Tell the truth, this win had left Keith with an empty feeling, as if he'd hit the pinnacle and had nowhere further to go. It didn't help that he'd missed six games during the regular season or that he felt that Bobby Anthony had done as much as he'd accomplished to secure the divisional championship. Lucky bastard, he was enjoying a belated honeymoon with Marly on some tropical Caribbean island.

For a moment Keith imagined himself and Tina sipping frozen margaritas in a place like that, listening to waves breaking across a white-sand beach. The fantasy beat the reality of a stormy night in Memphis all to hell.

He missed an easy shot on the two ball. After missing and digging the pool cue into the felt, he set the cue down. No need to rip the table top in a fit of emptiness. He had to get a grip. Tomorrow was the anniversary of Jackie's death. Worse, her parents would be descending on him, commemorating her death by doling out their guilt and condemnation in person under the guise of visiting their grandson on his birthday.

The impending anniversary explained a good part of his moodiness tonight. Despite the bad times, he and Jackie had some good years, made good memories together. He'd had a partner, somebody to listen to and share things with other than when he needed to talk about his career. This house was too damn big and cold not to have somebody to share it with. It was time for him to move ahead.

He wanted Tina.

There, he'd said it if only to himself. He just wished he believed they were right for each other. He was certain she was right for him, but that wasn't enough, knowing he'd been a lousy husband once and might let history repeat itself. Keith threw back the rest of the shot, savored the burning sensation in his throat.

The wind was blowing so hard outside that the floor-to-ceiling windows seemed to shake. Somewhere near the lake a limb shattered and slammed to the ground, helpless against the strain of ice and wind. Keith looked through the window but couldn't see the fallen limb. Only darkness, bittersweet memories and an uncertain future.

A tortured cry cut through the sounds of the storm. His imagination? He thought so at first then listened harder. "No. Please no. Get away from me." The terrified pleas were coming from upstairs. It had to be Tina, and she sounded as though someone were there, frightening her to death. Threatening her.

Taking the steps two at the time, Keith barreled to her room and flung open the unlocked door. She was sitting up in bed, her arms wrapped around her body, horror reflected in blue eyes that seemed almost black. They glistened with unshed tears.

"Tina?" He had to do something. But what?

Over these months, from her initial wary reserve around him, to her reaction to Willis' anger, to Bobby's vague references to problems with her stepfather in Hedgecock, a picture had been building. Keith hadn't wanted to look at it too closely, hadn't intended to get so involved.

But he was going to get involved now. Somebody had hurt Tina once, and he wasn't about to let that happen again. Not even in her nightmares.

He didn't hesitate. He moved to the bed, sat on the edge and wrapped his arms around her. His touch seemed to bring her back from her own private hell and loosen the taut muscles that had her practically immobile. He laid his cheek against hers, spoke just above a whisper so as not to spook her. "It's okay. Cry it out. I've got a good shoulder for leaning on."

She was shaking like a leaf, and her skin was clammy. "I—I'm sorry. Didn't mean to disturb you. It just seemed so...so real." As though she needed reassurance that he was there and real, she clutched him, fisted her hands in the fabric of his sweatshirt. "Please don't go."

"I'm here, and I'm not going anywhere. Why don't you tell me about it? Sometimes it helps to get whatever's scaring you out so you can see it can't hurt you in the light of day." When she just shook harder he brought her head onto his chest and stroked her back to try to soothe her. "I won't let anybody hurt you."

He'd never felt so helpless, so angry at whoever the bastard was who'd caused this sweet, caring girl to quake with fear. He also felt himself starting to react to her feminine softness but willed his body to behave. "Come on, let's go downstairs by the fireplace and have a drink while you tell me about this bogeyman that has you scared to death."

She only burrowed deeper, clasped him as if he were an anchor in the storm that had engulfed her. "Hold me. Please hold me."

"All right." Though he'd already made a decision to move forward with exploring a relationship with her, he knew this wasn't the time, so he used all those earlier rationalizations as he worked to calm down his libido. How she was ten years his junior, not long away from her teens. That she'd been a pesky tomboy he recalled from his childhood.

That she was wearing a fairly sexless sleep shirt, one that was thin and soft and let him feel her body beneath it... This wasn't working...

Not working at all. His damn twitching cock would just have to suffer. But there was something about being in her bedroom, the feminine smell of fresh linens and flowers on a bedside table that had him thinking about loving her fears away. He drew a mental picture of himself, stretching her out on top of these crisp, white sheets and covering her not with the comforter but with his own aching body. If he didn't get them to someplace neutral, he'd be seducing her while her thoughts were still on the terror she'd just faced in her mind. That wouldn't be right for either of them.

Keith scooped her up, surprised at how light she felt as he carried her downstairs and set her on the one end of the sectional sofa in front of the fireplace. He noticed a fire was still smoldering. Needing to put a little distance between himself and Tina, he laid

another log on the grate then strode to the bar and filled two brandy snifters with Louis XIII Fine Champagne Cognac from a bottle one of the team owners had given him for Christmas.

"Here, you'll feel better if you drink this." He joined her but sat at a safe distance on the opposite end of the sofa and sipped his drink. "Tell me about why you left Hedgecock so abruptly."

"After Mom died, h-he came after me."

"Who? Your stepfather?" Keith tamped down on the fury he felt when she nodded, saying nothing, hands trembling so the amber liquor in the snifter quivered. "He left me alone until after Mom died. But then...then he started touching me, cornering me. Pushing me against the wall and grinding himself against me. Saying filthy words about what he intended to do." She paused. "His breath stank of cheap whiskey and rotten teeth, and he wouldn't stop, not even after I moved out of the house where I thought he couldn't get to me."

She lowered her gaze, stared at her drink. "He caught me in a storeroom at the school cafeteria where I was working. He raped me. And he still comes back at night in my dreams. I'm so afraid." Her tone was flat, almost as if she were talking about somebody else's nightmare and not her own. But tears streamed down her cheeks, denying any lack of emotion on her part.

Apparently she'd counted on Bobby to chase away her demons when she followed him to Memphis, only to find him engaged to Marly Ragusa. But since Bobby had never mentioned the actual events that had driven Tina away from Hedgecock, Keith doubted that she'd ever told him exactly what had gone down. Keith sensed she'd kept the memory buried deep inside, and that this was the first time she'd told anybody the complete story. Hearing how her stepfather had raped her had Keith's blood boiling, his fists aching to choke the life out of the fucking pervert who'd hurt this lovable young woman.

Tina sat in the glow of the fireplace, seemingly calm now that she'd explained what had her waking, terrified, even now when she was safe and seemed happy to be taking care of Jack. Keith felt flattered that she'd trusted him enough to tell him...and that she could be sitting less than four feet away from him and not be trembling in fear.

He imagined most women who'd gone through what she had would have wanted to keep a safe distance from all adult men. But Tina often joined in when he played with his son, and she'd never given Keith any indication that he or any of his friends who'd come over to the house had frightened her. "I'm surprised you don't seem to be afraid of all men, me included."

"I trust you." She looked up, met his gaze. "You're a good man, nothing at all like *him*. I've never thought that all men were like him. Edgar Garcia is a monster. He's not any part of a human being."

In the time she'd been living there and taking care of Jack, Keith had thought of Tina as that kid she used to be, the tomboy he vaguely remembered from his own teenage years. Holding on to that picture of her had kept him from acting on the vague arousal he'd experienced when she was near. But it changed for good a few minutes earlier when he'd held her, felt her ripe breasts pressing against his chest, her warm breath making sensual patterns on his throat.

While he listened to her confess what she saw as her shame, his blood pounded in his head. Fuck, having been raped by her pervert stepfather wasn't anything for her to be ashamed of, no matter what she thought. Keith found himself not only wanting to find Garcia and beat the life out of him, but needing to reinforce to Tina that sex didn't have to be brutal or scary. That not all men were evil.

"Come here, little one." He had to hold her again, absorb her fears. "Don't be afraid of me."

She met his gaze, her eyes shining with unshed tears. "I'm not. I know you'd never hurt me." Setting her snifter on the cocktail table in front of her, she slid over and let him arrange her so they were half sitting, half lying together. They were close enough

that he could smell the slight aroma of fine cognac on her lips, see the outline of her panties and her firm, full breasts beneath that simple sleep shirt that shouldn't have been turning him on.

He shouldn't have been doing this. He risked hurting her, only not in the way she apparently was certain he wouldn't. Despite his resolve that he was ready to move forward with Tina, that was before he'd heard this story, about how badly a man had let her down—a man she should have been able to trust. As a result, the same demons ripped at his heels, making him doubt himself. He was too raw, too hung up in his own mixed feelings about Jackie and the way she'd died. Too leery about opening himself up to more emotional pain. When he desperately needed sex, there were plenty of willing women who wanted nothing more than a roll in the hay with an all-pro quarterback.

With every stroke of his fingers over Tina's soft, pale arm his conscience screamed at him to stop. She wasn't a groupie hot for a piece of him, but the woman who'd stepped into his home and given his son a mother figure. And him a friend.

But Keith couldn't stop. Some emotion stronger than he was had him in its grip. Desire, yes. He was a normal male, and normal males didn't go without regular sex as long as he had without reacting to a woman whose nipples hardened at his touch the way Tina's were doing now. When the tension in her body gave way to pure, female softness he was lost.

"That feels good," she murmured, turning her face up to his. "I should be apologizing for keeping you up."

"Hush. I couldn't sleep anyway. When I heard you crying, I wanted to help. You know, you've helped me more than I can say, being here for Jack. For me, too, although you probably didn't know it." Keith shifted, brought their bodies in closer contact. "You feel damn good."

"So do you." Tina couldn't help the heat that began as a little twinge in her belly and spread like molten lava through her veins. It was a good feeling, being in Keith

Connors' arms, knowing that anything that happened between them would be mutual, friends giving comfort to each other. Nothing permanent but something good, satisfying an attraction she'd felt toward him during the first few days they'd shared this big house and his little boy. "If you want..."

"I want, believe me. But I'm not much of a prize. I like you, I appreciate all you've done for Jack and me. I've got a feeling you need more than liking and appreciation to wipe out the bad memories that had you screaming and in a cold sweat not too long ago. You need more than I've got in me to give."

She didn't care. She knew he must still be hurting for Jack's mom, the beautiful woman who smiled down from a portrait above the living room mantel every time Tina walked by the room. Keith had to cope with having lost her while taking care of the baby they'd made and keeping up with his demanding job. She imagined he might be living with misplaced guilt as well, since his wife had died giving birth to Jack. His fast pulse and the growing tension on his handsome face let her know he was aroused. And she wanted to give him release. "All I want is now. I think you want that, too."

"You're sure?" He traced her lips with his thumb, looked at her with hungry eyes that burned right through her, made her pulse race and her skin grow hot.

"I'm sure."

He moved smoothly, his arms taut as he lifted her onto his lap then found and captured her lips. Small, sweet kisses that felt of affection as much as lust calmed her worries, gave her a sense of rightness, a security that meant worlds to her even if it was just for now. His kisses reminded her of ones he pressed on his baby son's chubby cheeks, only these were different. More intense.

Thunder rolled outside and a bolt of lightning lit the sky. It wasn't just the storm raging over the lake. It was the one brewing inside her, making her clasp Keith's broad shoulders, press closer to his long, muscular body. His erection branded her with its heat and hardness, made her shudder for just a moment.

She knew he wouldn't hurt her the way her stepfather had. Keith would make her feel good in a way nobody had for a long time. He reminded her of Bobby a little. Their bodies were similar, both tall, lanky and powerfully athletic. But the way Keith was kissing and caressing her now made bells ring. They'd never rung like this when she and Bobby had experimented with sex under the bleachers when they were in high school. Bobby had been a boy back then. Keith was a man, a successful man who'd had years to develop the technique that had her wet between her legs and panting for more. He was making her feel cherished, even if the feeling would only last a little while.

Tina guessed she was still the same insecure girl she'd always been, needing sexual fulfillment but wanting a white knight to come swoop her up, deliver her from her own difficult life and take her to the place she'd always dreamed of. Only now she'd settle for the promise of an hour in fantasyland with Keith.

She threaded her fingers through his longish, light brown hair, loved the way the silky strands contrasted with the shorter, crisp hairs at the back of his neck. When she stroked him there he deepened the kiss, ran his tongue over her lips and thrust inside when she opened to him. For a long time he kissed her, his tongue making a lazy exploration in her mouth as if he wanted to memorize her taste, the textures of smooth flesh and teeth she'd always wished were a little straighter. He aroused her slowly, his big hands caressing her neck, her spine, seeming to avoid the places she'd learned as a teenager that boys liked to zero in on. He hadn't even gotten rid of her sleep shirt yet.

He didn't need to. His sensual touch through the light fabric had her squirming against him, clutching his muscular arms like a lifeline when she was about to melt in erotic sensation. "Easy there, I've been starving for this a long time. I'd like to make it last." He sounded breathless, as if he was as affected as she by the contact, the promise of fulfillment he seemed determined to hold at arms' length.

Tina didn't doubt at all that he wanted her now. That was evident in his touch, in the taut expression on his handsome face. In the way he whispered her name. Hers. Nobody else's.

Not once did he make her believe, while he slowly built up the need in both of them, that he was seeing his wife's ghost. She wouldn't have believed that even if he hadn't often called her by name, whispered how much he needed this, how badly he wanted her. By the time he raised her sleep shirt, ripped off his sweatshirt and lowered his head to her aching breasts, she was nearly crazy, craving more.

She wanted it all. Wanted him to rip off his pants and her damp cotton panties and fill the emptiness inside her with his hot, rigid shaft that now throbbed against her swollen sex. "Take off your panties and lie back on the couch. Open up for me so I can taste your sweet honey."

"But—" She'd heard a lot about oral sex but never experienced it. "You don't have to."

"But I want to. Unless you're afraid?"

"I'm not afraid of you, Keith." Everything else he'd done to her felt delicious. The idea of him burying his face between her legs and stimulating her with his mouth somehow seemed more intimate than the prospect of him plunging into her core. Too intimate, almost, for this interlude she was sure wouldn't blossom into a lasting relationship. Yet not intimate enough, not unless... "I'd like to taste you, too."

"Me first." When he stretched out between her legs and spread her outer lips, she shuddered. His hot breath on her damp flesh sent little tremors along her nerves, made her hold her breath with anticipation. Then he found her clit and took it between his teeth. When he licked along the tip of her sensitive flesh she tensed. It was like when she satisfied herself, only better. His tongue felt like wet velvet, his touch sensual and sure. "You taste so damn good," he muttered, lifting his head for a second before diving back in, this time licking along the length of her swollen, wet slit.

She felt pressure building, making her muscles tighten, her body gush hot lubrication. The musky smells of sex and pungent smoke from the fireplace filled her nostrils, surrounded her with an almost desperate need for release. Could she come this way? Would Keith want her to?

He zeroed in on her sex, plunged his tongue deep inside her. His lips put delicious pressure on her clit. She wanted to give back the pleasure, take his long, thick sex in her mouth. "Please. I want to taste you, too."

"Not until you come for me."

A dam of sensation broke inside her, spread through her veins. "Omigod, I'm coming now. Don't...don't stop." She wanted more, wanted him to claim her fully. "Please. I want you. All of you."

He muttered something then resumed fucking her with his tongue.

It wasn't enough. "You're not going to..."

"Do what I'm aching with the need to do? Not tonight. I don't have a single condom in the house." He resumed sucking her clit, making her squirm against his mouth, splay her fingers over his shoulders.

Her good sense warred with the need to have him inside her, feel his heat and hardness. She wanted him to take her fully even as she appreciated him being considerate and not willing to risk making her pregnant. "That doesn't seem fair to you."

He backed off, blew on flesh already sensitized by the rasp of his evening beard, the smooth slide of his tongue. "Don't worry about me. I'm getting more pleasure than I've had for a long time. Besides, you can help me come, too, if you really want to."

"Oh yes, I do." She'd touched Bobby once or twice but never when she was starving for fulfillment. When her high-school friends had talked about going down on their boyfriends, she'd had mixed feelings about trying it. Now, with Keith, she wanted to touch him, taste him, do for him what he was doing for her.

Oh God. His long fingers and agile tongue worked magic on her, made her shatter again like an overfilled balloon into what seemed like a thousand pieces of pure pleasure. He kept it up, and the sensations intensified. She wouldn't have believed that possible. "Please don't...don't stop." She threaded her fingers through his hair, pressed him closer. "Omigod."

“Keith!” She called out his name as shock waves kept going through her.

Chapter Five

He lifted his head but kept his fingers inside her, hard and hot for her inner muscles to clench around. Her juices glistened on his mouth, his cheeks. His eyes expressed hunger. Hunger she longed to satisfy, however he wanted. "Tina, baby, you have no idea how much I want to..."

He was about to explode, holding on by a thread to keep from ripping off his pants and burying his cock to the hilt in her wet, welcoming pussy. "Feel your hands and mouth on me."

Keith felt her tremble, sensed her hesitation. More than that, he recognized her need. "Come for me again, little one." He drew her clit into his mouth, sucked greedily while he slid two fingers inside her warm, wet pussy and scissored them. She tasted so damn good, clean and soft and so arousing it was all he could do to hold back his climax. Her soft cries excited him more as she came again. He'd never experienced such a powerful response from a woman, as if her entire being centered on him. Soon she'd be climaxing while he buried his cock deep inside her. He'd be absorbing her cries of satisfaction in his mouth.

He shifted away from her spasming pussy and licked her juices from his lips as he met her stunned yet contented gaze. How could he ever have thought she was plain? "You're so damn beautiful when you come."

He rested his head on her belly, tried to concentrate on the storm that was raging outside. On anything but the one inside him that was sweeping him up in its fury, robbing him of the self-control he had to maintain.

"May I?"

Yeah. God yeah. His cock ached with anticipation. He sat up then lifted himself enough to pull his pants off. "Please touch me." Last week's debauchery had taught

him he liked oral, too. A lot. His cock swelled with anticipation when she first touched him. She was no expert, he could tell by her tentative touch, but he liked her slow exploration of his shaft and he loved the way she bent and put her tongue to the lubrication on the tip of his cockhead. "That's the way."

She slid off the sofa and knelt between his legs. Her hungry gaze, the warmth of her breath as she leaned closer, fired his libido, made him clench his fists to keep from grabbing her head, guiding her mouth to his throbbing cock. *Let her do it in her own time. You can wait.*

Slowly she sucked the tip of his cock into her mouth, her tongue exploring as though she'd never done this before. She cradled his balls in one hand, her touch all the more arousing because it was so obviously unpracticed. Keith drew in a deep breath of air, let it out slowly when she sank deeper onto him and began to suck, first gently then harder, as though she wanted him to come in her mouth the way she'd just come in his.

He'd never wanted anything more than to drag her off his cock, slide down on the floor with her and fuck her until neither of them could see straight. But he couldn't. He held on, not wanting to come in her mouth just yet. Keith gritted his teeth, tasted her on his lips, in his mouth, smelled the heady musk that surrounded them.

He threaded his fingers through her silky hair, tried not to force her to take him deeper. Until his lust took over, stole his desire to protect her, left him in a white-hot fire of mindless need to come, to take the release that called every pore in his body. "I'm coming. Can't help it. Let go."

But she didn't. Instead she held on to him, took him deeper as she squeezed his balls. His climax built. His cock convulsed against her throat. The first hot bursts filled her mouth, escaped her lips. Slick ejaculate tickled his balls as she kept caressing them. He barely heard his own scream of completion as he fell backward onto the sofa.

"Thank you."

She looked up at him, her hair disheveled, her mouth and chin translucent with the remnants of his climax. Her pretty blue eyes shone brightly. Wanting to hold her, he

drew her up his body, settled her against his chest. He loved the way her soft hair tickled him, the slight weight of her body warming his. Their hearts beat in synch, strong and slow.

Then she looked up at him, tears in her eyes. "Thank you. For everything. For listening, but most of all for showing me sex can be good. Very good."

Keith had seen more beautiful women. He'd fucked women who'd been more skilled. But he'd never made love with a woman before who made him feel invincible. At that moment Tina was his world. "It will get better, I promise, just as soon as the weather lifts enough that I can make a trip to the drugstore. I've got the feeling this was just a little practice session for the real thing."

"You mean..."

"I mean I'm looking for a hell of a lot more than a one-night stand, and I hope you are, too." The way he hadn't with Liz, the way he hadn't with Jackie for a long time before she died, he felt content. Emotionally engaged. The feeling he had when he stretched out on the carpet and drew Tina into his arms felt almost like love.

* * * * *

When Keith woke the next morning in front of the fireplace he reached for Tina, but she was gone. He vaguely recalled her having stirred in his arms earlier, saying something about needing to go take care of Jack. When he blinked he saw Mrs. Gardner, her expression as icy as the winter scene outside.

He figured now was as good a time as any to have it out with her. "Good morning to you, too."

Even if he didn't suspect she'd been spying on him for his mother-in-law, Keith had never liked Mrs. Gardner all that well. The woman acted as though she could barely stand him, always had. Well, this morning he guessed she had reason for her evil-looking scowl.

Bare to the waist, sweatpants untied, one foot bare and the other in an athletic sock, he definitely looked disheveled. Though he didn't have a mirror, he could guess his chin was bristly and his hair looked like it had been combed through by human hands, not a brush. He couldn't help grinning when he followed the woman's gaze to the empty brandy snifters and a bunch of sofa pillows someone had tossed in front of the fireplace.

Mrs. Gardner eyed the pillows then looked back at him, disgust in her expression. "It seems like somebody had a good time in here last night."

That was pretty obvious, and even more obviously it was none of the snooty housekeeper's business. After all, it was his house. Keith shot her the fake smile that had sold millions of bottles of pricey cologne. "Actually, we did. Is there any reason you need to be cleaning up in here this early in the morning, or are you just getting information to pass along to Georgia?"

"Mrs. Bern? What do you mean?"

"I think you know. Either you're talking to her or she's scary psychic about what goes on here."

She seemed to miss his sarcasm. "I—I'm going to visit my daughter later today. I thought I told you I'd be gone a day or so."

"You probably did." Keith didn't care, he just wished the housekeeper would leave him alone so he could ruminate on what had almost happened last night. "Are the roads around here safe enough to drive on?"

"My daughter said they would be. She's going to use her husband's four-wheel-drive truck."

Keith didn't own a four-wheeler, but he figured he could probably make a half-mile round trip to the nearest drugstore in his Lexus or the new Escalade SUV. "I'm going out for a little while, so you won't have to clean around me."

"It's not a problem." The woman pursed her lips as though looking at him turned her stomach. "Don't forget, Mr. and Mrs. Bern will be here tomorrow to see the baby."

God, Keith hoped not. Surely they wouldn't be coming if the Memphis airport was shut down, and he imagined it was. He had no desire to listen to his in-laws cry about Jackie and coddle his son. "I won't forget. They may be snowbound, though."

After all, Jack was only a year old. He wouldn't know whether or not his grandparents came to see him on his birthday. Keith tied his sweatpants, grabbed the hoodie off the floor and pulled it over his head before escaping the room. He tried not to let the prospect of that birthday visit get him down as he showered, dressed and sought out Tina and Jack in the nursery.

* * * * *

"Morning, guys." He couldn't help seeing Tina differently. The grown-up tomboy seemed to have disappeared, replaced by a woman he was suddenly finding incredibly sexy even while she was wearing shapeless sweats and feeding Jack his breakfast. "That stuff taste good?"

"Da-da-da." The baby held out hands smeared with the peaches and cereal Tina was trying to get down his throat.

"Eat your food, Bruiser, don't wear it. If you don't you'll never grow up big and strong." Keith spared a look for Tina, who looked at him, questions clearly in her eyes. "You look like you've got this little piggy under control. I'm going to the drugstore." He paused, his cock already hardening as those doubts in her eyes were swallowed by desire before she ducked her head, busying herself with Jack's bib. "Do you need anything? Juice, formula, more of this stuff for Jack to smear all over everything?"

"We're fine. You be careful. It's awfully icy out there for you to be going out."

Keith met her gaze, warmed by the emotion he saw there. "There's one thing I don't plan on waiting to get. I'll take it easy and be back before you know I'm gone."

* * * * *

Had he meant that million-dollar smile for Jack or her, or maybe for both of them? Tina tried to concentrate on cleaning up after the baby's breakfast but her mind kept going back, not to the nightmare that had brought Keith charging into her room last night but to what had happened later. Her confession, him showing her he didn't find her tarnished from what that bastard had done to her, all resonated in her head. But not as much as the memory of how generously he'd held her through the storm outside as well as the one that had raged in her mind.

She didn't expect forever or even long-term. Keith was her employer. He was also one of the best-known and best-loved athletes in the country. Not only had his late wife been a gorgeous socialite, but he had women accosting him on the street and constantly trying to bribe their way past the gates to this luxurious community—not to mention the groupies who lined up outside the stadium after every game, hoping to get a piece of him.

Tina sighed as she wiped the last of the peaches off Jack's chin and picked him up. "You've got a wonderful daddy, do you know that?"

"Da-da-da." That was Jack's favorite word, his only word so far, except that Tina thought she'd heard him try to say her name the other day. Wishful thinking, she told herself.

She set him on the floor and watched him take three or four halting steps before toppling onto his diapered bottom.

"Tina?"

She looked up to see Mrs. Gardner standing in the doorway. "Good morning." It was unusual for the housekeeper to seek her out. As a matter of fact the woman normally seemed determined to avoid unnecessary contact with her or Jack.

"I'll be leaving now. I thought I should remind you the baby's grandparents will be arriving tomorrow for his birthday. I may not be able to get back before they get here, what with the weather."

"All right. Keith mentioned the other day that they were coming. Is there anything in particular I should do?" The woman usually didn't want any interference in the kitchen, or anywhere else in the house, for that matter.

"No. I've already made a birthday cake. Food's ready for lunch and dinner for the next two days. All you'll need to do is heat it. Mrs. Jackie's parents don't usually stay more than a few hours at a time, now that she's gone."

Jack's maternal grandparents hadn't visited Jack at all since Tina came to stay, but she'd definitely caught undercurrents that there was some sort of rift there. Since their daughter had died giving birth, she wondered if that was it, but she found it hard to believe they wouldn't want to spend time with the baby their daughter had been willing to give her life to have. It wasn't her business, of course. Nothing had changed in the last day to make it so, and she'd do well to keep that in mind. "I'll make sure Jack is spit-shined for Grandma and Grandpa," she said, trying to coax a smile from Mrs. Gardner.

She sniffed. "You might want to make sure his father is, as well. And that he doesn't have another one of his floozies messing up the game room again before they arrive."

Tina turned away. No need for Mrs. Gardner to see her cheeks that she was sure were turning beet-red. "Have a nice visit with your daughter."

"I will. Thank you." With that she turned and walked away. "There she is now. I hear her truck outside."

When Tina picked Jack up and took him downstairs to play, the phone rang. It was Jack's grandmother, who sounded irritated that Keith wasn't home but even more put out because the housekeeper had left. "We won't be flying down tomorrow because of the weather. I'm hoping Keith will postpone the baby's birthday celebration until the weekend. Surely the storm will have passed by then."

Tina didn't want to commit him or hand over his cell phone number in case Mrs. Bern didn't already have it. "I'll have Keith call you when he gets home. He shouldn't be gone long."

Unlike Keith's own mother, who called often and wanted to "talk" with baby Jack, Mrs. Bern didn't express much interest in her grandchild. She sounded annoyed about them having to delay their visit to celebrate his birthday. When the woman hung up, Tina sighed. Jackie's parents must have been what her mom used to call "occasion people" who set great store by milestones but not a lot by the actual people involved.

She couldn't help stopping in the foyer, looking at the portrait above the living room mantel. "That's your mommy, Jack. She'd be so proud of you."

"Yeah, she would." Keith came through the front door, bringing some swirling snow along with him. "Did Mrs. Gardner already leave?"

"Yes. About ten minutes ago. Right after she left, Jack's grandmother called. They won't be coming until the weekend because of the weather. I told her you'd call her back."

"Thanks, I will. I wouldn't have put it past them to have found some way to get here in spite of the weather. What say we all go in the kitchen and see what we can find to eat? One thing I can say for Mrs. Gardner, she's a damn good cook."

* * * * *

"Mrs. Gardner mentioned you had some woman in the house last night," Keith's former mother-in-law said without so much as greeting him when he called during Jack's afternoon nap. "I hope you're not exposing Jackie's little boy to your debauchery."

Keith clenched his fists, wondered how much severance pay would be in order because the housekeeper was history, no matter if she made the best beef stew he'd ever eaten. "Jack is just fine," he said tightly. "I called to tell you this weekend's not good for you to visit."

“Why not? I’m sure the airport will be open by then.”

“I have other plans.” Keith didn’t know yet what those plans might be, but he had no intention of entertaining Georgia and Tim, not until he got his temper under control. “I’m sure that if you check later with Mrs. Gardner, she’ll tell you what they are.”

The conversation went from bad to worse, quickly. Georgia wasn’t used to being questioned, especially from Keith. She tolerated him only because her daughter had wanted him, much like she’d taken in Jackie’s chocolate lab after her death because Jackie had loved him. Keith had loved Rufus, too, not that Georgia had cared when she’d commandeered the big dog and dragged him back to Chicago.

After he hung up, Keith felt another albatross sliding off his shoulders. He’d had it. Jackie’s parents didn’t like him, and they’d regrettably never shown much interest in Jack except as the line to keep giving him shit about Jackie’s death. Well, Jack didn’t need that, and neither did he. They could never visit again and that would be fucking A-okay.

It was past time for him to look at everything clearly.

For a long time after getting off the phone, he sat in his room thinking about what he needed besides to ease the desire that had come to life last night. He wanted Tina, needed her. Jack needed her, too. Keith told himself he should go slowly, let the relationship they began last night grow and develop at its own pace.

But Keith didn’t do slow. Although he’d made a mistake, thinking Jackie would always go along with what he wanted, he hadn’t been too discontent with the decision to marry her—a decision he’d made practically the moment he first laid eyes on her. After all, they’d stayed together twelve years. They probably would have been together now if she hadn’t died.

But Jackie was gone. Thinking back, he recalled as many good memories as bad ones. In many ways they’d hidden their deepest desires and aspirations from each other. Still, the bloom of first love, the star quarterback and the most beautiful

debutante on campus, had stuck around in spite of them having harbored entirely different pictures of the life they'd share. Even near the end, Jackie had still wanted to show off her jock to her snooty friends—and he'd held on to a certain amount of pride that he'd corralled a beauty who knew exactly how to run his charity, how to help him mingle as easily with the team owner as with his teammates.

In time he figured the good memories would stick around while most of the bad ones would fade. He'd hold onto them, pass them along to Jack when he got older.

He wanted Tina now, not only as a bed partner but as the woman who'd hopefully share the rest of his life. Although they both had roots in the same small west Texas town, they hadn't really shared a past as neighbors might be expected to have done. Not that they were strangers. Far from it. In just a few months they'd become good friends, spending time together with Jack while trying to ignore the inexorable pull toward intimacy by skirting the difficult stuff, avoiding topics either of them might have found painful. Last night Tina had opened up to him. But in many ways, he was still a stranger to her.

Keith wanted to correct that. He wanted to dig deeper, learn all about Tina's hopes and dreams so he could make them come true. And he needed for her to really get to know him—not just the football star who had lost his wife, not as Jack's dad, but the man inside, complete with a lot of faults he tried to hide from most of the world.

He went downstairs, started a fire in the fireplace and nuked a pot of Mrs. Gardner's homemade cocoa, thinking as he tasted the incredibly smooth stuff that he'd miss it when she was gone. The woman was a damn good cook.

He took the pot to the game room and set it on the table. Then he went looking for Tina.

* * * * *

He found her in the nursery, her feet tucked underneath her on a platform rocker as she stared out at a sheet of ice that had formed along the outer edges of the lake.

For a minute he stood in the doorway, just looking at her, imagining things he might do to her. Like picking her up and hauling her across the hall to the bedroom where he'd slept since Jackie's death. He'd strip her slowly, touch every inch of the body that suddenly seemed sexier than any other woman's, even the buxom groupies who kept stepping into his path at every turn.

No, he wanted to watch her in here, hold her. Warmed by the picture she made here in the nursery, he stepped inside, scooped her up then sat in the chair with her on his lap. This felt good, holding her while they both watched Jack sleep. "How long will he sleep?" he asked, amazed at the total look of relaxation on his son's baby face.

"A couple of hours. Maybe more. He played pretty hard this morning."

Keith recalled the playing, Jack's delight at walking around downstairs, one plump hand clutching his leg while Tina held the other one. The kid had his old man's strength, for sure. And he was stubborn. Every time he toppled over he pulled himself back up, laughing as though he'd intended to lose it in the first place. "Pretty soon he's gonna get to be a handful." *The little bruiser's gonna need us both to keep him out of trouble.*

"You're right there. But he's a happy little guy. Who could fail to love him?" Tina turned, nuzzled his scratchy cheek. "Except for his blond curls, he looks just like you."

Keith turned, tasted Tina's tempting lips. "Good for him. His mom was beautiful all right, but I don't know if those delicate features of hers would look too good on a boy."

He liked the way Tina laughed, a soft, tinkling sound that tickled the spot on his neck where she'd buried her face. He hugged her, thinking he'd like staying here forever, enjoying the sense of them being a family – him, her and the baby.

But they needed to talk. Somewhere he wasn't bombarded by the emotions he needed to explain. Abruptly he stood, setting Tina on her feet and striding across the room.

She looked confused when he picked up the baby monitor and put it in his pocket. "Let's go down to the game room. I started a fire and nuked us a pot of hot cocoa."

"Is this about last night?" she asked as they went downstairs. "If it is, you don't need to worry. What happened, happened. There's no need for us to talk about it."

"Yes, there is. Unless you'd like to pretend last night never happened." He took a seat at the game table and motioned for her to join him. "I hope you don't feel that way."

"No. Of course I don't." When she looked across the table at him, he thought he saw love in her eyes. Hoped he wasn't seeing emotion that wasn't there.

"Then I think you need to know a bit more about what you'll be getting yourself into with me." He motioned toward the insulated pot in the middle of the table. "Would you mind pouring us some cocoa? It makes me cold, just looking at the weather outside." He figured his extreme reaction toward the unusual winter chill was a holdover from having been practically frozen during that playoff game a few weeks earlier. "I don't think my body's gotten completely thawed out since Pittsburgh. You and Jack were lucky, all cozied up in that heated suite."

She smiled. "That was nice of you, making sure we stayed warm."

Keith noticed her hand was steady when she handed him his cocoa. He was glad. He never wanted her to be nervous around him. When she poured a mug for herself and took a tentative sip, her expression was blissful. "I wish I knew how Mrs. Gardner makes this. It's delicious, and just right for such a gloomy day." As though she didn't know exactly what to say, she licked her lips and looked over at him, her expression expectant as though waiting for him to respond.

"I'll ask her before I send her on her way." At Tina's odd look, Keith explained that the housekeeper's days were numbered and why. "I think it's reasonable for me to expect that she not be a pipeline to my former in-laws about everything that goes on in this house."

"Oh. I'm not surprised, but still I'm sorry you're going to have to let her go. She shouldn't have been gossiping, and she certainly ought not to have spied on you." Tina

paused then continued. "But maybe she felt justified. Your wife was the one who hired her. She probably feels a sense of loyalty to her, even though she's not here anymore."

Tina was too kind, although Keith found he loved her for it. "It doesn't matter. I value my privacy. Our privacy." What he wanted was to pull Tina onto his lap, warm her with his own body heat. But they needed to talk first. He needed to tell her where he was coming from, make sure she saw the pitfalls as well as the potential benefits of being Mrs. Keith Connors.

He took her hand, massaged her palm with his thumb. "I grew up in Hedgecock like you did, but I left fourteen years ago. Since then I've lived a lot differently from the way I was brought up. The only tie I have to Hedgecock now is the invitation I got from Bobby's mom to come back this spring for a reunion." He paused, considering how much Tina might have wanted to escape from her own painful memories there. "And my sister Diane. She still lives there, and I've been trying lately to rebuild some kind of relationship. Her son will be starting high school next fall. I'm not proud of myself, but I pretty much turned my back on my roots when I went to college and got married my sophomore year.

"You see, my mom remarried right after I finished high school and moved to Denver. She likes it there and has never wanted to go back to a town where she was never happy." If Tina never wanted to go back there after what her stepfather had done, he'd understand, and he could rebuild his burned bridges with Diane and his nephew Dylan via long-distance.

Tina cocked her head, studying him with those beautiful blue eyes. "I wondered. It was like you were there and then you were gone. Everybody in town talked after Diane's husband left her, about whether or when she'd pick up and go stay with you or your mom, but it never happened."

The local folks had probably thought he was a class A jerk when he never came to Diane's rescue after she finally came to her senses and threw her husband out. Come to think of it, Keith had spent a good many hours thinking that about himself, but he

hadn't wanted to ruffle Jackie's feathers when the blow-up had happened so soon after they found out she had a bad heart. "Diane always loved that rickety old ranch where we grew up. She and Mom never got along—she was Dad's girl. She was never close with me, either. I guess the age difference was too much for us to have been pals. Besides, I took a real dislike to Frank Granger after they got married and he moved in. But I was wrong. I should have kept up with her and her son. Dylan's going to be in ninth grade next year."

Tina reached over, took his hand, a gesture of comfort, understanding. "I'm sure you've been busy with your own family and career."

"You don't have to make excuses for me. I've made plenty for myself, that one included. But I could have made time for my own kin." Another flaw to lay at Jackie's feet. She'd wanted the college football hero, figuring he'd grow up and become her father's lackey. But she'd made it clear almost from the beginning of their marriage that she hadn't wanted any part of Hedgecock, Texas, or his "countrified" relatives.

That was wrong, laying blame on his dead wife when most of it belonged to him. He could have made time to keep in contact with his sister and ignored Jackie's feelings about that, just as he'd managed to flout her distaste for him playing football. Who knew? She might have taken to his relatives, understood him better if he'd shown her where he'd come from. But he'd been afraid she'd laugh at his humble beginnings, comparing the rundown ranch where he'd grown up with her parents' Skokie mansion. Now he'd never know. He took Tina's hand, hoped she'd understand and cut him the slack he probably didn't deserve. "I'm ashamed of myself."

"You shouldn't be. From all I read online and in the papers, you do all sorts of good things for kids here in Memphis."

Keith couldn't help laughing. "I write checks to the foundation Jackie set up in my name. And I do a football camp every summer for underprivileged teenagers. I could have made it a point to send some of the goodness home but I didn't. Jackie wanted us to live year-round in this house, and she liked choosing the charities the foundation

supported. I haven't even checked up on what's been going on there since she died." It was past time he looked into the charity that bore his name, maybe diverted some funds to help folks back in Hedgecock. Keith sighed.

When Tina met his gaze with tears glistening in her eyes, he realized how generous she was, worrying about how he felt. "She was so beautiful. You must miss her terribly."

"Not as much as I probably should." He traced his thumb along the smooth skin on the backside of her wrist. "I can't help wondering if you're thinking of her as an angel, a dutiful wife who gave her life to provide her selfish husband with a son."

"I could never think of you as selfish, Keith."

"I am in lots of ways. I want to continue playing ball as long as it's fun and profitable. I want Jack to grow up happy and healthy. I want to live life my way, with a partner who's everything Jackie wasn't."

Tina was confused. "What wasn't she?"

Keith leaned his elbows on the table, propped his head on his hands. "Jackie was the most self-centered woman I ever knew. She hated me playing pro ball and did everything she could to make me act civilized enough to move in what she called decent society." He paused, met her gaze. "That's not to say I didn't love her, because I did. At first I was dazzled by her looks, by the fact she seemed crazy about me—and probably a little bit by the fact she had a shiny black Porsche convertible that was the envy of the entire Northwestern football team. Our first years together when we were in college were damn good. Then, when I refused to go into business with her dad, she was furious. We fought about that for months until we finally agreed to disagree about my career.

"The only thing she wanted from me besides to run my foundation was a baby, and I was willing to cooperate. For several years we tried, but nothing happened. Finally a fertility specialist suggested in vitro fertilization, and she got pregnant only to lose the baby in her fifth month. That was five years ago, when we found out she had the

serious heart condition that nearly killed her. The doctors told us that if she got pregnant again she'd be risking her life."

"Oh no. I'm so sorry."

"So am I. Even though I was against it, she insisted on trying again. Wouldn't even consider adoption. Almost two years ago she found a specialist who thought that with some new drug, she might be able to have her baby after all. She talked me into trying IVF one more time, against my better judgment."

"And..."

"She got pregnant with Jack. Everything went pretty well until about the seventh month. Jack was getting bigger and putting a lot of pressure on her heart, so the doctor put her to bed and came to check on her every day. She went almost to term, insisting she wasn't taking any unnecessary risks."

"What happened?"

Keith sighed. "I came home from working out a year ago today. She was gasping for breath and white as the sheet on the bed. She'd gone into labor, and I found out later she'd also been having a massive heart attack. An hour after they took Jack by C-section, she died."

Tina lifted her hand, brushed away a tear he hadn't realized was making its way down his cheek. "You must have been devastated."

"At that moment I hated her for insisting on killing herself and leaving me with a helpless baby I didn't know how I'd take care of and keep on earning a living playing football. I hated her for killing the feelings that we'd had for each other when we were college kids. And fuck it, I hated myself for not being as sorry as I should have been that she was dead."

"So you felt you let Jackie down?" Tina's heart was breaking for Keith, who stared down at his hands, seemed to expect her to reject him for what he apparently believed was an unforgivable sin.

"I know I did. Somehow I ought to have been able to persuade her all we needed was each other. Or that an adopted baby would be as much ours as one we'd created. I should have quit football and been the kind of husband she wanted. And I shouldn't have hated her for dying and leaving me with Jack."

"She died having the baby she wanted so much. That has to count for something."

He looked up, met her gaze with eyes that were as sad as any she'd ever seen. "I love my son more than I ever dreamed I would. I want him to have the best life any kid could have, but I also want a life for myself. I don't want to sleep alone every night. I don't want to have a woman only when the team has a big win and I let some groupie take care of my sexual needs in a haze of booze and euphoria." When he paused and met her gaze, she saw the shame there. "I did that last week, you know. I fucked a woman I hardly know and don't have any desire to get to know better."

"You d-did?" She tried to tell herself she didn't have the right to feel like something had speared her heart. That there were no promises between them. Plus, when she'd been staying with Bobby and he'd told her what it was like being a player, it made perfect sense. How difficult it would be for players, particularly stars like Keith, to resist all they were offered after a big win when the alcohol flowed hard and fast and willing women were neck deep. Keith was human. It still hurt to hear him say it, though she tried to hold in those feelings.

Apparently she wasn't entirely successful, because this time it was Keith who reached out and carefully closed his hand over hers, drawing her gaze up to his face. "I told you that because I wanted to tell you this, too. That night I played the MVP superstud and didn't much like myself for it. What happened between us last night seemed...a lot more right."

What did he mean? "It seemed right to me, too, but you don't need to feel obligated."

"I don't feel obligated," he said, a tone of exasperation in his voice as though it irritated him that he wasn't getting through to her. "I'm honored that you trusted me to comfort you, and that you knew I would never hurt you the way your stepfather did. And I want to keep you in my house, my bed and in Jack's and my lives. We're both crazy about you. He loves you, and that's a big part of why I'm asking you to marry me."

Marry him? Tina looked into his eyes, found his expression deadly serious. "I—I..." Was he actually asking her to marry him because Jack loved her?

He gave a nervous sounding laugh. "Is us getting married such a lousy idea that you're speechless?"

"N-no. I don't know..."

"I do. We'll be good together. You won't have to worry that I'll be unfaithful. I never was to Jackie. We'll build a good life for Jack. I'll play a few more years and then we'll live wherever we decide will be best to raise him. Maybe I'll coach high school or something once I quit playing. I can't imagine giving up football entirely, and I don't think I'd make a very good sports commentator."

Tina was speechless. Should she marry him? She didn't know. He'd promised her a good life, but he hadn't said a word about loving her. Was liking her and enjoying her company enough for either of them?

She wished she could believe Keith loved her, the way she'd always dreamed her man would. But before she could think of what she wanted to say, his jaw had tightened.

"One thing, though, you need to know upfront. If you want kids, it's going to take me time to get there. Maybe later, when the memories aren't so fresh, we could try for a pregnancy, but only the old-fashioned way."

"That's fair." Tina understood how Keith might feel Jackie didn't get pregnant naturally because her body knew she shouldn't, and how he could feel at fault because he'd agreed to the in vitro procedures. "I'd really like for Jack to have a brother or sister. Not right away, of course. Could we? That is, could we get a baby the old-fashioned way, as you put it?"

Keith looked over at her. "I don't know. My sperm count's not the greatest but I'm not sterile. Chances are you don't have the sort of problem that kept Jackie from conceiving naturally."

"You don't need to explain. It's just...I'm an only child, and it got pretty lonely for me sometimes."

"I imagine it must have. I wasn't an only kid, but Diane was too much older than me for us to be very close. What do you say now? Will you marry me?"

Chapter Six

From Keith's expression, Tina gathered her hesitation had caught him off guard. "Come on. I'm not all that bad a match. I've got a good job, money, all the things most women want." He paused, grinned. "Hey, I may be ten years older than you, but I've still got all my hair." Getting up, he stood behind her chair, laid his hands on her shoulders. When she tilted her head back he stroked her throat, sent shivers down her spine. Her nerves hummed not from fear but from a desire so strong it almost squashed her doubts.

He must have sensed her weakening resolve, because when he spoke again, his voice rang of honey and persuasion, made her think of their hot bodies tangled, slick with sweat and a desperate need for completion. "The sex will be damn good between us. Want me to show you now?"

God yes. She wanted to feel his weight and strength. She wanted to feel him buried deep inside her, the way she hadn't last night. But she wasn't sure she wanted to marry him. "You don't have to marry me for us to have sex. It's not as if I was a virgin or anything like that. Even before..."

"Before you were raped? I wouldn't expect you'd have been. I wasn't, either, since a good while before I met Jackie. You forget I grew up in Hedgecock, too. Experimenting with sex was just about all there was to do other than go to high-school games and eat burgers at that place across the road from the school. My desire to marry you has everything to do with wanting a good mom for Jack and a friend to help me raise him, less to do with me wanting to have a handy bed partner." He glanced out the window at the frozen scene outside then turned back and met her gaze. "Not that I won't enjoy going to sleep every night with you in my arms. And waking up to the sight of your pretty face."

She loved the way Keith was looking at her now, as though she were every bit as attractive as the beauty captured in the painting above the marble mantel in that cold, formal living room. As though he really did have feelings for her, Tina. If he hadn't been watching her she'd have pinched herself.

He put one big hand on her cheek, turned her until she was looking into his greenish-blue eyes. She wanted to trust him completely, fall hopelessly in love with this man half the females in the country would kill to get this close to. But she was afraid that if she did, she'd get terribly hurt if he walked away. While she knew now that she'd leaned on Bobby much more than she'd loved him, it still had hurt when Bobby broke it off, telling her before leaving for college that he wanted her as his friend, not his lover. Who was she to even consider that she might be able to hold on to Keith Connors, even if they were married?

"Come on, now. You're gonna give me a complex. Don't you want to be my wife, be Jack's mom?"

"Yes. But..." How could she tell Keith she didn't trust him not to find somebody else better and dump her? "Nobody's going to think you've got any trophy wife in me. I'm just a country girl, not a very smart one at that. You're...you're a huge hero. You're the league's best quarterback."

He laughed. "Brett Favre and both of the Manning brothers might disagree there. Come to think of it, so would a few others. Drew Brees..."

"You know what I mean, Keith. You don't need to recite the name of every other quarterback in the NFL. Your face is splashed on billboards all over town, not to mention that you show up in ads on TV every few hours. You're famous. Damn it, Keith, you're every woman's dream. You can have anybody you want. Why on earth would you want me?"

"I want you because you make me happy. Comfortable, both on the field and off it. No matter what you may think, I'm not exactly every woman's fantasy, and even if I

were it wouldn't matter. I won't be chasing skirts. Once I make my bed, I lie in it. I have a feeling you'll be a lot more pleasant to live with than Jackie sometimes was."

When he moved, his motion was swift. Smooth. Like the skilled athlete he was. Before she could protest he'd lifted her in his arms. "You want this. Quit fighting it."

Yes, she wanted him more than she craved her next breath. But she couldn't talk, not with his lips hovering above hers, coaxing...coercing her to toss caution to the winds and take everything he offered. When he kissed her and traced his tongue along the seam of her lips, she couldn't deny him. But when she opened to surrender her mouth, he pulled back. "This will feel so much better when we're sitting."

When he sat on the couch, he cuddled her on his lap and shot her a grin that melted her heart and banished her second thoughts. "I bet you'll even let me buy us a house where I can feel comfortable in more than just one room. And that you and Jack will come watch all my games."

"Of course I'll let you pick out a house for us. After all, you're the one who'll be earning the money to pay for it. You should be able to enjoy living in more than just one room." She paused, laid her head on his broad, muscular shoulder. "I've got a feeling I'll be more comfortable, too, in this house that you pick out."

Keith held her close, traced along her throat, over the curve of her breasts. "I think you will be, too, because I'll be thinking about us both when *we're* doing the dream home search. How about it? Will you be happy living with a football player, watching him play and tending his bruises on days when his linemen haven't done too good a job protecting his tender hide?"

"I love watching you play. How could I not? I can't remember a time I didn't look forward to watching football every fall. It's even more fun watching when I've got a special player I've got reason to look for. I'm sure Jack will love the games, too, as soon as he's a little older." Keith's nearness, the woodsy smell of his cologne and the comforting heat of his muscular body made his proposal seem more feasible. The mere thought of massaging his beautiful, sore muscles was making her wet with anticipation.

The only thing was, he hadn't said he loved her. She was fairly sure he didn't, not the way she wanted, needed, to be loved. Still, she believed he'd take good care of her, and that he'd be faithful physically, no matter how much he might want to stray.

Maybe friendship and sex would be enough after all. "Still..."

"Hush. I'm going to take you upstairs to my room and show you how good we can be together. Grab the monitor." He picked her up again and lifted her over his shoulder.

Tina knew this couldn't be good for the shoulder Keith had needed to baby most of last season. "I can walk. I bet your coach wouldn't like it if you hurt yourself carrying a grown woman around."

He laughed. "There you go, sounding like a wife already. I like it. If you insist, you can walk. But it wouldn't hurt me at all to carry you—you're light as a feather."

Too light. Last night he hadn't seen her naked. Now, as she watched him toss his parka off the bed and set a huge box of condoms on the nightstand, she figured that would be the next step. Undressing. She knew this wasn't the room where he'd slept with his wife, so Tina had no reason to feel any more uncomfortable than she would having sex with him anywhere else in the same house where he'd lived with Jackie. The same house where they'd lived together platonically for the past five months.

"You'll think I'm too thin," she said, recalling his "light as a feather" comment and Bobby's apparent concern when he'd first seen her again about the weight she'd lost. "It's awfully bright in here."

Keith paused, his belt hanging loose, jeans unzipped. "Baby, I won't think anything of the sort. I want you exactly the way you are. So maybe you're a little skinny. You felt damn good to me last night. Come on, now, don't get shy on me."

He obviously had no doubts about his own buff, muscular body, because he dropped his jeans and boxers in one efficient motion before shedding his sweatshirt. "Come on, I bet you've got a lot less scars than I do."

Even in the bright light, she couldn't discern any flaws anywhere on Keith's well-toned, gorgeous body, all six feet four inches of it. "Quit teasing me. You're perfect and

you know it." Trembling as she did it, Tina peeled off the rest of her clothes, praying he wouldn't be turned off by her prominent ribs, by boobs that had to seem almost nonexistent compared with the silicone-enhanced assets of some of the groupies she'd seen .

Was it her imagination or had the room suddenly gotten cooler?

Keith's gaze on her body scorched her in spite of the breeze that had her pores puckering. His long, thick sex registered appreciation too, curving upward against those rigid, well-delineated abs. Its tip glistened with lubrication, as though it was eager to get inside her.

"You're wrong, honey. You're exactly what I want." He moved a step closer, cupped the breasts she'd always wished were larger. He bent and drew a nipple into his mouth then stood and looked at her, his expression serious. "And I won't have you thinking like a gaping groupie, not looking past the Photoshopped images on billboards and ads, and all the media hype that goes along with my job."

He paused, skimmed his hands over her torso then drew her face to his chest. "Believe me, I've got scars you can see and ones you can't. You'll be getting a guy who's close to passing his prime in his profession. A guy who had to have help from doctors to get his wife pregnant. Then there are a collection of interesting cleat marks and surgical scars you haven't looked at very closely yet. They're anything but pretty. To me you're the perfect one."

She couldn't believe him, but oh, how she wanted to. "If you really think that, then take me to bed now. Show me."

In one smooth motion he picked her up, placed her in the middle of the king-size bed and came down over her, a hot look in his eyes. "See how perfect I think you are?" He guided her hand to his hot, swollen sex. "I don't get hard-ons like this for every woman I see."

He was huge, hot and throbbing against her fingers. She wanted him inside her. He was using his free hand to skim over her body, as though he wanted to learn every inch

of her, as if he found her desirable—as desirable as his beautiful dead wife, as sexy as the faceless groupie he said he'd celebrated with after the Super Bowl a week ago. His hot breath scalded her when he bent and found a sensitive spot above her prominent collarbone.

Her nipples tightened at the touch of his calloused palm. Her pussy clenched. Her heart beat faster when he laid one leg over her belly, and his erection branded her mound with its throbbing intensity. She wanted him to take her now. Claim her. But he only explored her with his hands while he claimed her mouth, holding her still beneath him so she couldn't spread her legs, invite him in.

Firm yet velvety soft, his lips caressed hers, coaxed them open. He sampled her mouth with his tongue. It felt wonderful but she wanted more. She wanted him to slide his long, thick cock inside her pussy, pound into her with reckless abandon.

Squirming beneath him, she tried to get closer. "Easy, little one, we've got an hour or so before Jack wakes up. Let's make the most of it."

"I need you inside me. Please." She wanted Keith now. Not just his mouth and hands. While she loved him touching her, caressing her all over with his big but ever-so-gentle fingers, she needed it all. She wanted him to brand her with his hard, muscular body, fill her aching sex with his throbbing heat. The foreplay, sweet as it was, could wait for later, after he satisfied this gnawing need in her belly. "Make love to me. Please."

"I am. God but you have the sweetest mouth, the softest skin." He kissed her again, long and deep, as he found her core with one hand and plunged two fingers inside her wet, swollen flesh. "Tell me you want my cock in your hot, wet pussy."

Sex talk that usually put her off now made her even hotter. "Oh yes. I want it. I want it badly. Now." When she spread her legs wide apart, he slid down, found her, pressed barely inside her outer lips then plunged in all the way.

"Is this the way you want my cock?"

"God, yesss." She loved the feel of him throbbing inside her, stretching her tender flesh. His heart beat solidly against her breasts. "Don't stop."

"I won't. Not ever. Your pussy's just right. A perfect fit. Hot and wet and so tight I want to come right now but I want to keep fucking you all night. Does this feel as good to you as it does to me?"

His breath felt warm and damp against her ear. "Oh yeah. I love it." *Love you more than I've ever loved anybody in my whole life.* His hot flesh throbbed inside her, stretching her almost painfully. Yet it felt incredible. Better than anything she remembered or could have imagined. Heat spread through her veins and her body tensed, as though a bubble inside her was about to burst. "Omigod."

"I'm not wearing a condom. Want me to pull out and put one on?" He slid halfway out then hesitated.

"You'd better." She didn't want him to leave her, even for the few seconds it would take him to sheathe himself. But she didn't want to take a chance, either. If they married, and if they decided to try for a pregnancy, that would be okay. "It wouldn't be okay for us to risk having a shotgun wedding."

"Okay. Only we're not waiting to get married long enough for us to know if a shotgun might be in order." Getting up, leaving Tina feeling empty for a moment, he moved off her and tore open a condom. "I'd forgotten how much I hate wearing these things," he muttered, settling back between her legs and sliding slowly back inside her warm, welcoming channel.

"You don't have to."

"Yeah, I do. Wrap your legs around my waist. We can pretend we're kids again, celebrating a win by fucking under the bleachers at the high-school football field."

Then Keith realized what he just said. "Oh hell, I didn't mean that..."

Tina locked her smooth, slender legs around his waist. "You didn't?" she asked, her tone making the question sound ridiculously innocent.

He couldn't hold back the laugh that bubbled from his belly, and that sort of negated the horror of what he'd just said. "No, baby. For a minute there, I forgot there's half a generation between us. Honest, I'm not really a dirty old man."

"No, you're not. Think about those bleachers if you want. Imagine us doing this there, now, only we're both seventeen. That's the nice thing about fantasies. They can be whatever you want them to be." Tina touched his cheek, shot him an impish grin. "By the way, I love the way your cock feels inside me."

Damn but she knew how to get his mind away from the gaffe he'd made and back on fucking. "Did I remember to bring a blanket?" he asked, rubbing his hand between her smooth skin and the smoother surface of the fine Egyptian cotton sheet. "Or is your cute backside getting scratched by all the blades of cold, dead grass?"

"You're a considerate lover. You brought along a nice, soft blanket. Even a pillow. And you didn't forget the condoms. After all, you're the team's star quarterback. You know how to make a forward pass and do it right."

"Yeah, I do. So do you, baby." He dipped his head, drew a pink, pebbled nipple between his teeth and sucked it while sliding in and out of her wet, hot cunt. Her clit felt hard as a rock when his cock rubbed against it. Moving to her other breast, he bit the nipple lightly then flailed it with his tongue.

She bucked against him, took him in all the way to his balls. "Omigod! Don't stop. I'm—I'm coming. Feels so good. I've never come like this before."

He felt her contracting around him, the welcoming wet glove that made him forget he was wearing that condom. Her nails dug into his shoulders, hard, but he didn't care. His balls tightened. He wasn't gonna hold out much longer. Keith hadn't felt so hot in years. "Baby, I'm gonna love being married to you." His muscles tightened as he tried to hold back, but he couldn't. Not now, when she was milking his cock, digging her nails into his chest and screaming out her pleasure. "God, yesss, I'm coming."

When they quit shaking and he rolled her on top of him, Keith shot Tina a shamefaced grin. "Baby, I'm sorry this went so fast. Next time maybe my cock won't decide to pretend it's seventeen and almost-virgin. Honest, I've been able to hold out a lot longer."

"You did fine. All I need to do is look at your gorgeous body, and I'm ready to come."

He drew her down on him, took her sweet, sexy mouth. "We're getting married next week. Hey, isn't that Jack making noise like he wants some attention?"

"It sounds like he's awake and tossing around his toys. We'd better get up now and take care of him."

"Not until you say you'll marry me." He pulled her down hard, clasped both hands around her slender waist. "Say it. Please."

She looked down at him, silent for a long, scary minute. "All right. I'll marry you. But there's Jack, starting to cry. If you'll let me up we can go see what Jack wants."

So that was why she was hesitant, he thought as he rolled over and got up, extending his hand to her. He saw it in her eyes, and he didn't blame her. Most women wanted a declaration of love along with the proposal, and Tina deserved one. "You know I love you, baby. Maybe I just want to tell you the right way, the right time." Even though she wouldn't expect all the hoopla of diamond rings and engagement parties, he wanted more than anything to watch her eyes light up with surprised delight.

And he wanted to set his family, Jackie's parents, his teammates and the whole goddamn world straight. Tina was his woman, his life, his love, and nobody better dare say otherwise. "I'm gonna spend the rest of my life showing you how much you mean to me."

Chapter Seven

Tina's head was spinning. She could hardly believe all that had gone on in the two days since she'd agreed to marry Keith.

First thing when Mrs. Gardner returned, Keith gave her notice. She'd stay until they moved or until she found a new job, whichever might come first. Meanwhile Tina would look for a housekeeper or housekeeping service both she and Keith could trust fully.

He put his house on the market, furnished, because he said he wanted them to have everything brand-new. They sat in the game room with the realtor while Keith described the sort of place he wanted for them. "Something big enough that we can entertain our friends. But I don't want anyplace that's so grand it will intimidate anybody, including me."

He went on to insist on tight security, which she approved of heartily. While she had no doubt Keith could and would protect her and Jack, she didn't want groupies climbing down the chimney, or would-be kidnappers maybe getting close enough to grab Jack.

The next morning Keith left for a while. Movers arrived and took down Jackie's portrait. They were carrying it out when he came back in and looked wistfully at the blank, slightly darker spot on the pale cream colored wall where the painting had hung. "I've got more pictures of Jackie. I'll save some for Jack to have when he's older. But it was past time for that one to go."

Tina agreed. It would be hard enough for her to keep from worrying about gorgeous groupies who were very much alive and lusting after Keith. She refused to be jealous of a ghost, and not having that portrait around would make it much easier to keep that little green monster inside her from rearing its head.

"Come with me. Jack's napping, and Mrs. Gardner will watch him for a little while. We've got a few errands to take care of."

* * * * *

They made a quick visit to his lawyer. Afterward they stopped at the training center where they spoke with Coach Lyle and Keith picked up the ring he'd asked the coach to collect this morning from Memphis' best-known jeweler. He wanted to have everything ready for the surprise he had in mind for later.

Oh no. When they pulled into the driveway back home he saw a black limo parked at the front door, he knew. Mrs. Gardner apparently had done her last spy job for Georgia and Ted because he was pretty sure they were here and all hell was about to break loose.

"You're the woman I intend to spend the rest of my life with. Keep that in mind," he said, squeezing Tina's hand as they walked inside through the garage door. "I'm afraid we're in for some unpleasantness."

She tightened her arm around his waist when they moved through the kitchen toward the front of the house. "It'll be okay. I love you."

The empty spot where Jackie's portrait had been stared at him as he stepped inside the living room. He tried to maintain his composure, but it wasn't easy when Jackie's parents were standing stiffly, staring him down with as much malice in their expressions as a pair of linebackers eager to overrun his protection and smash him into the ground. "Georgia, Ted, this is Tina Black. My fiancée. You should have let us know you were coming today."

Silence reverberated against all four walls of the huge room. Georgia's sky-blue eyes, so much like her daughter's, welled up with tears. Grief? The woman obviously was still feeling the pain of losing Jackie, but beyond that Keith sensed her fury behind a barely there screen of civility. Ted just looked miserable, as though he didn't like the awkward scene but couldn't figure how to escape it.

Keith couldn't stand the silence any longer. "Since you're here, would you like a drink? Some coffee? We might as well sit down. There's no need for us to stand here staring at each other."

"How could you?" Georgia took a step toward Keith. "It's only been a year since you killed my little girl and here you are, selling her house and planning to marry her baby's nanny."

When he felt Tina start to tremble, he tightened his arm around her waist, a silent message that everything would be okay. Then he met Georgia's icy gaze. "I love Tina. So does Jack. I won't have you saying anything against her. If it makes you feel better, blame me for not dying along with Jackie."

Ted shot a miserable look toward Keith and Tina. "I'm sorry, Keith. I know you didn't cause Jackie to die. But Georgia...she misses her so much. And it's so soon...too soon for you to forget her."

"I'll never forget Jackie. We had twelve years together, and I see her every day in our little boy." Keith paused, looked down at Tina, hated that he could still feel her trembling in his loose embrace. He'd have given anything to have managed for her to avoid this scene. He looked back at Ted. "But life has to go on. Jack needs a mom, not a nanny. And I need Tina."

Georgia stepped a little closer, as though she intended to slam a bejeweled hand into him or Tina. "Stop right there, Georgia, before you do something you'll regret." Keith ground the words out, hoping he sounded as menacing as he felt.

She stopped but shot him a disgusted look. "You—you animal. What you need is a woman to warm your bed. You always did. Jackie said so. It's a pity nobody ever told you that you don't have to marry every woman you dip your—"

"Georgia, that's enough." Ted put his hands on his wife's shoulders, drew an evil look from her. "Your hate's got to go or it will kill you, and I don't want that. Our daughter picked a good man in Keith. And he didn't kill her. She did that to herself because she wanted a baby the doctors said she mustn't have. If her dying was

anybody's fault, it was ours, because we spoiled her rotten all her life. Come on, let's go home."

Keith looked at Jackie's father with new respect. He'd never have believed the mild-mannered gentleman would stand up to Georgia—but he had. "If you'd like to see Jack while you're here, we'll go upstairs and see if he's up from his nap."

"Next time," Ted said. "I think what Georgia needs now is to think about some things she's said." When he stepped up and held out his hand, Tina extended hers when Keith hesitated. "Be happy, both of you, and take good care of Jack. When you think he's old enough, let us know and we'll send him one of Rufus' pups when it's weaned. If Tina doesn't mind, that is."

"Tina doesn't mind at all," she said, smiling at Ted and then at Keith. "I think a pup would be wonderful for all of us."

Keith hadn't asked her, but somehow he'd known any woman who took to a baby the way she'd fallen for Jack would love animals, too. "This one will grow up to weigh about sixty pounds," he warned her after they'd walked Georgia and Ted to their limousine.

"What kind is he?"

"A chocolate lab. At least I guess he'll be chocolate, although he could be black, I suppose. Rufus is brown, with light golden brown eyes. Jackie got him the first year we were married."

"They took him?" Tina sounded surprised.

"Georgia insisted he'd be too rambunctious, that he might hurt Jack. I miss him. It will be nice to have one of his pups—after we get back from our honeymoon."

"Mmmm. I can hardly wait."

An idea crossed Keith's mind, one he hoped would take the last of the sting from this unexpected encounter. "Come on back to the car. Jack will be okay with Mrs.

Gardner for another hour or two. I have a surprise, and I know the perfect spot to give it to you."

* * * * *

A few minutes later Keith was opening the passenger door of the Escalade, helping her inside before moving around to the Lexus and retrieving some remote controls. "Why aren't we going in your other car? It's already warmed up." She turned to him after he slid behind the wheel and started the powerful vehicle that, so far as she knew, he'd never used since the local Cadillac dealer had brought it to the house.

"You'll see." He reached over, took her hand and placed it on his thigh. "We're going someplace that belongs to us. Just us. And the SUV has more room inside."

Had the realtor found them a house already? Tina didn't think so. In the first place, he'd turned out of the gated community where they lived, in the direction of downtown rather than toward the area where the realtor thought they might find the home they wanted.

Then she saw the stadium and realized Keith was bringing her here, to the place where they'd spent their first hours together away from home, where she'd watched him throw passes for the first time at a home game in early December. Tears came to her eyes.

He pressed a remote control device, and a gate opened. The big SUV barely made it through a narrower gate that led onto the narrow ring of concrete around the playing field. "Come out here with me," he said, shutting off the car and grabbing a blanket off the backseat before stepping outside.

She followed him, wondering what he had in mind. It was about thirty degrees outside, not exactly ideal weather for outdoor lovemaking, but...

Keith had shown her in the past few days that he could keep her warm anyplace, anytime. She stepped out of the cozy vehicle and walked over to the blanket he'd just spread on the cold artificial turf. She stared at the blanket for a minute then grinned up

at him. "You know, honey, the back of that SUV is plenty big for what you have in mind."

He laughed. "How do you know that? Maybe what I want is just to hold you, tell you how happy you've made me." He sat and drew her down beside him. "Maybe I want to do things right this time."

Shivering a little, Tina cuddled up next to Keith, used his big body to shelter her from the cold wind. "What things?"

"Will you marry me, let me spend the rest of my life trying to make you happy?"

She'd already said she would, so she shot him a questioning look. "I said I would. In every way I could think of." She'd told him with every kiss, each embrace, and there had been so many in such a short time.

He pulled out a small box from one of the pockets in his black parka and flipped open the lid. "Then I want you to wear this. It's got a matching band I'll give you next week." Fumbling to take off his gloves, he lifted a huge, sparkling diamond solitaire from the box. "Baby, you need to take off a glove so I can put this on your finger."

Her hands shook so, she could barely peel her glove off her left hand, but he steadied them as she trusted he'd steady her when she started to doubt herself—and him. Then he took all her doubts away.

This was Keith Connors, all-pro Maulers quarterback, seller of razors and TV sets, incomparable groupie magnet—and the only man Tina wanted. His expression serious, he met her gaze. As she watched him, he let those gorgeous eyes fill with something she realized had already been there for some time. Only she hadn't had the confidence to give that something a name until now, as he gave voice to it.

"I wanted to make sure to do this right, so I haven't said much about being in love with you before. But I'm telling you now. I love you, really deep down love you, as much as I love playing football, as much as I've ever loved another person in all my life." Very gently he pushed the ring onto her finger then brought it to his lips.

While tears filled her eyes and her heart ached, he continued with a smile. "If we were kids I'd let you wear my letter jacket to cover up with while we made love back behind the high-school bleachers. Since we're both grownups and I just won that rolling bed over there, I think I'll see if the back of it's big enough for a guy as tall as me to make it with his lady." He grinned then lowered his voice. "No one's in the stadium but us, just in case you care."

She didn't. Keith loved her and she wouldn't mind shouting it to the whole world. "I'm glad you love me. Because I love you, too. I want you now, and I wouldn't care if all seventy thousand or so seats in this place were full." Tina had never been happier. Never felt more cared for, protected. Or desired. Keith lifted her, retrieved the blanket and set her down inside the warm car.

Echoes of cheering crowds rang in her ears, though the stadium was quiet. As Keith bent over her, taking her mouth as he splayed one big hand over her belly beneath the zipper of her jeans, Tina explored the rugged planes of his face. The face that smiled at millions but looked at only her with love. Already a hint of stubble scraped sensuously against her fingers when she caressed his cheeks, the sinewy column of his throat.

She felt her hero unzip her jeans and slide them down her legs, heard him unzip his own. The sound of silk tearing when he tore away her panties, a burst of cool air on her naked flesh made her whimper against his insistent mouth. The heat of his long, thick cock seared her channel when he flexed his hips and joined their bodies. The slick abrasion of flesh on flesh made her clench her inner muscles, welcome him inside.

Nothing wild. He took her missionary style, as though they were new lovers, kids experimenting under the bleachers for the first time. Though he lay over her, the heat of his big body pressing her, controlling her, this wasn't a raw kid but a full-grown man, a skilled lover coaxing her climax with patience, with love. She lifted her hips, answered his silent demand for all she had to give.

His jeans abraded the tender skin of her thighs with each hard plunge into her core. She loved it. Loved him, more than she'd ever thought she loved her childhood friend.

When he sank deep inside her and shouted out his pleasure, she knew. This was the man she'd been born to love.

"Hold me. Don't stop loving me."

"I'll never stop loving you, as long as there's a breath in me."

Epilogue

Hedgecock, Texas, the following Saturday

Melanie Tate looked over the small crowd then turned to her husband Cal. She'd done a great job putting together Tina and Keith's wedding in such a short time, even if she said so herself. Of course Keith's mom had been helping since she and her husband got in town two days ago.

Mel looked on with satisfaction as the newest newlyweds stood in the living room at the Tate house, holding hands and chatting with her son Bobby and his wife. Cal's twin sons were home from college for the occasion, laughing and playing pranks and, if she didn't miss her guess, plotting a *ménage à trois* with the pretty brunette they'd brought home with them for the wedding.

Good thing Cal's grandpa had built a house big enough to put up half the Texas cavalry, because every room was full with laughing, happy football players and their significant others. Mel had commandeered the hotel and even put up some overflow guests with Keith's sister in her own small house and at Tina's empty place.

One face thankfully wasn't anywhere to be seen. Something or someone apparently had made that bastard, Edgar Garcia, take off last weekend for parts unknown. "Cal, did you have something to do with Tina's stepfather leaving town?"

"Not me. I wouldn't put it past Keith to have issued a warning, though. I've never seen a man more protective of his woman." He bent, dropped a quick kiss on Melanie's lips. "Unless it would be me, taking care of you."

Dave Delaney, who'd just arrived in town a few days ago, watched the festivities from a distance, a hard look on his darkly handsome face. If it weren't for the obvious way the man adored that silly, shaggy-looking poodle he said was his daughter's, Mel would have thought he had it in for everybody on Earth. Hopefully coming home,

getting away from the playboy life Keith mentioned had pretty much destroyed his NFL career, would be good for him.

She figured it was pretty much time he retired anyway. Dave was pushing forty-two, a year older than Mel herself. From the research she'd done while planning for the upcoming quarterback reunion, she knew his talent had been as mercurial as his taste for the playboy lifestyle. "Let's go over and say hello to Dave," she told Cal. "He looks like he feels out of place."

Seeing Keith and Tina so happy together warmed Mel's heart. Not that she didn't feel the same about Bobby and his effervescent bride, but they were so young. So untouched by the tragedies that had tempered Tina's youthful exuberance, left Keith to put his life together after his first wife's untimely death.

When Tina had left last October, Mel hadn't thought she'd ever come back to Hedgecock. She was glad for them all that she'd been wrong. For years Diane Granger had insisted she didn't miss her mother or Keith after they left, but today a weight seemed to have lifted from her shoulders.

"I'm glad they decided to come home to get married," Mel said as she greeted Keith's sister on the way toward the corner Dave had staked out for himself.

"So am I. Who'd have thought my baby brother and my best friend's daughter would have found each other, in Memphis of all places." Diane's eyes were bright, her smile sincere. "I'm glad Mom and Zach came for the wedding. You know, I never realized how much I missed her, or Keith..."

"Sometimes we don't realize how much people mean to us until it's almost too late." Mel glanced at Keith's mom, saw she was heading for Diane with Keith's son in tow. "We'll talk later. Right now I need to go cheer up Dave Delaney. He looks a little bit lost among all the happy faces."

* * * * *

Keith could hardly wait to get Tina to himself. His mom had Jack for two whole weeks, and tickets to Honolulu were practically burning a hole in the pocket of his suit jacket. They'd get to their suite at a five-star hotel on Waikiki, crawl into bed and stay there until exhaustion and hunger took over and sent them out in search of sustenance. When he'd mentioned Hawaii, Tina's eyes had sparkled with excitement. He wanted to see sights through her eyes, feel her enthusiasm. Her love.

He'd been right about having their wedding here, though. Tina needed to feel the love of everyone who'd been part of her life since she was born. What the hell. He'd needed that, too, to mend fences and renew old acquaintances. Today he felt that love he'd turned his back on for so long.

He took Tina in his arms, kissed her soft, sweet lips. Life was good. Better than he deserved, but he wouldn't dwell on that.

Coach Williams, fifteen years older and even more grizzled than Keith remembered, tapped him on the shoulder. "I've been awful proud of you since you went away to college. Still am. You know, I'm retiring. I'm hoping to leave it to Dave over there to carry on the Hedgecock tradition."

Keith followed the old man's gaze to the Hedgecock star he'd followed, felt bad in a way for Dave Delaney. Dave had always been a bad-boy player, but he'd been hot in the clutch last season, so hot he'd taken a battered and bruised Savannah team all the way to the Super Bowl. And almost won. If it hadn't been for that last hail-Mary touchdown, it would have been Dave, not him, hoisting the Lombardi trophy.

"I heard he might be moving back here. You know, the guy used to be my idol." Like Bobby had tagged along behind Keith, Keith had pestered Dave. He guessed Dave must have idolized Colin Zanardi, the first of the Hedgecock quarterbacks.

"I know. I'm happy for you and your bride, even though I used to think it would be Bobby taking her down the aisle someday. He sure found himself a pretty one." Coach Williams' watery gaze shifted to Marly, who was holding Bobby's hand and captivating

Carl and Eddie, guys who'd protected Keith's blind side back in the day. "You know, Keith, she's a hot one, all right, but I think you may have gotten the best of that deal."

He pulled Tina close. "I know I did. We're going to go now, enjoy being newlyweds."

"Don't blame you, son. Just don't forget us anymore. We all like seeing you once in a while other than on TV."

Keith motioned for his mom to join them then gave his old coach a quick bear hug. "We'll be coming back here next month. I'm hoping you'll help me set up a football camp for high-school players."

"Sure thing."

* * * * *

They'd gone home, where neither of them had intended to go. And it was good. They'd go back again for the reunion. And more.

Later. Now, in a suite overlooking the beach at Waikiki, Keith and Tina sealed the promises they'd made. With love.

The End

About the Author

Ann Jacobs is a sucker for lusty Alpha heroes and happy endings, which makes Ellora's Cave an ideal publisher for her work. Romantica®, to her, is the perfect combination of sex, sensuality, deep emotional involvement and lifelong commitment—the elusive fantasy women often dream about but seldom achieve.

First published in 1996, Jacobs has sold over forty books and novellas, some of which have earned awards including the Passionate Plume (best novella, 2006), the Desert Rose (best hot and spicy romance, 2004) and More Than Magic (best erotic romance, 2004). She has been a double finalist in separate categories of the EPPIES and From the Heart RWA Chapter's contest. Three of her books have been translated and sold in several European countries.

A CPA and former hospital financial manager, Jacobs now writes full-time, with the help of Mr. Blue, the family cat who sometimes likes to perch on the back of her desk chair and lend his sage advice. He sometimes even contributes a few random letters when he decides he wants to try out the keyboard. She loves to hear from readers, and to put faces with names at signings and conventions.

Ann welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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