

An Appetite for Passion

Kari meets Max online, and the relationship sizzles. But there is a BIG obstacle--her weight. He knows she loves to eat but doesn't know what that's done to her figure. Will it bother him when he finally meets her in person?

Meanwhile, Jeff is funny and fun, and Kari loves being with him as a friend, but he admits he has a secret. Could it be that he is, after all, the guilty party in the political campaign sabotage? But if he's innocent, can Kari prove it and clear Jeff's name? And can they be more than just friends?

Note: Heroine has an affair with a secondary character.

Genre: Contemporary Length: 45,482 words

AN APPETITE FOR PASSION

Cynthia MacGregor

ROMANCE



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Chapter 1

The drubbing raindrops pelted the white lawn furniture insistently in the early September morning. Their demanding clatter was so loud that they pierced Kari's sleep-fogged brain, even through the nearly closed window, and roused her to semi-consciousness before her alarm ever went off. Sleepily, she raised an arm in the direction of the clock, then realized that what had awakened her was not the cheery electronic rooster.

The rooster clock had been a gift from Lylah. "Another customer was messing around with it," she'd explained, "and when I heard it crow just like the real thing, I turned around to see where the rooster was. It was a hoot."

Lylah was a hoot herself, an irrepressible woman with a wild sense of humor. Kari and Lylah had been friends since high school, though lately Lylah's time seemed too often claimed by other interests...most notably, her pregnancy. As Kari lay listening to the pelting raindrops, she felt an irrational pang of jealousy toward the baby. Not even born yet, and already it was taking up so much of Lylah's attention.

A more subtle drip than the noise of the rain on the lawn furniture caught Kari's attention.

Oh no! Not the leak in the living room again!

She thought the roofers had fixed it, but like a horror movie monster, it was ba-a-ack.

They ripped me off! Charged me big bucks and didn't even fix it. Now I'll have to stay home emptying buckets all day.

But getting wearily out of bed, she found the leak was minor. Nothing a big bucket wouldn't handle while she was gone all day.

An Appetite for Passion

Too bad. There goes my excuse for staying home.

It wasn't work she was trying to get away from. Kari actually enjoyed her job in a corporate publicity department. It was Glenn she was avoiding. Glenn...that bastard!

They had dated...once. He'd invited her for dinner, and she'd accepted. Though she'd never thought of him in a romantic or sexual light before, he was tall, suave, deep-voiced, and charming, and when he asked her to have dinner with him, not long after breaking up with Judy in Accounting, Kari had been flattered.

Not knowing where he was taking her, she'd dressed up. After a drink at her house, he took her back to his house. "I thought we'd stay in," he informed her. "I'm a whiz in the kitchen. You won't starve."

True to his word, dinner had been a gourmet feast, although Kari found herself on the menu as his dessert. She gave herself willingly, though she insisted on leaving the lights off. Dates were few and far between for women of her size. Though she was too embarrassed by her mounds of flesh to let him see her in the buff, she followed him to the bedroom willingly enough and gave herself enthusiastically to his caresses.

Glenn had been an able, though not a caring, lover. At first, Kari wondered if this indicated anything of his feelings toward her, but then she got caught up in his passionate caresses and calculatedly sensuous maneuvers. Swept into the grasp of emotions engendered by his knowing moves and educated touch, Kari lost her misgivings and gave herself fully to pleasuring the man who was both fanning the flames of her passion and promising to satiate her need.

"You set me on fire," she murmured to him as his hands stroked over her eager flesh and touched her in all the right places. There was no kissing; there were no endearments. But he touched all the right buttons and set off fireworks in her under-appreciated, over-abundant body.

Their bodies merged, and his swollen organ surged into her. She delighted in the feel of his strength pistoning in and out of her. She crested even faster from his plunging rod than she usually did when her own finger sent her to ecstasy, and she was left a whimpering and utterly satisfied pool of melted womanhood on his bed. He climaxed a moment after she did.

She waited for his afterplay. Tentatively making the first move, Kari stroked Glenn's shoulder hesitantly, expecting his hand to play through her

hair, his kisses to seal the pleasure into her lips. She waited, but she didn't feel Glenn's reassuring touch, didn't hear any murmured endearments, received no tender kisses. He didn't even say, "Thank you. That was good."

Kari hadn't mistaken his seduction for a declaration of love, but she'd assumed he had some interest in her more than a quick and nasty physical coupling. She'd envisioned them dating, at least...and who knew where that could lead?

But after they'd lain together for only a couple of minutes, Glenn got up and got dressed again. "Let me go wash those dishes," he muttered, picking her clothes up from the chair and laying them on the bed in the darkened room. The hint was clear. It was time for her to get dressed and go home.

She felt rebuffed, hurt, but she chided herself for oversensitivity. "He's probably got an early morning meeting and needs a good night's sleep," she rationalized as she pulled her voluminous dress over her head, trying not to feel too dejected.

Glenn turned the lamp on, wrapped himself in a robe, and strode out to the kitchen. Looking at herself in Glenn's mirror, she saw a pretty-faced, if tired-looking, brunette with a stylish hairdo whose chic outfit, though unable to hide her bulk, dressed it up smartly. She also saw the disappointment mirrored in her liquid brown eyes.

When she assented to sex, she had expected to spend the night. She'd looked forward to curling up to another human body, feeling his warmth, enjoying his nearness. She craved the closeness, the intimacy.

Not beyond ploys, she ambled out to the kitchen and tried a maneuver. "It's late," she said, consulting her watch and opening her mouth wide in an exaggerated yawn. "God, I'm tired." She had left two hooks unfastened at the back of her dress. "Can you get those for me?" she asked, turning around.

But instead of saying, "Never mind. It's late. Take your dress back off and stay the night if you want," Glenn fastened the hooks and said, "Here you go. If you're that tired, maybe you'd better get going right now. It's a good thing you haven't got far to drive."

The next day at work, he was cold to her. Several times she tried to start a conversation, but he cut her down every time. "What's wrong?" she finally pleaded. "Absolutely nothing. Nothing has changed," he said. Well, that was the problem. She thought after the night before that something *had* changed. She endured his coldness and several nasty barbs all day, wondering if he'd be like this on their next date, wondering if she even should accept another date with him. She wanted to feel his touch again, feel him make her body soar to heights of fulfillment, and hopefully, this time, curl into the enfolding warmth of his form afterward. Yet, on the other hand, if he was going to be like *this....*

In her mail that night there was an invitation. Her cousin Allison was getting married. The next day, when she passed Glenn in the corridor, she asked him if he'd like to go to the wedding with her.

"Why the hell would I want to?" The ice in his tone was even worse than it had been the day before.

"But what about what happened Tuesday night?" she asked.

"You got what you wanted...just like me," he said. A rush of anger burned through her. How dare he presume he knew what she wanted...or presume that all she wanted was a quick jolt of physical pleasure? The burn threatened to spill out of her eyes.

"Besides," he added, his voice even more cruel, "if I wanted to be seen with an elephant, I'd pose for pictures at the circus."

Kari fled to the ladies' room and cried off all her makeup. Up to that moment, the evidence of his behavior notwithstanding, she'd still tried to believe there was such a thing as Kari-and-Glenn. Knowing that a woman her size gets fewer chances at happiness, she grasped at every one that she saw.

She'd even caught herself writing her full name and Glenn's full name on a piece of paper at her desk one day. Following the ages-old adolescent formula, she'd crossed off all the letters in each of their names that matched, then counted off the remaining letters, saying aloud as she did, *Love*, *Friendship*, *Marriage*, *Hate*.

It came out *Hate*. Unsatisfied with that result, she tried it with just their first names. With no duplicated letters to cross off, the formula pointed to *Love*.

Well, that was better, but it was marriage she was really after. Kari had it all planned. She would meet a man, be swept off her feet, fall madly in love, and get married. They'd have kids, of course, and she'd finally be happy. All she needed was the man.

With Glenn's good looks and charm, she'd thought she could fall for him easily. How could she know he would prove so cruel? How could she know that marriage, love, and even friendship were out of the question? Obviously, this adolescent romance-prediction method had been right the first time when it came out hate.

After that, she dreaded going to work. She nearly quit the job she'd formerly loved, but she had too much pride to let his presence drive her away. So she stayed at the same job, going to work every day in an aura of gloom and dread.

Now, on this rainy September morning, she was disappointed that the leak in the living room wasn't large enough to legitimize her staying home. She put on a pot of coffee and resolutely dressed, selecting a pants suit with vertical strips that minimized her heft and projected a businesslike image.

The outfit personified competence. Studying her mirrored reflection, she felt a returning flow of self-confidence. *It's time to make some changes in my life. Take charge of my destiny. Do things to improve my state of happiness*, she thought. She wasn't clear as to what changes she should, could, or would make, but merely resolving to make a change for the better put a spring in her step that hadn't been there for a while.

She had a dinner date with Lylah. *There's something specific to look forward to*, she thought. Lylah always made her laugh. Driving to work, she thought about where they might eat. The Japanese restaurant on the corner by the office? The Chinese restaurant in her own neighborhood? That budget-priced Italian place down the street from Lylah's house? There was a new Turkish place that had opened downtown. She'd never had Turkish food before—reason enough to go there.

She was again contemplating the "menu" of restaurants an hour later at work when she passed Glenn in the hallway. He was emerging from his office with a look as black as crows at midnight. Obviously he had something far less cheery than dinner prospects on *his* mind. Kari wondered what was up. At lunchtime, she found out.

"Want to have lunch?" Sheila from Personnel asked her in the hallway as she was heading out. They occasionally ate together.

"Sure. I've got no plans. The coffee shop?"

"Sounds good to me. The less distance we have to walk in this weather, the better." It was still raining, and the temperatures had dropped, too. The day had turned downright nasty with a chilly, unpleasant nip in the air.

"Weather can be cruel," Kari agreed.

"So can people," said Sheila, who had heard the Glenn-and-Kari story along the office grapevine. "But sometimes they get their comeuppance, even if it doesn't come from the person they wronged."

Kari lifted an eyebrow inquisitively. "Tell all," she said.

"Glenn's been canned," Sheila gloated. "Fired, let go, bounced, out on his ass. Two weeks severance, but he's out the door as of now."

"Cosmic justice," marveled Kari. "This day is definitely looking up. Lunch is on me."

But the day took another downward turn that afternoon when Kari's phone rang. Lylah's voice on the other end announced, "Sweetie, I've just joined a Moms-to-Be support group...and the first meeting's tonight. If I hand engrave the rain check and deliver it on a silver platter, will you let me bow out of our plans?"

"Sure," Kari said dejectedly. Lylah had been too busy for her a lot lately. Yes, she knew Lylah was having a difficult pregnancy, and yes, it was her first one, and yes, it made sense for her to join a support group...but did it have to meet on the night they were finally getting together?

Get a life! she snarled at herself mentally. She was envious of *Lylah's* life, actually. She had to admit it, if she was to be candid with herself. Not that she had any designs on Steve, Lylah's husband, but—with a different man playing the part of Husband—she wished she were in Lylah's position. Married. About to have a baby. She would even put up with the difficult pregnancy, and the resultant proscription against sex for the duration. At that thought, she gave a snorting laugh. *It's not like I have a sex life now*.

The sky had cleared at five, and though the air was still crisp, it was no longer nasty out. She walked up the street, leaving her car parked. Maybe she'd have a bite to eat somewhere anyhow. There were plenty of places downtown where a woman could eat alone without every man in creation assuming she was there to get picked up. Maybe she'd have a drink and...? Chinese? Japanese? Hungarian? *There I go again. I never met a cuisine I didn't like.*

She walked without any specific destination in mind, looking in windows, taking her time. Kari felt a change in her life was both desirable and imminent, but she was clueless as to what form it might take or what she ought to be doing about engineering it. She had just about decided on the Cuban restaurant in the next block—some *lechón asado* would fill her up and warm her up—when she passed an electronics store.

Kari was an absolute Luddite when it came to electronics. Oh, she owned a computer...she wasn't so far gone as to still be using a typewriter...but incredibly, she wasn't connected to the Internet.

There was a reason. One of Kari's dearest friends in the world, second only to Lylah, had been a woman named Audra. Audra had jumped on the Internet bandwagon early. She was the first of Kari's friends to get a modem, get connected, get web access, get email. And she had met a man in a chat room. They had started an email correspondence, and eventually, agreed to meet in person. He'd told Audra he lived only 200 miles away and would be willing to travel to meet her.

He'd traveled. He'd met her. He'd killed her.

He had been a psychopath. The police caught him, resolving in the process, a string of unsolved murders. But that was no consolation to Kari. The loss of Audra, and the shock of her murder, hit Kari hard, and Kari blamed it on the Internet. She vowed she would never get electronically connected, lest she risk meeting the same fate as Audra. And she had kept to that promise all this time. At work, she used email only for business and only when absolutely necessary. At home, she had no Internet connection at all.

Now, standing in front of the electronics store, she felt her resolve beginning to waver. *How long can I hold out? How long can I remain a Luddite in a wired world?* Dissatisfied with her life, she resolved this was one change she *could* make. She took a deep breath, as if steeling herself to enter a dentist's office, and went in.

Thirty minutes later, she emerged from the store, her MasterCard still steaming. She had gone whole-hog and gotten far more than she needed just to get connected to the Internet...for which she still needed to arrange for broadband service from the cable company.

She pulled out her cell and dialed Lylah's number. As she'd expected, Steve answered. "Hi, hon. It's me, Kari. What are you doing Friday nightassuming I can get my broadband service hooked up by then? I need your help, my electronics genius friend. Want to do me a favor?"

"Does this one involve helping you test out one of your new recipes?"

"Optimist! No, but it involves messing with my computer. Isn't that almost as good as eating my cooking?"

"Nothing beats your cooking, but you know I can't resist the siren song of a computer. What d'you need?" Kari told him, and Steve agreed to meet her at her place on Friday evening, subject to her being able to get the broadband installed then.

The *lechón asado* was yummy, and the *plátanos* were perfection, but Kari rushed through it all, not even ordering *flan* after the main course. Hurrying back to her car, she zipped home and put on a pot of cinnamon coffee, unpacking her purchases and eagerly laying them out in advance of Friday.

Friday took its sweet time in getting there, but at least the broadband service was installed on time. No glitches there. Steve arrived early, got everything installed and up and running, and first showed Kari how the email program, different from the one at work, functioned. Then he gave her a tour of the Internet, with special attention to cooking sites, which he knew had a particular interest for her.

Though impatient for him to leave so she could get back to the computer, she checked her eagerness and talked with Steve. "I'm jealous of you and Lylah," she admitted. "A baby. Here I'm so up about my new software, but your wife *really* has something to look forward to. Not to mention that when *she* looks in the mirror and sees she's growing outward, she's got a good excuse for it." She laughed, then turned serious again. "In a few more months she'll be thin again...and have a new life entrusted to her, too. Lullabies. First steps. Pride. A little mini-person that was given to you to take care of. God, it's so exciting!" She couldn't keep the wistfulness out of her voice.

"Yeah," Steve said with unmistakable sarcasm. "It's exciting to have no sex now so in a few months our lives can be totally disrupted by a demanding little creature with a loud set of lungs who always needs attention and is a regular poop-and-pee machine. Diapers—ugh!"

"God, Steve. You make it sound like a baby is all negative."

From the look he gave her, it was obvious she had vocalized his thoughts.

"I'd trade places with Lylah in a heartbeat."

"Great. Who do I get to trade places with?"

"Steve!" she chided him. "Maybe you need to do something new—like me with the Internet—to get your mind off your blues."

"I'm ten steps ahead of you, hon," he answered. "You're looking at the latest volunteer member—very low on the totem pole, I admit—of the campaign staff of Ron Larrimore, our next mayor."

"You're working for Larrimore?"

"I am...and if you know what's good for our town, you'll vote for him."

"Oh, I intend to! Save your speeches. What are you doing on the campaign?"

"Mostly working the phones in the evening. But as long as I'm among the ranks of the unemployed, they have me coming in days a lot, too. Hey, why don't you join? You've got untapped talents. Put 'em to use for Larrimore. A lot of it's grunt work, mailing flyers, nailing up posters, stuff like that. But chip in. Lend a hand. You've got time."

That last remark stung. But it was true—she did have time, and she was looking for something new in her life. Still, she'd always been pretty apolitical. Though she voted every year, she'd never gotten involved in campaigns or causes. And now that she was connected to the Internet, she expected that to keep her busy. Email. Recipe sites. Maybe even chat rooms. She was wary, remembering Audra's fate, but now that she had taken the first step, why not chat rooms too?

She gulped at the thought, then realized Steve was waiting for an answer. "I'll think about it," she promised, draining the rest of her rapidly cooling coffee in one gulp.

"Well, I'm outta here," Steve said, rising from his chair. "You okay with that computer, now?"

"You did the hard part. I can take it from there."

"G'night then." He gave her a chaste peck on the cheek.

"Love to Lylah." She waved as he walked down the driveway to his car.

"Call if you've got any questions with that thing."

"Will do." And she eagerly locked the door behind him and rushed to her computer.

Chapter 2

The computer, long a mere convenience, now became as seductive as a lover. Kari hurried home to it every day, logging on, browsing, talking to people in several different chat rooms, exchanging email at long last with all her friends, including some new friends she'd met online. There was a whole world waiting for her "inside the screen," as she thought of it.

She posted inquiries about recipes, and soon she had several new friends with whom she was trading hints and tips. One Friday evening, logging on after getting home from work, she found a letter:

Hi—

Tried your pot roast recipe—great $\langle g \rangle$. Now all I need is potatoes to go with it. (Any ideas?) What can I offer in return? Would you like my short-cut goulash recipe?

Where do you live? I don't know if I'm trading recipes with someone across the street or across the country. Here in Elm Ridge, we're having mild weather for September—I'll barbeque this weekend. Do you barbeque? Got any recipes for the grill? Want any?

Got to go now. Got a pork roast in the oven, and the smell is calling me. :)

See ya— Max

Kari had learned by now that $\langle g \rangle$ was "grin" and :) was a computer smile. She smiled for real at the thought of his roast beckoning him with its aroma and quickly shot back a reply.

Hi, Max,

Am sending a file with several recipes in it. Hope you like them, especially the potato pancakes, which go well with pot roast. Let me know what you think.

As for location, you're in Elm Ridge? The same Elm Ridge that's four hours drive from here? (I'm in Jeffersonville.) Yes, we're having the same warm weather. Yes, I barbecue. Ever take a boneless pork roast and bathe it in barbeque sauce, then cook it on a covered grill for about an hour? The only trouble is, it tastes so good it's hard to stop after "seconds"—I want to go on and finish it all in one night instead of saving some to have cold tomorrow.

She stopped, reread that last sentence, and thought it made her sound like someone who probably weighed over 200 pounds. Which, in fact, she did, but why advertise the fact? Self-consciousness immediately assailed her, followed by annoyance at herself. Why should I care what some anonymous, faceless correspondent thinks of me? Does it matter if this Max knows I'm fat? For all I know he weighs three hundred pounds, is eightyfive years old, is toothless.... Then she had to laugh. A previous letter had mentioned a fondness for corn on the cob. Toothless was one thing he was not.

She backed up and deleted the offending sentence, feeling guilty over her vanity even as she did it. Then she chatted about the weather for a minute, and closed out the letter.

A reply was waiting in her inbox the next day.

Hi, nearly-neighbor,

Jeffersonville, hmmm? If I ever find myself in your part of the state, I'll take you to dinner at Woody's Wagon Wheel. Ever been there? Simple food, but hearty. Not a fancy place, but a great place for folks who seriously love good food...and I take it that's you as much as it is me.

I had a good day today. Oh, I guess I haven't told you—I'm a stockbroker. And what do you do? Or are you a housewife? (That's an honorable profession too.) Have you lived in Jeffersonville all your life? That's a sneaky way of trying to find out how old you are, a question I know better than to ever ask a lady outright. But I like to have some feel for the people I correspond with. I trade recipes with a few other folks, and correspond with several. Since "tit for tat" is only fair, I'll admit to being thirty-six myself.

Well, I have a peach pie in the oven. I'll "see" you here tomorrow.

Max

Kari got up, checked on dinner, which was simmering, then composed a reply:

Hi, fellow gourmet,

No, I've never been to Woody's Wagon Wheel. If you ever find yourself in this part of the state, I'll take you up on dinner.

You could have asked me about my age outright. I'm not sensitive about my thirty-three years.

No, I'm not a housewife. I'm not even married. I'm in the publicity department of one of the larger corporations around here. I like my work, which mostly involves writing brochures, press releases, and similar stuff. Not exactly as exciting as writing The Great American Novel, but the money's more secure. The work's steady, and it pays the bills...and if you've got to do a 9-to-5, well, hell, it's not a bad way to earn a living.

How did your peach pie turn out? I love to cook, but don't bake. There's a wonderful bakery three minutes drive from here. They sell some of their goodies by the portion, too. Tonight I'm having a piece of "To Hell in a Chocolatebasket." Tomorrow I'll probably buy a piece of "Mocha Sin." They're as clever with the names as they are with the creations themselves.

I'm a lifelong resident of Jeffersonville; never lived anywhere else. And you? Tell me about yourself. Including what you look like. I like to have a face to keep in mind when I write to people. I'm new at this email thing, but I've asked my other online friends what they look like too.

Kari went on for a few more sentences, and as she did, she constructed a mental image of Max. The picture, when it arrived three days and as many letters later, was no disappointment. Max had dark hair, lively eyes, handsome features, a trim physique, and a nice smile.

Of course he wanted her picture in return, and Kari selected a head shot. Her shape was not visible. She didn't want him to know what all that cooking and eating had done to her.

In picturing him, she'd imagined someone roly-poly. By all accounts, Max had a good appetite. Yet his picture showed a lean body. Apparently, he had a great metabolism, or else he worked out extensively. Either that, or the picture was awfully flattering in comparison with reality. Enviously, she mailed off her picture to him.

Meanwhile, their correspondence was warming up. From cooking, they had progressed to miscellania. They chatted about their respective jobs, friends, towns. And then Max told Kari,

You seem a very sympathetic person, just the sort I've always enjoyed being around. Warm, friendly, caring. And a woman with your appetite for food probably has other appetites that are equally voracious.

Tell me, my dear--are you a passionate woman? Do those lips that love coq au vin also love to kiss? Do you pucker for a man as eagerly as to swallow stroganoff? Could this hapless, smitten suitor be a course in your banquet of love?

And then the letter went on to deal with more innocuous matters. But it had left Kari with a taste in her mouth for Max. She fell to fantasizing about him. Only four hours away—it wasn't an impossibility. They could get together...feast on each other...and maybe have time for some *food*, too.

She had printed his picture out, and now she taped it up on her computer, keeping an eye on it as she typed away. She had any number of online friends now, but the letters she searched for most eagerly were those from Max. His letters mixed passion with prosaic matters, ranging from what he'd like to show her in his town to what he'd like to do to her when he got her alone.

Have you ever had your toes kissed? You can't make love to a woman's "private area" only. You have to make love to the total woman. You have to

be a connoisseur of fine women as you are of fine foods. You have to appreciate the full woman as you do a full banquet.

I would love to make love to you. Not just to the flower of your womanhood, but to all of you. I would love to devour you as if you were a sumptuous six-course meal.

The first course is your lips. I would feast on them extravagantly, kissing them, licking them, parting them with my tongue.

The second course is your fingertips, which I would lavish my attentions on, sucking on them and kissing them. The third course is your toes. I leave it to your imagination just how I would treat them. (I have to reserve some secrets, my dear, or you'll know it all in advance and be bored before I get there.)

The fourth course is your neck. Let me kiss all over it, nuzzling into it, inhaling your perfume—not just the scent you have dabbed on or sprayed on, but the scent of you, your skin, that personal essence any woman has, individualistic, sensual, and seductive. Let me nibble and graze at the soft skin of your neck, burrow into the warmth of it, feel the satiny skin enfold me.

Perhaps the other courses will be the subject of another letter, or perhaps I'll let you tell me what you'd like me to do for you.

But rest assured, I am a man who knows how to appreciate a delicious woman as well as a delicious meal. And, my dear, I know you are a feast for the soul, a treat for the eyes, a lavish banquet for all the senses.

Now the only question is, when we can get together? I cannot undertake a four-hour drive each way lightly. So for the moment, we will have to let this affaire du coeur remain a matter of email and dreams.

Sweet dreams to you then, my Kari, and think of how you will feast on my body in return.

Eagerly,

Max

Wow! Kari jumped up from the computer and looked into the mirror. Her face was flushed with suffused heat; her eyes were glistening with anticipation. Her nostrils flared with excitement, and her hair, which she'd been running her hands through, was as wild as if she'd just climbed out of bed with the man.

Would he like what he saw when he met her? She studied her reflection in the mirror for the bazillionth time. Her face wasn't that of a chubbette. Though softly, gracefully rounded rather than angular, it didn't betray the degree of excessive heft she carried below. To look at Kari's face, one would think she weighed a little over what she should, but one wouldn't expect the extent to which her body was out of proportion.

Could she lose weight quickly? Years of previous attempts had failed, but she'd never had the same incentive before. Max was in her life now. Max wanted to come for a visit some time. Max thought she was a banquet. He could find plenty to feast on without discovering this much amplitude.

With all the new recipes coming in from her new online friends, she knew she hadn't a hope of dining on tuna salad at night, but maybe if she stuck to salad for lunch...?

Returning straightaway to her chair at her living room desk, she wrote right back to Max.

A six-course feast? I have been called many things, but that's not one of them...not that I'm objecting, you understand! You would eat this banquet by hand, wouldn't you? Forks would seem out of place, and knives...ouch!

Teeth are excellent for eating, and fingers work well at such a banquet. I can feel your fingers now, holding my face as your teeth softly graze my nose, then drift to my lips, softly, gently chewing on each lip while my heart leaps in delight. Can you feel my heartbeat in every fiber of my body, every inch you touch?

I could continue in the same vein—I, too, appreciate fine and exotic tastes—but I confess, I'm a bit shy of speaking as frankly to you as you do to me.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not at all upset by your candor. To the contrary, your descriptions thrill me. I just don't know you well enough to dare to be too candid in return, yet. But I hope that in time we will get to know each other much better.

Any plans for driving in this direction yet? I'm eager, and not just for the sex. (That too!) I feel we are compatible people with similar interestscooking, the old movies you've spoken of enjoying, and the sunrise walks you've mentioned.

As for your political involvement, which you've spoken of, I've recently had it suggested to me (by a friend's husband) that I get involved with a local mayoralty race. I've been thinking of doing it—I want to see a candidate named Larrimore get elected—and your example has pushed me into deciding to definitely volunteer.

Tomorrow is Saturday. I'll log on when I wake up, and see if there's any mail from you (or anyone else—but don't worry, I don't carry on the same kind of correspondence with the others!) and then I'll head over to Larrimore's headquarters. I'm going to do more than just vote to make a difference this year!

And now I think my pork chops in cider are fully baked and ready, from the smell of them, so I'm logging off to go enjoy them. I would rather be dining on select parts of you!

Yours, Kari

Chapter 3

She could have slept later. It was Saturday, after all, and Kari had no commitments. But her head was a froth of plans and possibilities, and how could she sleep with so much bubbling around up there? Opening one eye, she peered warily at the clock and confirmed her worst suspicions—though she was wide awake, it was only 7:00.

Well, at least she had managed to sleep later than if it had been a workday...though not by much. She closed her open eye, rolled over, and made a determined effort to return to the cloak of oblivion. But sleep played hard-to-get. Her mind kept boiling with the day's possibilities, chief of which were more email from Max and volunteering at Larrimore's headquarters.

After ten minutes of remaining prone but restless, Kari acknowledged that sleep was not an option, and she threw back the covers. The house was chilly. An unseasonable early fall chill had the late September morning in its grip, and even the carpet felt cool to her bare feet as she scurried to the closet to get out something to wear.

Selecting something casual, yet not sloppy, a loose-fitting dress that she'd feel comfortable wearing to Larrimore's headquarters, she left her clothes on the bed while she went into the bathroom. Her nemesis was in there—the scale—though this morning it was kind and reflected the loss of a pound. Elation on top of anticipation—a good way to start the morning.

Still barefoot, she padded down to the kitchen, goosing the thermostat as she passed it, and stopping at the hall closet to grab a sweater. As the wool blend slipped over her arms, she fancied it was Max's arms warming her shoulders. She put on a pot of coffee, some sausages, and toast. Taking two eggs out of the fridge, she hesitated, then put them down on the counter. Eagerly, she darted into the living room to boot up her computer. It could be doing its thing while the eggs were cooking. A few minutes later, she walked back to the living room desk, this time precariously balancing her plate, coffee cup, utensils, and napkin, all of which she successfully set down on the desk without spilling more than an errant drop or two of coffee. Eagerly, she logged on to her email, finding the hoped-for letter from Max.

Good morning, lovely lady.

It's 6:30 AM, and I'm headed out to jog. Thought I'd drop you a quick line first. I've got a busy day ahead of me—errands including grocery shopping, plus housecleaning and laundry, and in whatever time I have left, tinkering with the '47 Plymouth I bought a year ago and have been lovingly rebuilding. One of these days, I may even get it on the road! I've got a full plate of things to do before me. And what's on your agenda?

I probably won't be back online till this evening around 6:00. I have plans for the evening, but will log on before I go out. Your picture arrived yesterday. Your pretty face is sweet—it fits your personality, as I glean it from your letters. I know I won't be disappointed when we finally meet.

I long to do delicious, wicked things to your body, but my designs on you go beyond erotic love. I want to get to know all of you, to know you as a person, not just as a bed partner. To appreciate the whole Kari, not just the exciting parts. To meld with your mind, not just with your physicality.

But yes, I very much want your body too. At the moment, I'm not in "sex mode"—at 6:30 AM I'm more revved up for another kind of physical exertion: jogging.

Do you like to jog? I want to know what your likes and dislikes, interests and pet hates all are. I want to be a student of Kari, learning you till I could get an "A" on the test of life. Educate me, sweet lady.

I'll "see" you here at 6 tonight.

Yours, Max

Kari glowed when she read the letter...except for the part about "plans for the evening." Jealousy overtook her at the thought those plans might involve another woman. Did he talk the same way to her? Did he tell her she was sweet? Did he make love to her? Wrap his arms around her? Kari wanted Max to herself.

The romance was unfolding like a rose slowly blooming, opening its petals to the sun, growing ever larger. It was taking over more of her life, more of her thoughts every day.

In some ways, she truly felt she had a lover. Yet, when she went to bed at night, there was still no one to snuggle up to for warmth, comfort, companionship. When she wanted to share a sadness or a joy, there was still no one there to confide in...though she did sometimes rush to the computer and pour it into email.

And when she was sexually needful—as seemed to happen more often now—she still had to resort to self-satisfaction. But at least she had a mental picture to accompany the solo act that had a ring of future plausibility. Her fantasy lover was no longer a faceless creation of her own imagining. She had a future rendezvous with Max in mind—and his picture on her desk to show her what he looked like.

As for Max, he had a picture, too—of just her face. There was no sense in pushing her luck. Kari had sent him a photo from the neck up.

She composed a reply to his letter:

My plans for the day? Rather pedestrian, except for the visit to Larrimore HQ to sign up as a volunteer. I, too, have laundry, housework, grocery shopping. If I get back from Larrimore's HQ early, I plan to cook a few things in advance and freeze them in single servings. That way I have dinner on hand for nights I'm too tired to cook. What did we all do before microwave ovens were invented?

You want to know my likes and dislikes? I'm eagerly awaiting the leaves turning—autumn leaves are among my favorite things. Dare I add fluffy cats, or is that too predictable an answer? Actually, I guess the usual answer is "kittens," but I prefer them fully grown. Soft and cuddly rather than cute and playful. I haven't had a cat of my own, though, since Boots died. Too painful.

My biggest dislike at the moment, I guess, is waiting for you to find the opportunity to come visit me. Second to that? Recipes that say "5 mins prep time" and take 20. Recipes that don't come out right. (There I go talking food again.) And people who break promises. And rainy days—though they

sometimes bring rainbows, which I'd have to add to my list of favorite things.

Which reminds me—have you ever seen the Northern Lights? I never have and have always wanted to.

No, I don't jog.

I'd love to see your '47 Plymouth. My neighbor was rebuilding a '55 Chrysler for a while but wound up selling it after he got it nearly complete. A money crunch thing. What a shame!

Well, I want to get the house clean and the groceries bought before I take off for Larrimore's headquarters. So I'd better get my butt in gear. I'll "see" you here later.

Yours,

Kari

She finished the breakfast she'd been eating intermittently and with less than her usual full attention and enthusiasm. Getting up, she carried her dirty dishes in, poured another cup of coffee, and took a mouthful before scrubbing the dishes and pans.

She bustled around the house, speeding through her cleaning, racing to finish quickly. Yet, even while rushing, she took extra care that no uncaught dust sully the appearance of her house. What if Max sprang a sudden visit with little notice? She polished, she shined, she poked into corners that she sometimes neglected. When she was done, even the doorknobs gleamed.

As she lived alone and was not slobbish in her habits, the house was basically neat and not that difficult to clean. Even with the extra touches, like cleaning the inner sides of the window panes, she was done while it was still early in the morning. Putting up a load of wash, she grabbed her grocery list and trotted out to the car.

An hour later, back home and with the groceries put away, she checked her appearance in the mirror before heading over to Larrimore HQ.

"Can I help you?" the harried-looking man with the perpetual grin on his face asked. Kari realized she was staring, but she couldn't help marveling at the fact that his face managed to convey a harassed look even while he was smiling. The slightly disheveled look to his sandy hair, and the fact that one eyebrow looked like he'd been distractedly worrying at it with his finger contributed to his air of being beset with nagging problems, yet he had an open, friendly face.

Something of an amateur artist, Kari liked to sketch faces and frequently made note of the appearance of people she passed in the street. Right now she was committing this man's face to memory. But she realized she was being impolite. "Sorry," she said with an answering grin. "Yes, you can help me by telling me how I can help you. I'm Kari Crandall, and I'm here to volunteer."

The sandy-haired man stuck his hand out. "Jeff. Jeff Linden. Welcome aboard." She took his hand, and he grasped hers firmly, shaking it enthusiastically. They sat in two adjacent chairs to talk above the babble of voices around them, and Jeff told her that coordinating volunteers was one of his many tasks. "As a volunteer, you'll wear several hats too," he predicted. "Give me a clue what some of them will be. What are your talents? How can we best use you? Although I warn you now, even if you're a brain surgeon, we'll have you doing grunge work too."

Kari laughed. "I'm a publicist, a writer, but I expect you've got a professional team handling that. Put me to work wherever you can use me. And I'm not allergic to grunge work."

"Got time this afternoon? You can go to the Southdale Shopping Centre with me and hand out flyers. Maybe even talk to a few people. But I need to brief you first, so you can answer questions intelligently if people ask you Larrimore's positions on issues. Got time Tuesday night? We're doing a big mailing. It'll be back from the printer's Tuesday afternoon, and we need all the hands we can get to get it out. Got time Thursday night? We're shorthanded for volunteers on the phone bank."

"Whoa! You're planning my life for me already!" Kari laughed. "Actually, yes, I've got time now for a briefing and this afternoon for Southdale and Tuesday for the mailing and Thursday for the phone bank...but don't make any plans for me any further ahead than that, and I reserve the right to cancel if...if something important comes up." She was thinking that, although it might be months till Max drove to Jeffersonville to see her, he also might surprise her and show up soon.

"Fair deal," Jeff agreed, sticking his hand out again to shake on it.

She appreciated Jeff's openness, as well as his sense of humor. There were too many bullshit artists in the world. She liked the fact that Jeff was

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down-to-earth. It made her all the more willing to put in long hours for Larrimore.

Clearly, she wasn't in a volunteer job for the money, nor was she in it for thanks. But it was nice to be appreciated, and she instinctively felt Jeff wasn't the kind to take her for granted. Moreover, he was *nice*. If you're going to work for no compensation, you want to at least be working with nice people.

Jeff gave her an index card to fill out: Name, address, phone, business affiliation, hours available, special talents, previous political experience. She filled in all the blanks, and imagined handing prospective lovers a similar form. What would the blanks be she'd want them to fill in? Name, address, phone, occupation, likes, dislikes, favorite topics of conversation, favorite forms of recreation, favorite kinds of sex. Could she have a blank for "minutes of staying power?" She giggled.

"What's so funny?" Jeff asked. She blushed. "Never mind," Jeff said discreetly. But his trademark grin widened.

He took her around the storefront headquarters, introducing her to the others who were present. As he did, he chatted to her about a mix of campaign related details and computer oriented chatter. The headquarters had just gotten a new computer, this one a Mac, unlike the PC it was replacing, and he was very excited about it. He was the proud possessor of a Mac himself, and when he learned that Kari, too, had a Mac at home, he really took off at high speed on the subject.

Jeff, when he was excited about what he was talking about, had a tendency to talk with his hands, to punctuate with body motions, and to use his face to mirror his words. He raised his eyebrows—sometimes just one at a time—moved his mouth as if it was made of Silly Putty, jutted his jaw, or cocked his head to one side in an attitude of thoughtfulness. There was something about him that put Kari right at ease, as if he were an old friend she had known for years. Though, in fact, she decided she had never known anyone quite like him before.

When she'd made the rounds of the storefront and Jeff had briefed her on the candidate's positions, he asked her to be back by 1:00. It was now noon. The sensible thing would have been to grab a bite nearby, but Kari raced home to see if there was any email from Max. Logging on, she found letters from two other online friends, but nothing from Max...who, after all, had said he wouldn't likely log on till 6:00. Disappointed, Kari made a salami sandwich, grabbed some cookies and a banana, and took it all with her to eat in the car while she drove back to campaign headquarters.

"Good—I didn't scare you off this morning." Jeff grinned at her when she showed up. "Here—grab a bunch of flyers," he said. Then he put his forefinger on her chin and made a brushing motion. "Crumb," he explained casually. Kari felt self-conscious. Normally fastidious, she wasn't used to walking around with crumbs on her chin, but then she didn't usually eat lunch on the drive-while-you-gulp plan.

They took their respective cars to the Southdale Centre. Jeff huddled with her for a quick orientation, then turned her loose, impressed with how much she already knew about the candidate. "I can tell you read more than just the supermarket tabloids," he laughed.

"Actually, I never touch those." She wrinkled her nose up in mock disgust.

"That's what they all say."

"Go on. Ask me about Elvis, Oprah, the latest scandals. I won't know the answer. That should prove my innocence."

"Then how come you know what the topics are?"

"They glare at you while you're waiting in line to check out. If we could rent that space and post headlines about our candidate there, we'd have a captive audience, a better informed electorate, and no question about winning the election."

"Hey, lady, I like the way you think." He gave her a mock salute.

Saluting him back, she went off to accost the populace about voting for Ron Larrimore and was pleased with how well she fielded the occasional questions people raised. Most people just took the flyers without any more comment than "Thank you," if that. A few asked a question or two about where the candidate stood on certain issues. And one or two were downright disputatious.

Kari felt she handled them all well. At one point, she became aware that Jeff was behind her, surreptitiously listening to her handling one of the more difficult people. She went on talking to the man in question, and when he finally turned and left, Jeff gave her a thumbs-up sign and a cheery wink before whirling around to press a flyer into the hand of a passing shopper. Toward the end of the afternoon, Kari realized she was comparing all the men she talked to to Max. Did they look as handsome? If she talked to them, did they seem as interesting? Did they have as good a sense of humor as he seemed to? A sense of humor was very important to her.

As they left the shopping centre, Jeff helped her carry the flyers back to his car. "I'll take the leftovers back to headquarters. You can go straight home if you want. It's getting late, and you probably have plans for the evening."

"Yes," Kari said, brightening at the thought of communicating with Max again. "Do you need help tomorrow?"

"Hell, yes, if you don't mind. But I don't want to take up your time if you've got something else you need—or want—to be doing."

"I'm free as a bird. Or should I say, 'I have a date with Ron Larrimore'?"

"You and I have a date with our esteemed candidate. Is 1:00 too early?"

"I'll see you at headquarters at 1:00."

"Here's the number at headquarters, and here's my home phone. Get to me if you can't make it for any reason. Otherwise, I'll be counting on you."

"I'll be there."

Chapter 4

Kari, whose movements were usually sure and steady, found her hand fumbling with the key in her eagerness to get into her house. It was after 6:00. Max's email would be waiting.

Getting the door open at last, she switched on lights against the encroaching darkness, making her living room cheery and cozy, which pretty well matched her mood. She had powered down her computer before leaving the house, and now she booted it up again, letting it whir and do its thing while she bustled around the house.

In the kitchen, she pulled a plastic container of lemon chicken from the freezer. Removing the lid, she popped it in the microwave. After putting on water for instant rice, she fixed herself a salad while the water came to a boil. When dinner was ready, she carried it all, plus utensils, a paper napkin, and a glass of diet Pepsi, into the living room.

But she actually ignored the food till she had logged on to email and found Max's letter, and even then she ate distractedly, sporadically, while she read. Her attention was almost completely on the letter:

My dear,

I hope you've been having a good day. Weekends are special...like you. I've grown to treasure knowing you as we've exchanged these letters that have nurtured and cemented our relationship. Funny, has it really been so short a time that we "know" each other?

Though we've never met, I know you're sweet, caring, and thoughtful all important qualities. I also am sure you'll be caring as a lover, as well as responsive and imaginative.

Start imagining now, sweet Kari, the things we will do to each other when we get together. Of course, I have my ideas, but making love is for the pleasure of both partners, and if there's something special you want me to do to you, I'll have no way of knowing if you don't communicate it to me.

How do you like to be touched? Where do you like to be touched? You needn't tell me now...you can show me when I get there, if you prefer. And I'll show you what I like...though you may have even better ideas.

I want to make love to all of you, not just your female parts. I long to run my fingers through your hair, kiss your fingertips, nuzzle your chin.

There is more to a woman than "there"—other places that deserve attention, and I mean to lavish my affections on all those wonderful parts. But then, I am sure there is not a part of you that isn't utterly wonderful.

But yes, I will get to "there" eventually, too. I will lavish you with physical love and show you that mouths are for more than just talking.

But if I continue this letter in this vein, I will become too distracted to continue writing. I am already agitated and in a state of such arousal from the mental picture of enjoying your beautiful body that I cannot sit still. The need engendered in me by the thought of enjoying your womanly treasure, and bringing you sweet pleasure, is burning through me and demanding satisfaction. I am torturing myself by writing these things to you, creating such vivid pictures in my head, when you are four hours away from me and I cannot do anything about it.

So let me turn to other matters...if I can concentrate. I successfully completed all my errands, plus housekeeping and laundry, in enough time to put in a couple of hours tinkering with the other joy of my life, that '47 Plymouth.

I really do get a kick out of working on that car! It's a true labor of love, a joy to work on despite the fact that the work at times is tedious, at times frustrating, and it requires getting into some of the damnedest positions. (Well, so does sex, and that's a joy too...damn, there I go again, back to talking about sex. When you're around, even if only electronically, it seems hard to get away from the subject.)

Have you plans for the evening? Maybe I shouldn't take up too much of your time with a long letter, and make you tight for time if you're running out to do something fun. Or staying in to do something fun. Well, speaking of plans, I have company coming at 8:00, myself, so I guess I'd better gulp down some dinner and make myself presentable. I was hungry to talk to you and sat down at my computer before I even showered after working on the car. I'm a grungy mess. Better go do something about it.

I'll "see" you in the morning.

Yours, Max

Kari's right hand sporadically clicked the mouse to move the text up the screen through the letter as she read it. There was so much to react to in his letter. Of course, her pleasure button—her whole treasure trove, as Max had called it—was throbbing and thrumming in reaction to his letter. But there were parts for her head to react to, too.

For one thing, he had implied that he was in as agitatedly horny a state as she now found herself. And he had said he had plans for the evening. He was expecting company.

Were his plans simply to get together with a buddy or two and play video games or watch football on the tube? Or perhaps he had a pool table in his basement? For that matter, she didn't actually know if he even liked video games or played pool.)

Or did he have a date? Was some woman coming over, some woman who would get the benefit of the head of steam he had built up over her? Some woman who would get to enjoy in reality the lovemaking Kari could only imagine?

That line of thinking was too uncomfortable. At one time she was becoming both more sexually needful and more upset at the prospect of sharing Max with some other woman. Whatever sexual steam he had built up, it belonged to her! The condition he now found himself in had been engendered by thoughts of her, and only she should have the benefit of it.

Too, she was jealous of what came after. The cuddling, the caressing, the intimacy of two entwined bodies snuggling in the afterglow. The exchanged soft murmurs of appreciation, the confidences exchanged in the post-sex aura of extra closeness.

Would the woman—if indeed there was one—spend the night? Would she make Max breakfast? Or would Max, rising in the early dawn, silently pad down to the kitchen, leaving her to sleep, and produce breakfast for two, cooked clatter-free, with only the curling aroma of bacon and the sizzle of it as it crisped up in the skillet to reach and possibly waken the sleeping form on the bed?

Kari's racing brain crashed free of *that* train of thought in a hurry. While it had stopped the escalating spiral of unsatisfiable rising passion, it was agitating her in its own way...a most unpleasant way. She turned back to Max's letter. There were so many tidbits in it to pounce on, to feast on—and to think about.

"...the other joy of my life," he had said, referring to the old car he was rebuilding. The *other* joy? Was he implying she was the first joy? Or did some different, unnamed pleasure hold that singular honor?

"I will lavish you with physical love," he had said. But she wanted more than just *physical* love. That too, yes, but her passions were more than just sexual. She craved affection, romance, caring, closeness. He seemed prepared to give her more, give her what she needed. But could she be sure? Oh, what if she was barking up the wrong tree?

She was new at this online thing. Electronic friendships—she was building up a few of those—electronic sexuality, electronic courtship, electronic romance. The Information Highway had as many potholes as any other. She didn't want to fall into one. And she was navigating without a map.

Then there was the paragraph where he asked if she had plans for the evening. He seemed interested...was he concerned, worried, envious? She hoped so, as she picked at her lemon chicken in a decidedly less enthusiastic manner than the taste deserved. It was growing cold on the plate, and still only half eaten. Kari Crandall eating with a less than voracious appetite? This email thing certainly had wrought spectacular changes in her life...or at any rate, Max had.

Good evening, Max,

I had a great day at Larrimore headquarters, following a morning in which I accomplished

She did the electronic equivalent of tearing up the page and began over.

Good evening, Max,

Your stirring words touch deep places in me and arouse me to passions that toss me like a gale tosses a ship.

No, too cliché. Once again, she destroyed what she had written. And began again.

Good evening, Max,

Your words speak to my body as if my most female parts had ears and could hear you speak directly to them. I tingle in places I never even knew existed. I resonate to your written voice. I only wish I was hearing the real thing.

You ask about my plans for tonight. They do not include you, except electronically, so at best it will be an imperfect evening. I wish they would hurry up and invent a modem through which we could teleport ourselves instead of just transmitting mere words. If our words can transmit our thoughts, why can't we transmit ourselves to each other in some way? Imagine me popping out of your computer monitor this minute!

I had a good day, yes. I accomplished all my chores, got to Larrimore's campaign headquarters, met those of my fellow volunteers who were there at the time, and agreed to several assignments of "grunge work." It will feel good to know I'm doing something to make a difference, even if it's just stuffing envelopes. Not that Chris Badley is the worst politician on wheels, but Larrimore is, by far, the better candidate. (Our incumbent mayor, a disaster, is fortunately not running again.)

What are your plans for tomorrow? I'm volunteering again, but don't know what my assignment is yet.

Tell me about your house. Have you lived there long? What does it look like? I don't even know if you own or rent. Tell me about yourself. You've said you're a stockbroker, but I don't know much more than that. Do you come from a large family? Small family? From around here or across the continent? I don't even know if you've ever been married before. Tell me as much about yourself as you'd care to...and then save the rest for when we get together...which I hope will be soon. Tell me, too, what your favorite dinner is, so I can cook it when you come to visit.

Yours,

Kari

She sent the letter on its way without rereading it. If there were any typos, he'd figure them out. There was still a bit of chicken and rice and salad left. The salad was supposed to be cold, but the chicken and rice weren't supposed to be, yet were.

Gulping them down distractedly, Kari mentally patted herself on the back for the way she'd neatly dealt with his question about her plans for the evening. Which, actually, primarily involved watching the video of her cousin's wedding. After the fiasco with Glenn, she'd become so upset about the whole prospect of going to the wedding—and so embarrassed about having to show up without an escort—that she'd pleaded a virus and stayed home. But Max knew nothing of the brouhaha with Glenn, nor was she ready to tell him.

If she was going to curl up and watch the video, she wanted something good in the way of dessert while she was watching. The neighborhood bakery was open late. With visions of fudge and nuts cavorting through her brain, she locked up the house, leaving the computer running. Lately, when she shut it down, she felt like she was shutting Max out. She knew it was irrational, illogical. After all, his letters couldn't get through till she logged on to her email program anyhow. Merely leaving the machine turned on didn't give him access to her; it wasn't like a phone. Still, these days she sometimes left the machine up and running all the same.

A chill hit her when she walked out the door into the darkened evening. The wind had picked up, and it was brisk and nippy. She had simply thrown her jacket over her shoulders. Now she slipped her arms properly into the sleeves. *Max's arms would warm me up nicely*, she thought.

Dry leaves scudded down the driveway, one brushing her ankle as it skittered past her. She absent-mindedly rubbed that ankle against the other one. A half moon gauzily shone above her. *Is it half full or half empty?* she thought, chuckling at the absurdity. *Whatever it is, it's the same moon that's shining on Max...somewhere. I wonder what he's doing right now.* A myriad of stars spread out in a sparkling ceiling, twinkling crisply in the chill. *It'll be winter before long, at this rate.*

At the bakery, Kari couldn't decide between Chocoholic's Ecstasy Supreme and Double Fudge Fantasy. So she bought a portion of each, cradling them as she carried them back to the car. A black cat crossed in front of her as she scurried, hunched up against the wind, which had picked up. But, despite the chill, she stopped to pet the fuzzy creature. "Halloween will be here soon. Your holiday," she said to the black animal. "And then Election Day." That inescapably drew her thoughts back to the Larrimore campaign. *I wonder what Jeff will have me doing tomorrow*.

She got into her car and drove home. She was tempted to run to the computer, log onto the online service, and see if Max had answered her email, but she dissuaded herself from doing it. He'd said he had plans for the evening, and he hadn't said that those plans were answering email!

Checking her watch, she saw it was 7:30. Maybe she'd answer some snail mail, pay some bills, tidy up her desk. Surely the video wouldn't take all evening. She rationed herself one dessert for now and the other for during the video.

Max crept into her correspondence. She found herself telling two out-ofstate friends—why did people have to move?!—with whom she still corresponded the old-fashioned way about her new *affaire du coeur*. Then she turned to paying bills. Ugh! Although clearing them up and knowing they were taken care of was always a relief.

By the time the pile of bills was gone, so was a goodly chunk of the money in her account. The first serving of dessert was long gone, too, and Kari decided on a bubble bath before the video. She ran the tap, pouring the scented bubble liquid under the running water, inhaling the fragrance as it rose from the steamy water.

In a frivolous mood, she selected a sensuous-looking peignoir to wear for the rest of the evening, disrobed, and stepped into the tub. She washed lavishly, practically caressing her body as she soaped it, lying back in the tub and luxuriating in the bubbles. Gypsy music slunk up the stairs and curled around the corner from the living room, where she'd put on a CD before getting into the tub. The violin cried. In an emotional mood, Kari nearly cried with it. Her heart was filled with longings, and the music intensified them. She wanted so much, none of it unreasonable, yet so much of it less easily attainable for a woman of larger proportions.

Having met Max, who so far seemed to exemplify so much of what she wanted in a man, it seemed her wishes might finally come true. Yet that very possibility made her longings all the stronger instead of quieting them. And the strings on the violin seemed to resonate in tune with something deep inside her.

After drying off, Kari lavished herself with dusting powder, slipped into the peignoir, and returned to the living room, turning the gypsy music off so she could watch the wedding tape. While scarfing up the fudge treat, she lay back on the sofa, snuggled among the throw pillows, watching her cousin get married and wishing it was her.

She could picture herself in that dress. But I'd pick something with a different kind of lace. She could feel the veil surrounding her face. I'd choose a longer one than Allison did. She'd be so happy her feet would barely touch the floor, thrilled to be starting this new phase of her life. And who's the man waiting for me at the altar? She couldn't quite make out his face. Was it Max?

She finished the fudge concoction, put the plate on the coffee table, and reached for the tissues she'd carried in from the bedroom. Weddings always made her cry...especially when they weren't hers.

Chapter 5

Kari slept with the window cracked open despite the chill. Many mornings this time of year, she woke up earlier than she needed to because the room had gotten cold and the heat wasn't on. But a warm front moved in Saturday night, and by Sunday morning, the weather outside—and the house's interior—was warmer than it had been the night before.

Half-waking, Kari stretched luxuriantly, threw an arm out from under the covers, felt the comfortable temperature of the room, and rolled over. When she awakened again it was 8:30. She had meant to get up earlier—she had a full day ahead of her—but the absence of sunlight streaming in the window had lulled her into thinking it must be earlier than it was.

She peered out between the blinds, which were open partway to let the air in. The sky was leaden with only occasional breaks in the heavy overcast. Kari hoped it wasn't going to rain. She assumed her assignment for the Larrimore campaign involved handing out flyers again, something less than fun in the rain.

She dressed, made breakfast, and hurried to the computer. Logging on, she found several pieces of email waiting. Naturally, she opened Max's first.

My dear,

It's 6 AM. I'm off to jog as soon as I write and send this...but before I go get my exercise for the day, let me answer your questions.

My plans for today? Read the Sunday paper cover to cover, play chess with a friend, tinker with my car some more if there's time.

My house? It's yellow and white, two stories, three bedrooms. I grew up here. My mom died a few years ago and my dad moved to Arizona, deeding the house over to me. (My brother—my only sibling—didn't want it. He lives in Idaho on a ranch. And I guess that answers all your questions about my family, too, in one fell swoop—or is that one swell foop?)

No, I've never been married before. Engaged, yes. And you? And tell me about your family, too. And your house. And any pets. (I have a cat, Pandora, who gets into everything.)

Well, if I go on at much more length, I'll have nothing left to say when we finally meet face-to-face. So, since I'm all dressed for jogging, let me get going. I'll see you here later.

Yours, Max

Nothing about what he'd done last night. Rats! And that tantalizing tidbit about a prior engagement—why did he have to be so terse about it? Didn't he know Kari would want to know more about it? Like how long ago, why he didn't marry the woman, whether she lived nearby and he still ran into her, and all that other important stuff.

The idea that they'd have nothing to say when they met face-to-face was preposterous...though of course he probably was being facetious. And the fact he hadn't said who was coming over to play chess with him...had that been a deliberate omission? Was it a woman?

Chiding herself for paranoia, Kari finished her breakfast, which she'd been eating as she read, and composed a reply to him. She was somewhat lengthier than he'd been, but she kept her nagging worries out of the letter, not asking who he was playing chess with, nor even asking for details of the engagement. They certainly *would* have something to talk about when they finally got together in person.

Pouring another cup of coffee, she returned to the computer and answered the rest of her email, then retrieved the Sunday paper from the azaleas and settled into her comfy, big chair. It was time to catch up on the news of the world at large now that she'd caught up on the news of her own little sphere.

The weather forecast was for mostly cloudy with a chance of showers, and unseasonably warm. Beyond that, the news was the usual mélange of battles, crimes, and disasters...the stuff that makes newspapers sell...plus all the extra features that get thrown in on Sunday. She decided she didn't have time for the crossword, and was pleased. There had been many Sundays when the puzzle was the highlight of her day. It was nice—practically an accomplishment—that she wouldn't have time for it at all today!

Kari still hadn't finished the paper by quarter-to-one, but she put it aside to go to Larrimore's headquarters. Jeff was talking on the phone and scribbling on a piece of paper. His perpetual grin was damped down. Kari wondered what was amiss.

Standing quietly at the long table that was doubling as a desk for the duration, Kari gleaned the information that Jeff couldn't find quite a few boxes of campaign flyers. "But they were here when I left last night," Jeff exploded into the phone. "Who locked up last night? Were you the last one out the door? Well, who was? Were the flyers still here when you left? Well, dammit, they've got to be *somewhere*!"

Kari went over to grab a cup of coffee from the big electric pot. When she returned to the long table, Jeff was off the phone. "I don't know if we're dealing with incompetence or worse," he said, running his hand distractedly through his already-disheveled hair. "But I guess there's nothing more I can do now. We have some flyers. We'll make do with what we've got. Eileen?" And he turned to another volunteer nearby. "See what you can find out about those flyers. Kari and I are going out to the flea market."

Well, now she knew what her assignment was. Two minutes later, she was in Jeff's car, leaving hers behind at the storefront. They had a load of flyers with them and were headed to the gates of the flea market, where they would talk to people on their way in or out, handing out flyers and trying to explain to the electorate at large why Ron Larrimore was the better candidate.

At least, that was the plan, but after just forty-five minutes, the skies opened. "Let's wait it out in the car," Jeff suggested. "It may blow over quickly. I'd hate to give up, go back to headquarters, and then have the sun come out five minutes later." So they sat in the car, talking.

"Is this your first time volunteering for a campaign?" Jeff asked. "Does it show?"

"Your enthusiasm is boundless...the mark of a neophyte. We veterans know better than to volunteer so eagerly, so willingly, so much."

"You should talk—I think you live at campaign headquarters!"

"But I'm crazy! What's your excuse?"

"I don't think you're crazy. In fact, you remind me a little of my friend Lylah."

"Is that good or bad? You did say 'friend,' not 'enemy.""

"You've both got weird senses of humor. I like that in a person."

"Then you're saying I am crazy! Point proven!"

"What are you, a lawyer or something?"

"Almost...I mean, I almost became one."

"What happened? Why didn't you become a lawyer?"

"I didn't have the patience—or the money, I guess—for that much school. So at eighteen, I changed careers before I started. I became a lunatic volunteer. And an accountant for a living," he added.

"A lunatic accountant."

"Most definitely. Though I think I spend more time as a volunteer than as an accountant."

"What do you volunteer for when it's not political season?"

"There's always something. One thing I do is entertain really sick kids in the hospital. You're looking at the one, the only, Marbles the Clown."

"Mild-mannered accountant by day, you zip into the nearest phone booth when summoned by a doctor, change clothes into your clown outfit, which you're wearing under your business suit, hop into your Clownmobile...."

"Wrong superhero. Clowns ride tiny tricycles."

"I can see you on it now." Kari laughed.

"Wait'll you see the real thing."

"Well, invite me along then. I work a mean sock puppet." And Kari made her two hands talk to each other about the uncooperative weather, to Jeff's amusement. As the rain pelted the van, the two of them laughed like loons. Kari hadn't laughed that hard since the last time she'd gotten together with Lylah.

"You're fun!" She pronounced her verdict enthusiastically. "You've got to get together with us the next time Lylah and I do dinner...oops, not the *next* time—that's tomorrow, and I've already got it half prepared, and there's just enough for the two of us. But the *next* time after that. You two will get along famously."

"I accept," Jeff said, bowing his head mock-gravely.

Was there such a title as "second-best friend"? Kari wondered if she had found hers. She was truly enjoying Jeff's company, and she felt very relaxed with him. Like Lylah, he was both fun and easy to be with.

The clatter of rain on the van's roof seemed to ease up a little. Kari looked out the window...still raining, but it definitely looked like it was slowing. "I almost went out and left a window open," Jeff said. "I have a friend who ruined his computer that way." And then they got into a discussion of computers with Jeff explaining why he favored Macs over PCs. Kari decided that even when Jeff was serious, he was enjoyable.

The rain stopped abruptly, and the pair climbed out of the van and returned to handing out flyers.

Monday morning dawned still grey, though dry. Kari got out of bed a half hour earlier than her former wake up time, as had recently become her habit, so she'd have time to read and answer her email before leaving for work. There were two letters, one from Max and one from a pen pal named Vicki. She read the letter from Vicki first, skimming quickly through it and saving it to answer later.

Max's letter commanded her full attention. This one she didn't just skim. In fact, she didn't even merely read it—she devoured it. Then she prepared to answer it, but as she started typing, she noticed her "E" key was sticking. Cursing all the way through the letter, she got through it as best she could, but clearly she had to do something about that damn key.

Leaving the computer in the shop was not an acceptable option. Without the computer, Max would be out of reach. She suspected, anyway, that this was something Steve could fix for her...which would cost a hell of a lot less than the shop would charge her, too. Steve would work on it for free. She'd only have to pay for any parts or supplies.

She reached Steve at the campaign office. "Do you have any plans for tonight?" she asked. "I'm having a little computer problem—my 'E' key is sticking, and I don't know what to do about it. Of course, Lylah's coming over for dinner at 7:00. You could come with her...I could stop at the store and pick up some more food, and you could join us...or you could even run over beforehand if you didn't want to eat with us."

Kari didn't really want him to join them. She was looking forward to laughing and being silly with Lylah, who was never as much fun when Steve was around. But she couldn't be ungracious.

An Appetite for Passion

"I've got plans for dinner," Steve said, and Kari brightened, but only momentarily. "So I couldn't come over tonight. And I'm kind of busy tomorrow, too. If you can't get anyone else to look at it, I'll try to run by on Wednesday night. By the way, you might want to call Lylah."

This last sentence was tossed off oh-so-casually, so much so that Kari's antennae went up. "Oh?" she asked, her voice rising.

Steve didn't take the bait. "You can probably catch her at work now," was all he added, leaving Kari to wonder what was up.

What was up was that Lylah wasn't feeling "very peppy," as she put it, "or very hungry these days...and it would be a shame to waste a perfectly good dinner. Besides, Ginny has a load of baby clothes...hand-medowns...that she said she could bring by this evening for me to look at. Since I couldn't see any point to eating when my stomach feels so blah, I said, 'Sure.' I meant to call you earlier. I'm glad Steve said something."

Kari remembered her conversation with Jeff, whose areas of expertise included computers. Maybe he could rescue her from her current predicament. The one with the computer, that is, not Lylah's no-show. Though, as much fun as Jeff was, he might even develop into a good friend as well as an emergency computer repairman.

Digging through her purse, Kari located Jeff's phone number. His machine answered. "Politicians aren't supposed to accept bribes," she said to the machine, "but since you're not a politician, I hope you're susceptible to bribery. This is Kari Crandall. Would the promise of a delicious dinner tempt you into coming by my house to fix my computer this evening? Stuck 'E' key. Don't know what to do about it. And you're a Mac person, so you should know your way around my keyboard.

"I have the fixings for a yummy dinner, and no guest coming. A friend cancelled. Her loss can be your gain. Am I tempting you? And if you can't come for dinner, can you at least fix the machine?" she pleaded. "I called my other Mac guru, but he gave me the cold shoulder. Help!" Then, she left her home and office phone numbers.

At a little after 1:00, Jeff called her at work. "I checked my voicemail at lunchtime and found you on it. I don't know," he tormented her. "Is the dinner going to be worth it? I need to know the menu before I'll commit."

"You rat!"

"What time do you want me there?"

"Give me a chance to go home and cook." And read Max's latest letter in private. "I'll see you around 7:00?"

"Seven it is. Give me your address and directions to your house."

Rushing frantically, Kari got home by 6:00. By 6:15 the dinner was cooking. By 6:30 she was in good shape to take a "Max break." She logged on and found his letter.

My dear,

Just home from work. I wish you were here to greet me. Now, that would perk me up after a long, tiring day. Nothing is amiss; just a hard, exhausting day. But how nice to know I will at least be "talking" to you at the end of it.

Say, that makes me think—why don't you send me your phone number, and I'll call you one of these nights? What time do you go to bed? I'll call you at bedtime and we can "get in bed together." It won't be as good as feeling your soft, velvety skin against mine, feeling the warmth of your body, cupping your full breasts in my strong hands. But it will do till the real thing...which I hope will happen soon.

I long to cuddle to you—both face-to-face before we make love and spoons position as we drift off to sleep afterward. Before, I'll hold you facing me, feeling your soft breasts pressed against the strength of my chest, feeling your bush blend with mine, insinuating my thigh between your thighs and tantalizing your love nest with the pressure of my leg. I am eager to consummate our passion.

You must tell me your favorite position(s), and your favorite forms of lovemaking.

My sweet Kari, think of me as you go about your evening. (You said a friend was coming over, didn't you?) And I'll think about you too, and try to get back online to write you a good-night.

Yours, Max

Max

She keyed in a quicker reply than usual, mindful of the dinner that would need attention shortly, and frustrated by that damn "E" key, which kept sticking. She told him of the change in plans for the evening—the sticking "E" key, Steve's unavailability to help, Lylah's cancellation, and Jeff's willingness to step in. She detailed the menu she was serving Jeff. "I wish *you* were the guest instead of Jeff. What's your all-time favorite food?" she asked him. Then, she gave him her phone number, chatted briefly about her day, and told him she'd answer his questions about sex later. Signing off, she dashed back into the kitchen.

Dinner was a half-hour from ready when Jeff showed up on the dot of 7:00. "Sheesh! Such perfect punctuality!" she said. "Your patient awaits you in the living room. You can get this chore out of the way now, or relax now and 'operate on the patient' after dinner. But either way, your hand looks empty. What sort of drink should I put in it?"

"Now, and scotch on the rocks," Jeff answered.

Pleased that he was going to look at her computer right away, Kari fixed two drinks while Jeff sat at her computer with the bag he'd brought with him. He got the problem solved quickly, and they relaxed and talked while dinner finished cooking.

Jeff had changed clothes before coming over and was wearing jeans, a blue sport shirt...and, of course, his perpetual grin. Kari had changed into a muumuu, blue and gold and purple, comfortable and bright, complimentary but informal. She hadn't felt she had to dress to impress Jeff. So she was surprised when he said, "That's a very pretty-colored dress. It brings out the color of your eyes." Lylah had once said the same thing about the same muumuu, but she hadn't expected Jeff to notice. Men usually didn't.

Dinner was perfection. Jeff did justice to her cooking, scarfing down seconds of everything, even the veggies. "Are the recipes a trade secret?" he asked. "Not that I think that, in my hands, they'd turn out as good as you made them, but I'd sure love to try."

"He cooks, too!" Kari marveled.

"I'm full of surprises."

"Well, dessert's not homemade. It's sinful, but store bought."

"Too bad I didn't know about tonight in advance. I'd've contributed the dessert. I bake a mean pie."

"Apple?"

"Among others. Hey...I could whip one up now. Unless you were planning on kicking me out right after dinner?"

"Is that a serious offer?"

"I have been known to tease on occasion...but, yes, that was a sincere, legitimate offer." He reached for his barely used paper napkin and withdrew a pen from his pocket, writing, *COUPON. GOOD FOR ONE APPLE PIE. ANY NIGHT IN OCTOBER...INCLUDING TONIGHT.* He wrote in decorative letters with fancy flourishes, and when he'd finished, he put the napkin on the table in front of Kari.

"I've never been known to turn down an apple pie," she said.

"I passed a supermarket two blocks from here," Jeff said, standing up. "I assume you have flour?" Kari nodded. "Salt?" And he continued reciting the list of ingredients, making note of what he'd need.

Kari had been bummed out over Lylah's cancelling their gettogether...again. But Jeff was as much fun as Lylah, and he liked to cook and bake. She had laughed her way through dinner with him, nearly choking on the Mushrooms Florentine at one point when he made an irresistibly funny joke just as she was swallowing.

He was back from the supermarket in no time, and as he prepared the dough and filling, rolled out the dough, and got the pie in the oven, he kept up a running commentary that had Kari doubled over with laughter.

They settled into two chairs in the living room while the pie scented the house with apple and cinnamon. Kari was drooling long before the pie came out of the oven. Jeff talked about politics, about the forthcoming election, about why Larrimore really was preferable to Badley, about the other races in the election, about previous political campaigns, and about the need to get more people involved.

When the pie was ready, Kari was surprised to see it was 10:00 already. "Do you take your pie with cheese or ice cream?" Jeff asked. "Or should I first ask which you have in the house?"

"Actually, the answer to your first question is 'neither' and the answer to your second question is 'cheddar cheese and chocolate ice cream,' but it's usually American cheese or vanilla ice cream on apple pie."

"No problem—I take mine plain too. I'm a purist when it comes to apple pie. I don't believe in ruining the taste with anything extraneous. If it's a good pie, let it be, and if it's a bad pie, don't bother."

"Well, this'll be a good pie...I can tell by the smell."

Kari's nose wasn't wrong; the pie, when it had cooled off a little, tasted as good as it smelled. Jeff had even cleaned up the kitchen when he first put the pie into the oven, a fact at which Kari had marveled.

Jeff was very unlike most guys she had known...he seemed more like one of her woman friends. When he looked at his watch and said, "It's about that time," she felt regret that the evening was over...until she realized Max might be waiting for her "inside her computer."

"Don't forget tomorrow," Jeff reminded her as he put his hand on the doorknob.

"I'll be there," Kari replied. "What time do you want me?"

"Whenever you can conveniently get there. Grab a bite after work and come right over if you can." Then, he opened the door, letting the night air swirl into the apple-scented house. Up high, Kari saw the moon, diminished since the other night. Again, she had the thought that it was the same moon that was shining down on Max. And she closed the door hurriedly after Jeff so she could rush to her computer, log on, and check for incoming email.

My dear,

I spent a pleasant evening. Lamb chops, peas, and mashed potatoes for a simple but satisfying dinner, then painted one room. I'm determined to repaint the whole house, but I'm doing it one room at a time when I feel like it, instead of making a must-do, hurry-and-finish, major project out of it.

Tonight I did the dining room. At the rate I'm going, by the time I finish the last room, it will be time to start over again with the first room.

Then I settled in to answer my email. Enjoyed your letter, but I'm eager to read your answers to my sexual questions. Do tell me what you like so my fantasies can be more accurate.

Tell me, too: Are your breasts doughy or firm? Both are good, but I want my fantasies as accurate as possible when I take myself in hand and relieve the pressure that thinking of you has built up in me.

Since "meeting" you online, I find I need to relieve the pressure much more often. My thoughts are filled with you at all hours. You pop into my mind at work, at play, at rest. You reside in my mind, in my heart, in my fantasies. You occupy a special place in my imagination. What I feel for you goes beyond the physical alone, but I can hardly deny that that is where the results are most visible. The embarrassing protrusion in my pants in the middle of doing business is testament to your strong hold on me, and proof that my mind has wandered from work once again in the midst of what are supposed to be business hours.

If I can get there this coming weekend, are you free?

Yours,

Max

Well, if he was having to "take himself in hand," as he so delicately put it, there probably wasn't any other woman in his life at present. Relieved, and excited at the prospect of seeing him in the flesh, she felt very up as she wrote her reply.

Hi, Max,

I, too, had a good evening and am as hungry for you as you are for me. Jeff was able to fix the stuck "E" on the computer. I'm in good shape to keep writing you. I was concerned the "E" would stop working altogether. Then how could I type, "Yes—I'll make sure I'm available this coming weekend!"—a sentence requiring seven "E"s?

Do you really think you can be here? When will you know for sure? I'm counting the days—hours—minutes till you get here.

And I'm not going to answer your sexual questions. You'll have to meet me face-to-face to learn the answers. (Have I given you more incentive to get here quickly?)

Meanwhile, call me one of these nights...soon!

Yours, Kari

Chapter 6

Max sat at his computer, reading Kari's letter. She seemed so bubbly, so vibrant, so funny, so warm. But would she be the same in person?

Once, in the past, Max had been quite taken with a woman he'd met by phone...they'd been doing business over the telephone, but had had no occasion to meet face-to-face. Enchanted with her—she'd possessed many of the same characteristics he ascribed to Kari—he agreed to meet this woman for drinks and dinner.

After half a drink, he'd known the evening was down the tubes. The woman—her name was Helene—was vastly different in person than he'd expected from her telephone persona. On the phone, she'd been funny, flirtatious, and warm...among other characteristics. But in person, she was stiff, uptight, serious, and totally lacking the warmth that had drawn him to her.

If Helene could be that much of a disappointment...and he'd talked to her often by phone...what could happen with Kari, whom he'd never even spoken to? She might prove to be incredibly—and disappointingly different in person.

Restless, Max got up from his computer and looked at his watch. Only 8:00. Not much of a TV fan, Max preferred pursuits that engaged him more completely. Now he debated what to do. He'd already finished the crossword and was too tired for anything as physical as painting another room of his house or working on the car he was restoring.

He finally settled on running a couple of errands. He could go to the supermarket, and he could stop by the ATM to deposit a couple of stock dividend checks he'd gotten in today's mail. He had tomorrow night's dinner in the house, but needed something for Wednesday and Thursday, as well as a few other necessities. He could also stand to put some gas in the car.

At the supermarket, he picked up some fresh rye bread at the bakery counter, shunning the packaged breads. There were no other customers at the counter, and a new young woman waited on him. She was friendly, vivacious, almost flirtatious. Max got into a spirited exchange with her, but when she seemed to be coming on to him, he drew back and said, "Well, I'd better get on with my shopping."

Kari's concerns notwithstanding, Max was no gadabout. He had no other lady in his life right now, and with his thoughts very much centered on Kari, he wasn't looking to invest his emotional energy anywhere else.

In fact, when one of the regular cashiers got into conversation with him as she rang up his purchases, his thoughts turned, yet again, to Kari. This checker had a figure most women would kill for, though she had all the personality of a haddock in spite of a pleasant enough demeanor.

As Max exchanged the usual small talk with her, he compared her face with the photo of Kari's face, scanned her body, and thought, *She's got very impressive looks, but what good is that when there's no sparkle? Now, if she had Kari's personality....*

Which led him to wonder about Kari below the neck. What did the rest of her look like? From her facial photo, he suspected she might be a tad overweight, but he couldn't be sure.

Paying for his purchases, he scooped up his two bags and left the store, driving to the bank a block away. There was an ice cream store in the same shopping plaza as the bank, and he decided to indulge. A banana split seemed very enticing.

He wasn't the only one with ice cream concoctions in mind. As he walked to the ice cream store from the bank, a rather fat woman was standing outside the store, eating a strawberry royale. Max slowed his steps as he caught sight of the generously proportioned woman.

His eyes took in every visible inch from head to toe, and a huge shudder passed through him. Then, he turned abruptly around and headed back to his car. Maybe he'd skip the ice cream after all. He took one last look over his shoulder as he walked away, and his lip curled up in disgust.

Chapter 7

Work was a bitch on Tuesday. A press release had an error in it—not Kari's fault, but it still made her look bad. A crisis arose in Accounting that involved her department, and she got dragged into it. The woman who usually answered the phones over lunch was out sick, two secretaries were out sick, and Kari got dragooned into fielding the phones for an hour. Some information she needed for a report she was working on wasn't available.

Worst of all, she was getting stage fright about her weekend with Max. What if they didn't hit it off as well in person as they had by email? What if they found that, in person, they sat staring at each other and had nothing to say? What if he canceled...it wasn't definite, after all.

Or what if she fell seriously in love and began a long distance affair? Could he, would he, come see her every weekend? Would that even be enough? Ultimately, would he be willing to move to Jeffersonville? If not, would she be willing to move to Elm Ridge, giving up her job, selling her house, pulling up roots? If Max had been raised in his house, he might not be willing to pull up stakes so easily. But could she?

By mid afternoon, she'd developed a headache. She reached for an emergency Snickers bar from her desk drawer, but it didn't help anything—the headache, the worries, or the business problems.

At 5:00, she felt like just going home, having dinner, and curling up in bed with a good novel. But, of course, she had committed to helping with the mailing at Larrimore HQ. Resolutely, she headed around the corner to China Xpress, whose motto was "Food on your table in ten minutes, or dinner's on us."

In fact, it took eleven minutes for her to be served, which Kari was not at all reticent to point out to her waiter. She ate her egg roll, Szechuan pork, and House Special fried rice—combination platter number six—with extra enjoyment, knowing all it would cost her was the tip. Then, fastidiously dabbing at her mouth, she rose from the table and exited the restaurant.

It was growing quite chilly. Kari hurried to the warmth of her car and pulled out into traffic, heading for the campaign's storefront. When she got there, things were in a worse uproar than they'd been at her office earlier. "I *know* I picked those flyers up earlier!" Russ was thundering. Russ was one of the bigwigs in the campaign. "I picked them up personally! They were in the back of the van."

"Maybe the printer's still open and could run some more off for us," Jeff suggested.

"Where are the ones we already had...and paid for?"

"I never saw them," Jeff quickly pointed out.

"You were in charge of getting the mailing out. Did you take them off the van and forget?"

"I haven't seen them, I told you."

"Well, *somebody's* done something with them. Look around the office again."

"We've looked three times," Eileen said wearily.

"Well, please look again." His voice brooked no buts.

Turning to Kari, whom he'd only just noticed, Jeff added, "Somebody's been tearing our posters down, too. *That*, I'd assume, is being done by some of Badley's people, but I can't account for the flyers."

"Maybe Badley's got a mole in our office." That was another of the volunteers.

"You've been reading too many spy novels." That was yet another volunteer.

"It does seem awfully odd...." Russ agreed with the first volunteer.

Kari looked around the room. Was someone here really sabotaging the campaign? Russ seemed suspicious of Jeff...but it *couldn't* be Jeff. Kari refused to believe that was a possibility. "What are we going to do?" she asked. Her coat was halfway off, hanging from one arm. Was there work for her, or should she hurry home to her computer?

"You're here to work. Get to work," Jeff said. "Get on the phones. We'll get the job reprinted—if we don't find the flyers by tomorrow morning—and we'll do the mailing Thursday. Meanwhile, scare up some votes by phone. But first, why don't you have a look around the place? Maybe a fresh pair of eyes will find the missing flyers.

"They're black and red on tan paper, and they were in brown cardboard cartons. The printer folded and stapled them for us. We have to address the outside of them and meter them.

"Look for anything that might be them. Maybe someone put them in a different container, or...I don't know. Just look." The forever grin was a mere hint of its usual brilliance, the hair wilder than ever from his running his fingers distractedly through it. "Steve looked earlier, too, but maybe one more pair of eyes...."

Lylah's husband had said he was working at Larrimore headquarters, but so far Kari hadn't run into him there.

Kari looked under, over, into, and around every pile of papers, carton, wastebasket, file drawer, you name it. She went out to the van and looked inside. She even timidly checked Jeff's car, unlocked and parked right out front.

No flyers anywhere. No sign of them. Not one single flyer remained of all of them. There had been tens of thousands of them...how had they all disappeared? Today hadn't been trash day. Where had they gone? More and more, it seemed it had been no mere accident, no simple matter of someone misplacing them. How do you misplace that many cartons, that many pieces of paper?

Kari got on the phones, began exhorting people to get out and vote for Larrimore, telling one and all who answered why Larrimore was the better candidate...when she could get that far. Many people weren't home, and of those who were, many had already made their minds up, for or against, and didn't want to hear her pitch.

Working down the list, she came to a Phil Traylor. "Hello, Mr. Traylor? I'm calling from the Ron Larrimore election headquarters."

"This isn't Phil."

"May I speak with him?"

"He's out of town. I'm taking care of his place while he's gone."

"Well, are you a registered voter?

"Yes, I am."

"Well, may I talk to you, then?" And she launched into the litany of reasons why Larrimore was the better candidate...but all the while wondering why the voice on the other end sounded familiar. The man interrupted her from time to time with a question, and each time he did, she puzzled over the familiar sound of his voice.

Near the end of the conversation, he said, "You sound familiar. Do I know you? What's your name?" And as he did, it hit her—it was Glenn! Glenn, who'd made the elephant crack after one night in bed with her. Suddenly shaking, she hung the phone up. Jeff, who was discreetly standing behind the volunteers, monitoring their work, noticed that she'd hung up without a goodbye. "What was that?" he asked gently.

"An asshole I once...dated," Kari answered. And broke down crying. Immediately, she was ashamed of herself for having so little self-control, but Jeff put an arm around her and comforted her. *The way Lylah would do...or would have done in the old days*, Kari thought bitterly. Feeling very unprofessional, she pulled herself together as quickly as she could. She hadn't known the nerve Glenn had hit was still so raw.

"Do you want to go home?" Jeff suggested. "You've been working since 6:00; it's 9:00 already, about time to stop calling people anyhow. You've been working all day, too. There's not a whole lot more to do tonight without the flyers. Come back Thursday, like we'd planned, and you'll work on the mailing then."

Grateful for his understanding, Kari slipped into her coat, gathered up her pocketbook, and left. It had been a bad day all around the board, but Max would be waiting for her "in her computer."

Opening her front door, she flung her coat down on the nearest chair, stopped only long enough to put on some music and grab a Diet Pepsi, then rushed over to the computer. She booted up, logged on, and found three pieces of email...but none were from Max. Her bad day was continuing!

Her mind raced through all possible scenarios. Something she'd said in her last letter had put him off. He was ill. He'd had to work late. His former fiancée had reappeared on the scene. He had plans for the evening and hadn't been able to log on, but would pop up later. His computer had broken down. *Which?*

She dashed off quick answers to the three letters. She was in no mood to chat lengthily. Then the phone rang. It was Jeff. "Just checking that you're okay," he said. "You were upset. I wanted to make sure you got home all right."

An Appetite for Passion

"That's sweet of you," Kari said, and meant it. They didn't talk at any length. Once he was satisfied she was all right, he returned to another futile search for the missing flyers. But she was touched that, in the midst of his own pressing problems, he'd been a caring enough friend, even though he was a new friend, that he'd taken the time to call and check on her. Then, as she hung up the phone, handling it reminded Kari that, in her wild dash to the computer, she not only hadn't hung up her coat, she hadn't checked the answering machine either.

And that was where she found Max.

She didn't know his voice, of course. But when his opening words were, "My dear," she had a sneaking, heart-exalting suspicion.

"My dear," his message said. "I'm sorry I missed you. I know you're working at the campaign headquarters after dinner, but I was hoping you were coming home for dinner. I'm doing some campaign volunteer work myself this evening, heading out that way now. I'll be back by 10:00, but I'll wait to call you till 11:00. You should surely be home by then. Be ready for bed when I call, and we'll go to bed together."

Ironically, the only other message was from someone at Badley's headquarters, calling to persuade her to vote for their candidate!

Feeling considerably cheerier, Kari prepared a bubble bath. She usually showered, saving baths for special occasions or times when she felt like doing something luxurious. As she poured the fragrant bubble liquid under the steamy water, she thrilled to the thought of talking with Max in just a little while.

The CD she'd been playing had gone off, so she went back down to the living room and put on a Tony Bennett album, cranking it up loud so she could hear it upstairs. Then she returned to the bedroom, selected a filmy, scarlet nightgown, and laid it out on the bed.

Sinking into the fragrant, warm, bubble-heaped water, Kari lay back and luxuriated. She imagined Max was there with her. Soaping her back. Talking softly to her. Climbing into the tub with her. Would he fit in there with her? It was a small tub. What if it turned out he, too, was overweight? He didn't look it in the picture, but photos could be deceptive, and besides, the picture showed him only to the waist.

She had taken her watch off to get into the water, but she suspected it was closing in on 11:00. Hurriedly, she sat up, washing herself carefully. A

scrupulously clean person to begin with, she washed extra-well tonight, as if Max were *really* going to be in bed with her instead of just over the phone. Then she got out, dried off, and went into the bedroom where the nightgown was waiting.

The clock on the bedside table said ten of eleven. Moving quickly, she hurried downstairs, turned off the stereo, the lights, the computer, put the chains on both doors, hung up her coat belatedly, and double-checked the stove. When she was content that everything was in order, she practically dashed up the stairs. The phone was ringing as she pulled back the covers.

"Hello?"

"My dear Kari. That is you, isn't it?"

"Max?"

"At your service. Are we in bed together?"

She sat down, pulled her legs up onto the bed, pulled the upper sheet over her, and lay on her left side, holding the phone to her right ear. "Yes. Yes, we are. You're in bed too?"

"Under the covers in the altogether."

"I'm wearing a fancy nightgown especially for you."

"Describe it for me."

"It's scarlet, sheer, floor-length with fancy stitching around the bustline, and it plunges between my...between my breasts." She had typed the word "breasts" to him any number of times, but she was momentarily shy about saying it.

"It's beautiful. You look delightful in it. But now, take it off. I want you naked."

She complied, sitting up to remove the nightgown, then resuming her former position.

"First, tell me about your day before we get into anything more intimate."

More intimate. A shiver raced through her at the implication. She told him about her day, glossing over the most depressing parts and leaving Glenn out altogether. Max, in turn, filled her in on his day. He made the life of a stockbroker sound more exciting than she would have thought.

Max had worked on a mailing that evening at the campaign headquarters where he was volunteering; he agreed it sounded like *someone* had sabotaged the Larrimore mailing. "I know Russ thinks it was Jeff, and I just don't believe it," she said. "I looked for the flyers. They said Steve—my friend Lylah's husband—looked for them. Other people looked for them. No one could find them. They didn't just get up and walk off by themselves. But it wasn't Jeff!"

"The culprit will be found," Max soothed. "Keep your eyes and ears open...maybe you'll even solve the mystery yourself. Now let's talk about more...personal...matters. Like you. And me. Together. I still want to see you this weekend. And I'm still not one hundred percent positive I can. But it's only Tuesday in any event. Right now, let's deal with tonight. Tonight, I'm in bed with you long distance...which is better than not at all. I have a good imagination. Do you?"

"Oh, very!" Kari gasped. She could already feel him in the bed with her, feel his strength as he pressed against her, even feel every hair on his chest, his arms, his legs.

"You have a very sexy voice, my dear. Talk to me."

She'd been thinking that *he* had a sexy voice, especially when he talked about sex, and his voice dropped into a lower register and took on the qualities of pouring honey.

Kari hesitated only a moment. "You *are* naked. Your body is pressed to mine, your strength palpable, your warmth spreading through me, your arms around my body, holding me tight."

Max jumped in. "Holding you tight and stroking your soft, sweet back. But let me get one arm out from under you, and move the other one, too. I want to have them free to roam your body, free to explore your delicate flesh, your billowing breasts, the curves of your hips. I want to trace the outlines of your body till I know you by Braille, till I would recognize you among two hundred other women in a totally darkened room.

"My sweet Kari, do you know how you affect me? Do you know how I burn to be with you? I want to talk with you, cuddle with you, cozy with you and share the Sunday papers with you, sip coffee with you and eat dinner with you and sleep with you cradled in the crook of my elbow. But most of all, I want to make love to you.

"I want to trace up and down the length of your body with my fingertips and raise goose bumps on your silken skin. I want to trace the tips of your nipples and make those little bumps rise on your areolas. I want to kiss every inch of you and feel the dappled softness of your derriere, the giving flesh of your breasts, the firm protrusion of your pelvic bone, the warmth emanating from the secret place between your legs.

"I believe in preparing a woman first, not taking her in a rush. By the time I enter you, you'll be begging me to satisfy you."

"I'm begging you now," she sobbed. "You have me in such a state, I can't possibly last till this weekend."

"My dear, I'm no torturer, but I'm also no magician. I can't slip through the phone wires and magically appear at your end of the connection.

"I also can't just pick up and drive over there tomorrow. There's the matter of a little thing called work. I suspect you can't easily get time off either. But the anticipation will whet our appetites for each other, and when we do get together, we'll be that much more appreciative of each other, hmmm?"

"I doubt I could appreciate you by phone and modem any more than I do already. What I want now is to see you in the flesh, Max, honey...to touch you...to kiss you, cook for you, make love with you, laugh with you. To reach over and touch you whenever I want. Maybe *then* I'll appreciate you more, but for that you have to be here...."

There was so much to look forward to, so much they could enjoy together: They would be able to share their bodies for real...and share a pot of coffee, and the Sunday paper, and a drive around her hometown, and conversation, and their aspirations, and stories of their childhood and families, and so much more, she thought.

"You are sweet, my dear, so sweet...and so desirable." Max's voice sounded tired now, but soothing and reassuring. Kari realized she was tired, too. The long day had taken its toll.

"I'm going to hang up now. Do you realize how long we've been talking? You're worth every penny on my long distance bill, but you do need to get your sleep, and so do I. A sleepy stockbroker and a sleepy publicity writer are not going to do their jobs well in the morning. Good night, my dear, and sleep well. Dream only of me, and dream only sweet dreams."

"No bad dreams for you either, tonight," Kari instructed him mockseverely. "I won't be online in the morning," Max said. "I have a seven o'clock business breakfast. But remember that I'll be thinking of you. And I'll be writing to you tomorrow evening. Do you have any plans for the evening?"

"Not a one," Kari answered. "I'll probably do laundry, balance my bank statement, that sort of thing. Maybe curl up with a good book."

"What do you like to read? Never mind—we'll be off and running, talking for another hour. Save it for one of the many things we'll talk about when we get together. Meanwhile, cuddle your pillow and pretend it's me...and I'll do the same. Sweet sleep, my dear. Till tomorrow evening by email."

"Good night, my Max." She had almost said "Good night, my love," but stopped herself in time. She didn't really love him yet...did she? Could she? Or was she just beginning to? In any case, prudence dictated that she curb her tongue till she met him face-to-face.

Hanging up the phone, Kari turned off the light and rolled over, hugging the extra pillow to her as Max had told her to, though it didn't feel at all like a man in her bed. Letting go of the pillow, she imagined him in her arms and drifted right off to sleep.

Chapter 8

Kari awoke before the alarm went off on Wednesday morning, feeling particularly refreshed. She luxuriated under the covers, feeling the cool, softness of the sheets against her bare skin while trying to recover the dream that had put her in such a glowing state. Then she remembered. It hadn't been a dream—it had been Max's phone call, providing the dangled hope of a visit this weekend.

Excited at that prospect, she threw back the covers and bounced out of bed. The carpet was cool under her feet. In a sensuous mood, she wriggled her toes on the pile and got into the feel of the plush fibers under and between her toes. She had not laid out any clothes the night before, and now she decided to dress in something smashing to celebrate her upbeat mood. Her red pantsuit would do very nicely. It was bright and cheery, had a thinning effect, and projected an efficient, executive image.

She flinched at her nude image in the mirror as she passed it, but was relieved when the scale didn't chastise her for all those yummy desserts. Her weight, though not diminished, was at least holding steady.

She mentally went over her wardrobe, already debating what to wear that weekend. Kari wanted to wear something with a slimming effect like the red pantsuit. She expected Max to be somewhat put off by her weight, but if she could continue to captivate him while she was still dressed, and manage to look slimmer than she was by dint of selecting her outfit carefully, maybe by the time she undressed, he'd no longer care about her girth.

He'd be so smitten that her weight would seem irrelevant...especially if she could manage to keep the bedroom dark so he didn't get a good look at her. Mentally dressing herself for the weekend, she grew nervous but excited, and her already good mood soared even higher. Halfway down the stairs, she remembered Max saying he wouldn't have time to log on in the morning, and momentarily her high spirits evaporated, but she felt too good for the disappointment to linger. A band of bright orange crested a bank of purple clouds to the east, as Kari saw when she opened the blinds on the that side of the house. *Red sky at morning, sailors take warning? Hell—I'm not a sailor!* While the coffee brewed, she logged on optimistically, but true to his word, Max wasn't there. *At least I know why, know he's not back with his ex-fiancée or something.*

As if benevolent gods were determined not to douse her good spirits, the day at work went smoothly, and to top it all off, Lylah called at 4:30. "Doing anything this evening? Steve unexpectedly got a call to help out with something at Larrimore's headquarters. I'm available if you want to get together."

They went out to dinner at a new Norwegian restaurant. Kari had never met a cuisine she didn't like, but there were any number she simply hadn't tried yet for lack of opportunity. She mentally crossed Norwegian off the list of never-trieds and pronounced the dinner delicious. They went back to Lylah's house for a while afterward.

Most of the talk was about babies. Kari felt doubly left out. First of all, she wished she, too, were starting a family. Put simply, she was jealous. Second, the forthcoming baby was a major part of Lylah's life now, and an experience she, Kari, had never shared, could not discuss from an I've-beenthere point of view. It made the conversation kind of one-sided.

More and more, Kari felt distanced from Lylah these days. Lylah's life seemed to have moved into a whole new sphere. Kari could understand Lylah's being caught up with the baby, but did Lylah have to let her enthusiasm lead her to exclude Kari from her life?

Kari felt uncomfortably jealous of the baby. She was angry at herself for this unworthy emotion, but there it was. She tried to reason with herself, but the jealousy overrode reason. She'd felt twinges of envy all along that Lylah had a husband, a forthcoming baby, the life Kari wanted for herself, but that had never gotten in the way of her friendship with Lylah. This was different.

She was jealous not of Lylah, but of the unborn life growing within Lylah. It seemed that the larger the baby grew, the more of Lylah's thoughts and emotions it took up till Lylah had no time and no thoughts for her best friend—or was it *former* best friend?—anymore.

Her life was an endless round of baby-clothes-shopping expeditions, obstetrician appointments, natural childbirth classes, parenting seminars, self-help groups, discussions with women who already had kids.... Not only didn't Kari have a husband and child of her own, as she wanted, but she felt that now she'd lost her best friend, too. Lylah never had time for her anymore, and on those rare occasions when she did, all she ever wanted to talk about was the baby.

When Lylah bubbled with enthusiasm, pronouncing potential baby names aloud to see how they sounded, discussing the side effects of pregnancy—she was past the morning sickness, but the frequent peeing had returned)—and voicing her fears about childbirth, Kari could only listen. At best she could offer intelligent commentary or secondhand information. But she couldn't offer firsthand advice or even say, "Yes, I know. I remember." She didn't. Pregnancy was a land she had never visited, and much as she coveted the journey, she lacked the passport—a husband.

"Isn't this darling?" Lylah gushed, holding up one tiny item of clothing after another. There were clothes she had bought, hand-me-downs from various friends, and even a smattering of early gifts. More and more, Kari found herself forcing her enthusiasm till she began to debate pleading tiredness and leaving quickly. In fact, Max might have written her by now.

"And what's new in your life?" Lylah asked. "I know you're volunteering for Larrimore, but what else is happening with you? How's the new Internet connection? Are you learning to surf the Net?"

"I've met a man."

"Where?"

"Online. But he might be coming here this weekend. I'm waiting to hear for sure."

"Where's he staying if he comes?"

"With me—of course!"

"You're going to let a stranger into your house? How do you know he's not a nutcase?"

"He's not a nutcase and he's not a stranger. We've been talking by email for weeks now. We even talked by phone last night." She pressed her thighs tightly together at the memory, and flares went off in the cleft between her legs. "If I were the kind of woman to 'do' bars, and I picked a guy up there and took him home, would that be any safer?" "No, but I'd worry about that, too."

"Well, you don't have to worry about Max."

"What about you—are you worried? What if he shows up and you find you don't like each other in person? What if you have nothing to talk about? What if he's ugly...or if he doesn't like your looks?"

"Relax. We've exchanged pictures."

"Suppose he snores like a steam engine, picks his teeth with your Things to Do list, smokes a cigar, stinks up the bathroom, doesn't bathe, has nasty teeth...."

"Stop it! Why are you determined to ruin my weekend in advance?"

"One of us has to be sensible, sweetie, and it obviously isn't you."

"Max is coming this weekend, and that's that. And I'm going to have a good time with him, and that's *that*. Since when are you so sensible and serious? Where's my fun-loving friend? I finally get to spend an evening with you...and you're not *you* anymore."

"I guess impending motherhood has brought out my maternal instincts."

"Well, can it and just be my friend again. Like the old days."

"Sweetie, people change. We're all growing, stretching. You too."

Yes, but we're growing in different directions. "Is it motherhood that's made you so serious, or are you just grouchy from lack of sex? Or has the doctor taken sex off your no-no list?"

"No, I'm still not allowed that pleasure. Poor me. Poor Steve, too! Thank God I trust him. I think this no sex thing is even harder on him than on me. With all those pretty volunteers at Larrimore's headquarters, I'd be worried if I didn't absolutely trust my husband."

"Well, be grateful for that. Now, ease up on Max. Trust him too. Just be happy for me. Be glad I've met someone. Who knows where it could lead?"

Lylah reached out and patted Kari's stomach. "Who knows? By this time next year you could be married and pregnant...and be proud of your size. You'd be rotund for a good cause."

"Now *that's* thinking positively. And speaking of 'positively,' positively I've got a good thing going. And positively Max is no axe-murderer. So lighten up and be happy for me. I'm happy. God, I never dreamed what getting connected to the Internet could lead to!"

"Has your Web surfing led you to a list of baby names anywhere? We're having the damnedest trouble deciding. All these cute clothes already, but still no name! I'm going crib shopping again tomorrow evening. Want to come?"

"I promised I'd be at Larrimore's headquarters tomorrow right after work. I'm just going to grab a quick bite first and run right in. I don't know anything about cribs anyhow."

"I could call Audrey. She'd know about cribs Or Joan. Or Marlene. Or Kayla.... We could get some other baby supplies while we're at it. I still haven't gotten baby powder, diapers, Q-Tips, crib sheets, a blanket...." And she was off, planning an evening with her new friends, billowed away on a gale of baby plans, caught up in baby-this and baby-that. Kari felt that Lylah seemed to be talking to herself, not even noticing if Kari was listening. *Would she even notice if I got up and left?*

Shortly after that, she did get up and leave. She had had enough baby conversation for one evening. She felt out of the loop. "I'll talk to you soon," she said as she left, and she remembered when that wouldn't have been necessary to say. When it would have been taken for granted. When they often talked several times a day.

Suppose he snores like a steam engine, picks his teeth with your Things to Do list, smokes a cigar, stinks up the bathroom, doesn't bathe, has nasty teeth.... Lylah's litany of possible problems echoed in her head all the way home, but she tried to dispel the gloom that had settled in her car. Everything's going to be fine...if he gets here.

Which he intended to, as she learned when she got home and logged on.

My dear,

Circle Friday night on your calendar. I'll take off around 5:00, arrive your place around 9:00. Please send exact directions. I'll stay till mid afternoon on Sunday.

If you'd like, I can make a big dinner for Sunday at noon. Do you do breakfast-lunch-dinner on Sundays, or brunch-dinner, or breakfast-dinnersupper, or what? Do you object to a man taking over your kitchen for a meal? Give me your thoughts. I want this visit to be a pleasure for you, not an intrusion.

I can't tell you how much I enjoyed last night. My toes are still tingling...along with select other parts.

My maleness is swollen just since I sat down at the computer to write to you. "He" knows what's in store for "him" this weekend, and "he" can't wait! Neither can the rest of me. My arms long to wrap around you, my lips to kiss your soft lips, my eyes to feast on your beautiful body, my nose to inhale the sweet scent of your clean hair, my fingers to touch you all over and get to know you intimately, and my tongue to taste every inch of you.

Oh, my sweet Kari, what beautiful love we'll make together...and what a wonderful time we'll have out of bed, too. I want you to show me your favorite possessions in your house...your favorite places in Jeffersonville...and pictures of your family, because they're a part of you.

No "hot talk" this letter...I don't want to heat you up and tempt you into relieving the pressure yourself. I want you with a full head of steam, three days of pent-up longings and no satisfaction, when we meet, and merge, on Friday.

I've been at it since early this morning, sweet Kari, and I'm tired. I have another long day in front of me. Another breakfast meeting. I promise you, it's business! And so I'm going to download some recipes and then go take a shower. I'll read a little and turn out the light by 10:00. By the time you read this, I may be asleep already...dreaming of you and our Friday rendezvous.

Till then,

Max

A sweet letter, she thought. And how nice of him to reassure her that his breakfast meeting was strictly business. How did he know she was worrying about that very thing? She was only worried about one thing he'd said— *"My eyes to feast on your beautiful body."* What if he didn't think her body was so beautiful when he saw it?

But she refused to dwell on negative thoughts. Kari's innate optimism was the reason she always bounced back from unhappy encounters with men. Immediately, her mind jumped to a negligee she'd seen in a window downtown. It was in a shop near the office. The negligee was black, cut full rather than tight, and would make her look glamorous—and thinner. She'd buy it tomorrow! Kari answered Max's letter, including precise directions for getting to her house from the Interstate, and asked him to bring pictures of his family with him. Next, she answered her other email and, since it was still early, she browsed around online awhile, downloading recipes, posting comments on a bulletin board, exploring what was still largely unfamiliar territory to her. At length, with thoughts of Max keeping her unable to concentrate on what she was doing, she logged off. After showering, she went to bed.

The human body is perverse. Just because Max had implored her to build up her desires, she was more filled with need than ever, and it took every ounce of willpower not to take steps to relieve that burning need. Images of Max floated into her mind. Max kissing her breasts, Max holding her tight, Max grinding his male hardness up against her, Max burrowing that engorged flesh into her churning depths, Max....

Abruptly, she sat and up and turned the light on again, reaching for the book on her night table. She read till her eyes would not stay open any longer, and only then—long after her usual hour of sleep—did she put down the book and turn out the light again. She knew she'd be groggy in the morning, but at least she knew she could go to sleep now.

For a few minutes, as she drifted in the neverland between wakefulness and sound sleep, her mind was a jumble of hazy thoughts. Lylah—they were drifting apart, weren't they? It was terrible to lose a friend. Babies—would she ever have a husband and a family? Max—what if Lylah was right and he *did* have some terrible habit, some overwhelming bad quality that she could not live with, something she couldn't discern by email? Well, better to find out now than later. Besides, she doubted it. Steve—he and Lylah hadn't had sex in ages, and still, Lylah was sure of his faithfulness. Would she, Kari, ever feel so confident in a man? Dinner Saturday—maybe she and Max would share the kitchen, each cooking part of the meal.

And that was the final coherent image in her mind before sleep claimed her. Max and her working side by side in domestic bliss in the kitchen.

Chapter 9

Kari was grateful for the busy pace at work on Thursday. Max had again not sent a morning letter—he'd warned her he had another business meeting—but the knowledge that she'd see him Friday night...*tomorrow!*...kept her bobbing on a cushy, glittery cloud all day. Still, the time would have really dragged if not for the particularly demanding workday. If ever a person was actually appreciative of crushing deadlines and an impossible work schedule, Kari, on that Thursday, was it.

But finally, her watch read 5:00. Kari scooted out of the office faster than a politician pursuing a major campaign donor. The negligee was still in the lingerie shop window, and Kari went in. "Do you have that in an extralarge?" she asked, pointing to the garment she had eyes for. The clerk produced it, and Kari took it into the fitting room.

She looked at herself in it, and she knew Max would be entranced. It hid her ample figure well, draping elegantly to the floor with a full sweep, yet plunging at the neckline to expose the full roundness of her voluptuous breasts. Lace in strategic places added softness and elegance.

There was a clothing store next to the lingerie shop. Wanting something new and smashing, Kari browsed the racks and came up with a full-cut, pleated, teal blue dress. She could dress it up if they ate out, or wear it casually during the day. The largest size they had it in was an 18, but it was a loose-fitting dress. Too, she'd actually succeeded in losing three pounds, yet another factor that had propelled her into her upbeat frame of mind, so she took the dress into the fitting room optimistically.

But the dress just didn't fit. Too small, too tight, it just wouldn't work. Suddenly, the dress was more than a dress. It seemed a metaphor for something more. Her relationship with Max? Her weight-loss effort? Life itself? The dress wouldn't fit, and the relationship wasn't going to work, her weight-loss effort was a failure, and life stunk. Tears burned her eyes and misted her vision as she blindly scrambled to yank the offending garment off her oversized, hulking body. She nearly tore it in her wild scramble to rid herself of the piece of fabric that was causing her so much pain. At last, she was free of the dress, but now she was facing her mirror image with only her underwear covering her mass of flesh and fat.

Yes, fat. There was no getting around it; Kari Crandall was a fat woman. Fat. Overweight, obese, more-than-just-hefty. Fat. What would Max say when he saw her in the buff? How would he react making love to a blubbery body? When he pulled off the black negligee, if the lights were on, how would he cope with the body he revealed underneath?

Her head buzzed; her eyes burned worse than ever. In a panic, she scrambled back into her clothes, leaving the teal dress in the fitting room and rushing blindly out of the store. In the car, she let go and bawled, her eyes overflowing, her wails so loud that more than one passerby stopped and looked in the car. She motioned each one to leave her alone, and they all did.

At last, she calmed down. Thank God for the roll of paper towels in the car. She had it there for such contingencies as cleaning off the windshield, but she used it now for blowing her nose and wiping off her smeared eye makeup. Her face was a riot of colorful rivulets, blue eye shadow and black mascara and liner cascading down her face in large, teary drops, and mixing with her blush.

Opening her purse, she got out her makeup case, then turned on the car's overhead light. As best she could, she reapplied her makeup till she looked at least semi-human. That was better than she actually felt, but looking decent was a start. Her eyes were still red-rimmed, but there wasn't much she could do about that.

She skipped dinner, only munching on a candy bar from her purse. When she walked into Larrimore headquarters, Jeff looked up from the computer and stared at her hard for a minute. Kari realized he was debating what to say about the condition of her eyes. "Don't ask," she said.

Jeff shrugged his shoulders as if to say, "Have it your way," and returned to the computer. He seemed very intent on his job.

"What's up?" she asked him, trying to keep her voice light.

"Trying to recover some files," he answered almost curtly, without looking up.

"Delete something you didn't mean to?" Kari asked.

"I didn't," he seethed.

Kari looked around. Eileen tilted her head sharply toward the far side of the room, in a "Come over there with me and we'll talk" gesture. Wonderingly, Kari followed her.

Knitting her brows in a puzzled expression, Kari asked, "What's up?"

"Someone deleted some vital files from the computer."

"By accident?"

"I doubt it. The backup copies on the floppy disks are gone too."

"What's missing?"

"Larrimore's speech for Friday night, and the list of registered voters with who's already been called and who said they'd vote for Larrimore."

"Who had access?"

"The last one here last night was Jeff. He stayed behind after everyone else had gone. Of course that makes it too obvious...I can't believe he'd be so stupid as to do it when everything points to him. Then again, I can't believe he'd do it to begin with. But since no one else saw anyone messing with the computer, it does look bad for him."

"Oh, I don't believe...Jeff couldn't possibly have ... no way!"

"I agree with you, but Russ and the others...they seem to think it looks like Jeff must be the one. They're keeping an eye on him. Larrimore himself is seeing red. Beyond red. Purple with chartreuse polka dots."

Kari giggled at that picture. It felt good to giggle again. But the laughter didn't last long when she thought of poor Jeff unfairly accused...and she knew it was unfair, just knew he hadn't done it."Do you suppose the same person who made the flyers disappear is responsible?"

"Hmmm...that's a good guess, but I don't know. Something fishy is going on, for sure."

Kari drifted back over to the computer. Jeff was still working at it. His forever grin was gone, replaced by a furrowed-brow concentration. "I have some software at home that I might be able to use to recover the lost files," he said. "I'll be right back." Jeff lived five minutes away.

The re-do on the mailing was back from the printers. Nothing had happened to these cartons; they were all lined up on the floor. Several volunteers were working at a long table, and Kari joined them. It was dull work, but Kari let her mind wander, thinking of the upcoming weekend with Max. Kari's black spirits had lifted, and her usual optimism reasserted itself.

She pictured Max walking in her backyard with her at night, his arm around her to keep her warm, gazing up at the star-smothered sky... Max waking her up in the morning with a soft, tender kiss on the shoulder... Max fixing coffee in the morning as if he truly belonged there... Max making delicious love to her, not omitting a single part of her body in his explorations... Max accompanying her all over Jeffersonville while she pointed out her favorite spots, and those of personal historical significance... Max curled up with her on the sofa, snuggling and talking, telling her all about himself.... Her reverie was interrupted by Jeff's return.

"Got the software?" Russ asked.

"Got it!"

"Think it'll work?"

"One way to find out." He went to work at the computer, whistling as he worked, and Kari kept glancing at him while she worked on the mailing. It was her job to stick pre-addressed labels on the mailers, a mindless task that left her plenty of time to speculate on the election hanky-panky. It seemed obvious to her that with two damaging incidents in two days, these happenings were not just accidents or carelessness. She was also sure that Jeff wouldn't have spirited away the mailing on Tuesday or deleted the computer information.

Or had he? Had she misjudged him? Was the fact that she enjoyed his company, was beginning to think of him as her newest friend, clouding her judgment? No! No, she was sure he was utterly innocent. Someone else was at fault...and in all probability, was trying to frame Jeff.

But no, that sounded too cloak-and-dagger. This was the stuff of novels, not real life. On the other hand, though, if these things didn't sometimes happen in real life, they wouldn't work as believable novels. Then maybe she *was* misjudging Jeff...maybe he *had* done it? No! But how to prove his innocence? How to find the guilty party?

"Got something!" Jeff sang out.

Russ called from across the room, "Got the speech back?"

"No, I can't recover the speech. But I read the original, and I'm not too bad with words. I believe I can rewrite the speech. I've recovered part of the voters list. Some of it's garbled, but, hey, this is a start. Half a loaf, and all that. Right?"

He worked awhile longer, saving and backing, finally printing out what he'd recovered. It wasn't complete, but as he'd said, some was better than none. He then went right to work on the speech, cobbling it together from bits of the original speech that he remembered and creations from his own brain that, Russ had to admit, were better than the original.

Ron Larrimore himself showed up at the storefront office just as Kari was getting ready to leave. Looking over the speech, he declared himself impressed with Jeff's facility with words. "Talk to me after I get elected," he said to Jeff.

Jeff shook his head. "I'll never quit my day job for politics," he said with a grin. "Too chancy."

"Uh—Ron...." Russ said, clearing his throat. Kari just knew that Russ was about to tell Larrimore not to offer Jeff any jobs if he was the one who had made the information disappear in the first place. On her way to the bathroom, a little while earlier, she had passed Russ's desk and overheard him on the phone. "...probably did it himself to make himself look good. Destroy it, save the day, and look like a hero?"

She didn't believe that scenario either, but at this point, she had to admit that things certainly looked bad for Jeff.

"I'll walk you to your car," Jeff said as Kari slipped into her coat. She wondered what was up. "You okay?" he asked when they were alone on the sidewalk out front.

Remembering her earlier sadness again, she sighed. "Yes, I guess so," she said wistfully.

"If you need a friend...a shoulder...."

"Thanks. I know you mean that."

"I do for real. You have my home phone?"

"Right here in my purse." She patted her large, black handbag.

"Could you find it if you needed it? It might be lost in that cavernous bag. What do you women keep in those things?"

"That's a secret I've been sworn never to tell a man. Only women know what we keep in our purses."

"I know—you've got an elephant in there."

"No, clowns. Like in the circus? If I open the bag, five clowns will climb out."

"I doubt it. Now, *midgets*, maybe."

"Open it and see for yourself."

"Are you nuts? If I open it, who knows what'll jump out and bite me. You may have a lobster in there." He made a claw out of his hand and lightly pinched at Kari's hand.

"No, you were right the first time. It's an elephant. It's going to squirt you with its trunk." By this time, they were both laughing.

"That's better," Jeff said, tugging emphatically at the corners of her mouth with his two index fingers to exaggerate her smile. Lunging at him, Kari lightly bit one of his fingers. "Have you had your rabies shots?" Jeff teased.

Kari opened the door. "Thanks," she said. Jeff had made her feel better...and he was the one who *really* needed—and deserved—cheering up.

"Don't forget...call me if you need to talk."

"And vice-versa! You've got my number, too. Do you want my work number?"

"I'll be fine." He gritted his teeth, determination overtaking his smile. He thrust his chin out resolutely. "When are you in next?"

"Nobody told me anything. And I have plans this weekend."

"Good. Something fun, I hope?"

"Most definitely! Max is coming over—my boyfriend." *Max—my boyfriend*—the first time she'd said that. She liked the sound.

"Well, give us a call Sunday or Monday, whenever you get a chance, and I'll let you know when we're going to have a project going. Or just drop in. There's always something to do."

"Okay. Bye."

"Bye." He waved as she closed the car door, started the car, and eased out of the parking space.

It was late, and she was tired, but nothing was going to stop her from checking email before she went to bed. There was only one piece of mail waiting for her, but it was from Max.

My dear,

Only one more day...I'll see you in roughly twenty-four hours...and it will be a rough twenty-four hours indeed, waiting to touch your sweet face with my hands, to blend my lips with yours, to hold your body tight to mine and feel the excitement surging through it.

I want to get to know your body, and I want to get to know all of you. Decisions, decisions—do we make love first, talk first, cuddle first—or have you some other plan for us? I'm all ears.

Did you have a good day, sweet Kari? Mine was plagued with problems, but nothing permanent or critical, and certainly nothing that being with you tomorrow won't erase from my consciousness.

I long to hold you in my arms, to whisper tender sweetnesses in your ears, to hear your voice say my name and hear it as beautiful music.

And speaking of music, I'm not a half bad singer; I may serenade you while I'm there. What is your favorite kind of music? That's a topic we've never discussed before. And please don't tell me you like rap—that's not music! Say you love rap and you'll ruin all my illusions.

Well, my dear, it's dinner time and I haven't eaten yet. I was eager to "talk" to you, first. But now that I've done that, I'll go fix a bite.

And so, that's it until tomorrow morning, and then tomorrow night when you should be watching your driveway for a red Porsche pulling in.

Till then,

Max

Kari's reply was briefer than usual. Partly this was due to her tiredness, partly to the constraints on what she would say to him. She wouldn't cry on his shoulder over the bad day; she didn't want to tell him about the negligee she'd bought for him, preferring to surprise him with it. In the end, she told him how eager she was to see him, briefly described the incident at the campaign HQ with the missing data, and let it go at that.

Showering quickly, she got in bed, but as tired as she was, she couldn't sleep. Lots of what-ifs ran through her head. What if Max was unable to come tomorrow for some reason? What if he just didn't like her when he met her? And then, what if Jeff really had destroyed the data and was responsible for the mailers' disappearing act?

On a night when she needed to be wide awake the next evening, and really needed a good night's sleep, Kari tossed and turned till well past 1:30.

Chapter 10

Jeff trudged back to the storefront reluctantly. No fool, he surmised what Russ was saying about him. What many of his co-workers were no doubt thinking and saying.

Kari seemed to believe in him. Sweet Kari. She was the only one there who he felt truly trusted him one hundred percent.

Kari. She was fun, she was funny, she was quick-witted, clever, and intelligent. She reminded him of Jennifer. Jennifer had been his best friend in college. That and more. They'd progressed, Jeff and Jennifer, from bestfriendship to romance. Jeff had always believed your mate should be your friend. Not every friend could, or should, be a lover, of course, but it was good if any serious lover was also a friend.

Kari, of course, had a boyfriend—she had said as much. So that seemed to eliminate her as a potential romantic interest...at least, as long as the boyfriend remained on the scene. Too bad. But they could still be good friends. Jennifer and he had been good friends even before they started dating.

As Jeff returned to his work in the campaign office, he wondered what Kari's boyfriend was like. Was he rotund, ultra-skinny, or something closer to average? More importantly, did he appreciate Kari?

Did he realize how special she was? Creative, industrious, upbeat, friendly, trusting, and all that other good stuff...Kari had a lot going for her. Did this boyfriend know it?

As Jeff worked, his mind wandered. Kari had taken up residence in his brain. He realized, with guilt, that half of him was rooting for Kari's boyfriend to let her down.

He already considered Kari a friend. And part of him was cheering that friend on, wanting her to find satisfaction with the boyfriend she had mentioned. But another part of him—he had to be honest with himself—was hoping things didn't go well with the boyfriend, leaving Jeff a clear field to become something more than a friend, as he had done with Jennifer.

Working away, Jeff suddenly felt as if he were being scrutinized. If he looked up, he imagined he'd see everyone staring at him, wanting to see what he'd sabotage next. Damn!

To prove to himself that he was just being paranoid, he raised his head from his work abruptly...and found that Eileen and one of the newer volunteers actually were looking at him. Of course, that didn't absolutely prove what they were thinking, but the fact that they looked away as he looked up and caught them seemed pretty incriminating.

Suddenly, Jeff felt very insecure. He'd been a vital person in the headquarters since the start of the campaign. The others had looked up to him, in part because of his knowledge, in part because of his personality, and in part because of the sheer number of hours he donated to the cause. Now, suddenly, they were looking at him in a different way...with suspicion.

Jeff felt very alone. He even entertained fleeting thoughts of abandoning his work on the campaign. They could get along without him. There were plenty of other causes that could use his services.

No! He believed in Larrimore. He wanted to see the man get elected. And he was *not* going to let the other volunteers' suspicions drive him away from working for a cause he believed in.

But he wished they weren't all convinced he was behind the recent skullduggery. Again, the feeling of aloneness swept over him.

And again, he thought wistfully of Kari.

Chapter 11

When she first awakened on Friday, Kari was freezing. Though it was still dark out, and she couldn't see if it was fair or cloudy, the weather had unquestionably turned colder. At first Kari thought that was what had caused her to wake up even before her rooster alarm went off, and she huddled deeper under the covers, seeking warmth even if she couldn't go back to sleep.

Then she remembered—Max would be here tonight! Springing from her bed despite the chill of the room, she closed the cracked-open window and selected a different outfit from the one she'd laid out the night before...something more appropriate to the evident wintry temperatures than to the October date on the calendar.

Kari tried to remember if the paper had predicted the temperature plummeting this way. Finally, she decided she'd been too caught up in Max's eagerly awaited visit to focus on the paper, had read very little of it, absorbed even less, and had probably bypassed the weather altogether.

Dressing more rapidly than usual, she raced down the stairs, as if by her hurrying she could speed Max's arrival. She continued at a breakneck pace, booting up the computer, then putting on coffee while the computer slowly did its thing. She righteously forbore to eat any breakfast but the coffee maybe she could lose another pound today if she skipped lunch too?—then, while the coffee brewed, she went to the computer and logged on.

My dear,

Just a quickie because I have so much to do. I want to be all packed and ready to leave when I go to the office this morning. That way, as soon as I wind up the day at work, I can leave right from there and zoom across the actual highway—instead of this "information highway" we've been travelling—to you and your waiting hospitality.

Just think—by this evening, my arms will know the feel of you, my hands will mold to your curves, my lips can worship you in more ways than merely forming your name, and my eyes can devour the sight of you. By bedtime tonight, my nostrils will know the scent of your hair, my feet will have traced lazy paths up your legs, and my lips and the back of your neck will be the best of friends.

I'll grab a little nibble at my desk before I leave (around 5:00) to tide me over till I get there. Would you want to have a light supper ready for the two of us when I arrive (which should be around 9:00)? Making love surely requires some fuel. Besides, I want to know you in more ways than the Biblical sense. Since it was cooking that brought us together (did you ever try that first recipe?), it's only fitting that we eat together, and I get to know you as the chef extraordinaire that I'm sure you are.

And now I must go pack a bag. I'll log on one more time to see if you have any last-minute requests or driving instructions. I'll see you later!!!

Yours, Max

Kari kept her answer brief, thinking she didn't want to delay him even by two minutes. Of course, she knew that was silly—two minutes extra reading in the morning wouldn't delay a 5:00 PM departure—but she hurried all the same. She included her office phone number "just in case," telling Max she'd be there till at least 5:00.

Between rising early and keeping her email brief, she was way ahead of schedule, and she didn't feel like getting to work early, so she turned on the radio and straightened up the house a little. She'd been keeping on top of the housework, and it really was quite clean, but she eagerly polished the wood, dusted off the light bulbs and the lampshades, and bent to all the hard-to-get places she might have skimped on earlier in the week...like the carved legs of the end tables, and the bottom shelf of the bookcase.

Lost in a reverie of her romantic weekend-to-be, she wasn't paying much attention to the radio, but suddenly the announcer's voice brought her up short. "...would be the first snowfall of the season, and the first major snowfall to hit the area this early in the season in eighty-five years. If the front moves north of us...."

Oh no!

Holding perfectly still, she listened to the rest and gathered that there was a threat of a major snowstorm blanketing the area, starting around noon. Why couldn't it at least hold off till Sunday? That way it would keep him here instead of keeping him away!

But maybe the storm would track away from them. That seemed to be a possibility. Why hadn't she been paying attention to the radio? What were the odds? What were the determining factors? When would they know?

Dispirited, Kari quit tidying up and got out her winter coat, her muffler, her gloves, and her warm boots. Snow or no snow, it was damn cold out. With heavy steps, she walked to the door. Her feet felt weighted with misery. Half of her wanted to just go back to bed and pull the covers over her head.

She tried to look on the bright side. Maybe it *wouldn't* snow. Maybe the snow, if it came, would be minimal, and Max could handle the roads. Worst-case scenario, if it did snow heavily and preclude his visit, maybe he could still come visit next weekend. Certainly she had no other plans; maybe he hadn't any either. The week's delay would be insufferable, but she tried to tell herself it was *only* a seven day hold.

She stopped at a full service gas station, getting her antifreeze and tires checked...no harm in being extra safe. Now she was running late, and it was a little after 9:00 when she got to work. The morning dragged despite a heavy workload. At noon, though she had vowed not to eat lunch, she went out. She told herself she was only going to stretch her legs, only going to get a pack of sugarless gum, but she knew her real need was to assess the weather.

The low, leaden sky looked none too friendly. Though not a single snowflake was in evidence, the sky looked ready to unleash its wrath. Maybe it would just be flurries. Maybe it would pass without dumping snow. Maybe it would hold off till the night. Maybe they would just get a light dusting at worst. Wishing, once again, for an office with a window, Kari bought her gum and scurried back to the office against a nasty wind that was picking up. *Well, at least it's not the calm before the storm!*

All afternoon she was too distracted to work properly. She debated finding a window in an office whose occupant wouldn't mind her peering out, then decided she'd be better off not knowing if a snowstorm was raging. In her present state, she could barely work as it was. If she knew the storm had tracked away from them, she'd be too excited and relieved to work. If she knew the storm had hit, she'd be too depressed.

She learned anyhow when she got back from a trip to the Ladies room. The receptionist rang her phone. "I took a message for you while you were away from your desk. By the way, have you looked out any windows lately?" That told her all she didn't want to know; no further explanation was needed. Her worst fears were confirmed, though, with the next call. Max was on the phone, canceling.

"But I have nothing on for next weekend that's not changeable or cancelable. What're the odds of it snowing two weekends in a row? In October? Not likely! I'll keep this brief—we both have to work—but I'll call you tonight. At eleven? We can 'go to bed together' long distance. It's better than nothing." His own voice grew tattered; the enforced cheeriness was hard for even him to sustain.

The office closed at 4:00. Some roads were already impassable, and travel was hazardous at best. Kari, already near tears, had to fight off her depression to concentrate on driving, which required every ounce of her concentration. Visibility was minimal. The roads were both skiddy and drifted. The poor visibility was compounded by the tears that filled her eyes the way the snow filled the sky, and obscured her vision the way the drifting snow obliterated the view out her windshield.

Kari tried to keep the windshield clear, running the wipers at fast speed, occasionally getting out at a red light to wipe down the windshield with a piece of the paper towels she always kept in the car. She tried to keep her eyes dry, too, but as hard as she tried, that was as much a losing battle as the windshield.

She was only nine blocks from home when she hit the ice patch. First, her tires wouldn't grip, and they spun with a sickening *whirrr*. She started to panic. She was in no state to have to cope with trouble. Getting a grip on herself, she told herself, *Rock the car*. So she put it in reverse, in drive, in reverse, in drive...and finally, she got traction.

Unexpectedly, the car shot forward, veered off at an angle, barely missed the lone other car in sight...and landed in a drift. A shower of white obscured the windshield as Kari let loose and bawled.

She tried the wipers, but the sheer weight of the mounded snow on the glass was more than the wipers could handle. She tried backing up, but she was wedged in. Snow and ice had trapped her. She sat and cried enough tears that they could have melted the snow on the windshield. Then she got her paper towels and got out again.

Kari succeeded in wiping down the windshield, but she was no closer than before to getting the car unstuck. She had neither sand, nor salt, nor a shovel in her trunk, nor anything else that would have eased her predicament. She hoped to flag a car down, but none passed.

It was a small, mixed-use block—stores at one end, four houses at the other, and two vacant lots interspersed. The stores were closed up tight, their owners undoubtedly smarter than she and no doubt cozily ensconced in their homes. The vacant lots were, of course, no use to her. She rang the doorbells of two of the houses, but there was no answer. At that point, shivering and wet, physically miserable and emotionally more so, she returned to the car. At least her heater was working.

She did have the presence of mind to make sure her tailpipe was clear before sitting in the car with the engine running. Though upset, she certainly wasn't *terminally* miserable! Surely a car would come along soon, she thought, as she warmed up, courtesy of the car's powerful heater.

Two cars did come along...and passed without stopping. The first went right by despite her sitting there, heedless of the paper towel she'd tied to the antenna as a distress signal. After that, she kept a keen eye out, and exited the car quickly when another car approached.

This second car she tried to actively flag down, but the driver never stopped. Whether he was concentrating so hard on his driving that he was unmindful of the chilled, snow-covered figure standing there, or he selfishly chose not to stop in his eagerness to get home safely, the net result was that Kari was left watching his taillights as he cautiously proceeded down the road. *I haven't lost that much weight that I should be so hard to see!* The thought tugged Kari's mouth into a minor smile, the best she could muster under the circumstances.

It was Steve who finally rescued her. Like a knight in shining armor except he was driving a Cherokee, not riding a steed—he providentially drove by, saw her, stopped, produced a shovel, got her out of her predicament, and insisted on tailing her home to be sure she arrived safely without further incident.

The least she could do was invite him in for coffee—she wanted a cup of something warm, herself, after her misadventure. Liberally lacing the coffee with brandy, she served them each a cup, leaving Steve with his while she ran upstairs to get out of her wet things. She shivered her way out of her clothes and into a fleecy robe and warm pink slippers. In the grip of a strong chill, she was still shivering when she went back downstairs to Steve.

"Don't you think you'd better call Lylah to tell her where you are? She'll be worrying."

"She's at her mom's for the weekend."

"How fortunate you came along when you did—God!—nobody came along and then, finally, two cars did but they wouldn't stop and I was really freaking out and thinking I was stranded there forever and wondering what I was going to do and whether I'd still be there when the storm was over and...thank God you came along when you did!" The words tumbled out as fast as avalanching snow rolls as Kari had a delayed reaction to her relief at being rescued.

"Thank God for four-wheel drive...and good tires, hmm?" Steve said. "Do I deserve a reward for rescuing you?"

"Does brandy-spiked coffee and my eternal gratitude do it for you?"

He answered with an odd smile, tilting his head slightly sideward as he looked at her. For no reason she could put into words, she suddenly felt uncomfortable. She also still felt cold. "I want to go put a sweater on under this robe," she said. "If you want more coffee, there's more in the pot. I made plenty. The brandy's already in it. Help yourself. I'll be right back."

Grabbing a sweater from the hall closet, Kari went upstairs to put it on, and put some socks on in addition to the slippers. She had the robe off and was picking up the sweater from the bed where she'd dropped it to look for the socks, when she heard a noise. Turning, she saw Steve.

She was startled, and not at all pleased. She was standing there in her underwear, socks, and slippers. Quickly, she grabbed for the robe. Steve strode toward her, pulled the robe aside, and kissed her. For a second she stood there, stunned, while his hard, dry lips scorched her lips, lips that had expected to be kissed by Max in just a few hours.

But as disappointed as she was about Max, and as unfulfilled in her longings, she had no desire to take out her frustrations with Steve. He was not the man she longed for...and he was her friend's husband, besides. "What are you doing?" she spluttered around his lips. "Get away!" She pushed against his chest.

Her rejection only made him kiss her harder, mashing his lips to hers while his hands gripped her buns and pulled her to him. She felt his excited male organ through his heavy corduroy pants. It was throbbing palpably and sticking out in distended eagerness. But she wanted no part of this scene. While he stroked her hair and cupped her broad buns in a manner he obviously thought seductive, she brought her elbow down sharply onto his arm, breaking his grip on her.

Tearing away, she slapped his face, grabbing the robe around to hide her semi-nakedness, not stopping to put the sweater on underneath.

"Hey, what gives?" Steve asked, seeming genuinely surprised as he rubbed his smarting face.

"Get out of here!" Kari snapped, her eyes flashing. Steve took two steps backward, but stretched a hand out to stroke her arm. Kari evaded his hand and snarled, "Out!"

"I only want to make you feel good," Steve wheedled.

"Out! Now! Out of my house!"

"Hey, didn't I just rescue you? You said you wanted to pay me back."

"Not with my body! And you're my friend's husband, too!"

"I thought all you fat girls were desperate" were his parting words as he turned and slunk out of the room. Kari listened to his retreating footsteps on the stairs. Only when she'd heard the front door slam did she take off the robe again and put on the sweater, layering the robe on top of it.

Cautiously, she inched down the stairs, looking for him all over, till she reached the front door and verified that his Cherokee was gone. Even then, she double-locked both doors and looked around the house, needing to reassure herself he wasn't lurking anywhere before fear finally relaxed its grip, leaving only anger.

She put on some music. Classical, not her usual thing, but what she happened to be in the mood for. Cranking up the volume, she blasted Tschaikowsky throughout the house. Then she trudged back upstairs to run a nice hot bath, taking her refilled coffee cup with her.

The coffee warmed her body, and the brandy warmed her spirits. The bath finished the job of banishing the chill that had gripped her physically, and between the brandy and her anger at Steve, her spirits seemed revitalized too. She started thinking of how she might spend the weekend if she wasn't snowed in for the duration—and making plans for *next* weekend with Max.

Of course, food was always a comfort. She had a fridge full of food she'd bought for Max. To the tune of Tschaikowsky's soaring violin concerto, she charged into the kitchen under a full head of steam to go through the foods and see what she could freeze, what she'd need to just use up...and what she could make for herself for dinner.

She whomped up a large meal for herself, not minding how long it took to cook. She had all the time in the world...till 11:00, to be precise. While the dinner cooked, she logged on, finding two letters from email friends and putting them aside to answer later. She wandered onto several of her favorite websites, then logged off when dinner was ready.

After wolfing down her meal, she returned to the computer, answering her email. She began to shiver again, so she boosted up the heat and ran another hot tub, as steamy as she could take it, adding bubble bath for good measure. While the tub filled, she turned off all the downstairs lights and did her usual nightly double-check. Doors locked? Computer turned off? Coffeepot off? Stove off? No need to check the windows—they surely hadn't been opened today!—or the thermostat—she had just tinkered with it a short while ago. Then, fearful that her bath was overflowing, she raced up the stairs.

Sinking into the suds, she luxuriated in the warmth while giving further thought to the weekend. She supposed she'd call Larrimore's headquarters in the morning and see if she could be of help. Maybe she'd pick a nice, thick book from among her to-read pile. She could even start it tonight, reading till Max called...and make a serious dent in it by the end of the weekend. If the weather tomorrow wasn't conducive to going out, she'd skip working for Larrimore and just read all day. She was reading in bed, snuggled under the covers—replete with two extra blankets—when the phone rang at five of eleven. It was Max. "Am I too early? I couldn't wait any longer to talk to you."

"No, honey. You're not too early at all."

"What are you wearing?"

"Absolutely nothing...I'm ready for you."

"If I were there, I'd keep you warm on this cold night."

"I'll have to settle for two extra blankets and the heat turned way up...which isn't the same at all."

"The telephone isn't the same, either, but we'll have to settle for that, too. And email...I reread all your letters tonight. It was the best way I could be with you under the circumstances."

Kari was pleased to think he'd saved all her correspondence and reread it.

"How did you spend your evening?"

Kari thought of the incident with Steve, but skipped any mention of it and just talked about going through the fridge to see what could be frozen for next weekend, making a large dinner, spending time online, luxuriating in a warm tub twice, and reading.

"Did you have any trouble getting home in all this weather?"

"Yes...but fortunately my friend's husband came along and rescued me."

"That was nice. Maybe you should have cooked him the dinner as a thank you...or I guess his wife was expecting him home."

He paused. Kari had to answer. "His wife is out of town." She hesitated. "And he had a different kind of thank you in mind."

"Ohhh?" His voice rose. He had clearly caught her meaning, though he didn't know the scenario.

"It's going to be awfully awkward going over to Lylah's house now. I slapped him. I don't ever want to see him again."

"He didn't just ask, then?"

"I think I hurt him. I hope I hurt him."

"He didn't...he didn't hurt you, did he?"

"The only thing he wounded was my feelings. Christ!" She burned all over at the memory. She, again, felt his hands, his lips, his male hardness. Shame burned her cheeks. Then she heard his remark again, about fat girls being desperate. Anger flooded her. But she kept that part of the story to herself.

"My poor baby," Max cooed. "If I were there, I'd kiss you to make you feel better."

"I think if you hit him for me, that would help even more."

"That can be arranged too."

"I didn't mean it literally. It's nice to think about, but I wouldn't want you to really do it."

"Well, how *can* I make you feel better?" His voice had dropped to a sexy purr.

"Just talk to me awhile."

Max was understanding. He obliged her with a recounting of the day, his work, his drive home under adverse conditions, the dinner he'd scrambled to put together with nothing much in the house. In anticipation of being away for the weekend, he'd bought little in the way of groceries, but he'd made a cheese omelet and home fries, a strong cup of coffee, and he'd had some frozen blueberries too. "An odd combination...I hope I can get to the store tomorrow, or I may be reduced to eating cat food!" he joked.

"Did you remember to call off the neighbor who was coming in to feed Pandora?"

"Yes...I don't need any surprises when I'm in the kitchen in my underwear."

"Now there's an interesting picture."

"I can picture you making coffee in your underwear...mmm."

"Wrong. I'm always dressed when I come down in the morning."

"But you're naked now."

He was leading her toward hot talk, and she decided she was finally relaxed enough to be ready. She let herself be led. "Yes, naked and warm. Want to try for naked and hot?"

"I'll get in bed with you and warm you up allll over. Where shall we start? A kiss on the tip of your nose? And here's a kiss on your cute little chin. I've been studying your picture. I'd know that chin anywhere.

"And now I'm moving down to your neck, kissing the hollow there, moving south to your breasts. I always did like mountain climbing. And those are worthy peaks to conquer. Mmmm. Soft breasts. So kissable. Flesh

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firm, yet yielding. Nipple hard...mmm, so good. Just the way I like them. Brown or pink?"

She gulped. "Pink areolas and nipples. And you—hairy chest or smooth?"

"A sprinkling of hairs, but I'm not one of those beasts."

"Good. And your bellybutton—an innie or an outie?" She was feeling playful now.

"An outie. And yours?"

"An innie."

"I'll dip into it with my tongue, then. Feel it flicking into your navel? Just like another part of me wants to do to another part of you."

"Oooooh." She squirmed in the bed as her dormant female cleft awakened and began to thrum to the excitement of his words. At last, the bad day was truly relaxing its grip on her, and she could get into the excitement engendered by his words.

As they talked, a fever rose in her. His words, and the pictures they gave life to in her mind, fanned the flames that raged through her body.

"I want to make you squirm in high heat," he said.

"You're doing that now!" she gasped.

Between his words, her own words, and the pictures playing through her brain, her body seemed in danger of spontaneous combustion.

At last, the conversation reached a natural peak and subsided. They couldn't talk any longer about what they longed to do to each other. Being unable to actually do it was too frustrating. She brought up a neutral topic instead—the political situation in Max's town. It had the damping effect on their desires that she sought.

They talked for a few minutes more, making plans for the following weekend. "It wouldn't *dare* snow again next weekend," Max thundered as if issuing an edict.

"It would certainly be a meteorological phenomenon in October," Kari said. Suddenly, she was exhausted. Sleep was ready to claim her.

Max heard it in her mumbling voice. "I'll be waiting in your computer in the morning," he promised softly.

"With my luck, the storm will take down the connection," she answered.

"You'll be fine," Max soothed. "And we'll see each other next weekend...and you'll have a nice time all cozied inside this weekend. Or

you'll go work for Larrimore. Maybe try out some new recipes while you're home. I'll send you my recipe for pork roast with cranberry sauce. Invite a friend over, and think of me when you eat it."

"My closest friend is Lylah, and I don't see much of her anymore. And after tonight...that was her husband that...."

"Shh. Yes, I know. You'll invite another friend over. Now go to sleep, and dream of me."

"Goodnight, Max. You're so sweet."

"You're sweet. You're my sweet. Goodnight, my sweet."

But Kari couldn't go right to sleep. As Max's voice went silent at the other end, his picture began to fade from her mind, edged out by other visions—those of Steve and Lylah.

First it was just Steve. Steve grabbing at her. Steve pawing at her. Steve thinking he had a right to claim her in return for rescuing her.

He was vile. He was awful. She had thought he was her friend, her rescuer, one of the good guys, but he had shown his true colors when he came upstairs to take her. To take her without even asking first, just assuming she would want him because "all fat women are desperate."

She would have to be something more than desperate to mess around with her best friend's husband!

Lylah! What was she going to say to Lylah? Should she call her and inform her that her husband, the man she'd said she trusted implicitly, was trying to cheat behind her back? Was possibly already cheating? Because if he had no computcions about trying to score with his wife's best friend, who knew who else he'd been chasing after, quite possibly with more success!

Or would Lylah somehow find a way to blame Kari? "What did you do to lead him on?" Lylah was her best friend—but in a contest between Lylah's best friend and her husband, which would she choose?

Surely Steve would deny his transgression, forcing Lylah to decide which of the two was lying. There were no winners in such a contest, only losers.

And even if Lylah believed Kari implicitly, and even if Lylah didn't seek mitigating factora—"You must have said or done something to encourage him!"—wouldn't Lylah resent Kari? Wasn't it typical to "kill the messenger?" And how could she not feel that Kari had been instrumental in

breaking up her marriage? Humans were funny animals. Lylah might easily find a way to make this incident out to be Kari's fault altogether!

Suddenly, Kari didn't envy Lylah's life as much as she had. Suddenly, being married and pregnant had lost some of its allure. Especially if you were married to someone like Steve.

Of course, Lylah didn't know it. Lylah thought she was married to Mr. Perfect. But that was it right there...if Lylah could be fooled, so could any woman. And if Steve could cheat, so could any husband, including any potential future husband of Kari's.

Was Max a cheater?

Yeeesh! She hadn't even met him face to face yet, and already Kari was worrying if Max was a cheater.

Face to face—that reminded her. How was she ever going to face Lylah again? Kari had fairly well decided *not* to tell her about Steve's advances—although, wouldn't that be just what he was counting on? But how would she ever deal with keeping the secret buried? With not letting Lylah know her husband was a cheater?

Sleep was elusive for the longest time, and troubled and restless when she finally found it.

Chapter 12

Stretching in bed, half-awakening, Kari was aware that *something* had pierced the shroud of sleep, and it wasn't the rooster alarm. Was it close to time to get up? Then she again heard the noise that had permeated her sleep. Snowplows.

Now it all came back—the planned weekend with Max, the snowstorm, Steve's unwelcome advances...and insulting assumption...the phone call, poor substitute for a visit. Well, it was Saturday, and she didn't have to be at work...or anywhere else in particular. She would probably call in to the campaign office later to see if her help was needed. As the plows were on the roads, she'd probably be able to get out. But for now, she could just roll over and go back to sleep.

She opened one eye to see what time it was, and was surprised that it was 8:30 already. Maybe she should think of getting up after all.... She lay there for five minutes, searching for sleep, but her brain was in gear, so she swung her feet out of bed and went over to the window to see what the weather was.

A brilliant sun was doing as much work on the snow as the plows were, and though the air coming in the cracked open window felt undeniably cold, it didn't feel hostile. Surely it would warm up to a tolerable level by midday. Kari picked out a pair of grey pants and a fuzzy pink sweater to wear.

A short while later, seated in front of the computer with a steaming cup of coffee, Kari logged on and found three letters, including one from Max.

My dear,

I so much enjoyed the conversation with you last night, though it was a pale substitute for actually holding you, making love to you, touching you,

talking to you, kissing you all over.... But next weekend is only six days away. Surely the weather will be more favorable then.

If only there were a way to slip into the computer and send myself to you by modem. Which reminds me, in an attached file, I am sending you the recipe for pork roast with cranberry sauce. Why not try it this weekend? Cook it for one of your friends. Let me know how it comes out.

I'm off to the campaign headquarters where I've been volunteering; I presume your plans are similar. I may get another room painted, too. As I've said before, by the time I'm done painting, it'll be time to start over again. And I've definitely got to go grocery shopping! Maybe I'll spend the evening with a friend; I'll have to make some calls. I'd rather be with you. <sigh>

Well, no news—I just spoke to you last night, after all. I'll check in online later, pick up your letter, and write back this evening.

Yours, Max

She read the letter, answered it, and downloaded the recipe. Who should she cook it for? Should she try to round up one of her friends to spend the evening with? Which one? Certainly not Lylah—oh, she was at her mom's this weekend anyhow. God, she hoped she never ran into Steve again!

After logging off, she drifted aimlessly around the house for a few minutes, straightening knick knacks that had been fine where they were, and dusting non-existent particles off the tables. Then, she picked up the phone and called Larrimore headquarters. The line was busy, busy, busy, but after ten minutes she finally got through.

One of the volunteers answered. "Got anything going on there today?" Kari asked.

"Hold on. I'll get Jeff for you."

After a minute, Jeff picked up. "Hey! I thought you were all involved this weekend?"

"I had to give him a rain check...or snow check. Have you looked out your window?"

"I was afraid the weather might put a crimp in your plans. Well, you want to stand out in the cold and hand out flyers again?"

"Sure, if that's all there is. I was hoping there'd be phone work."

"We're a little short of phone lines...."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll fill you in when you get here. What time can you be here?"

"Have I got time to make a quick run to the grocery store?"

"Hey—you're a volunteer. You've got time for anything. Come in when you can...but the earlier the better."

"Ouch-my arm hurts when you twist it like that."

Jeff laughed. "Well...see you soon?"

"About an hour, I guess."

She ran out to the store, got what she needed for the pork roast recipe and a few other items besides, came home, put her groceries away, and called three friends...all of whom already had plans for the evening. She put off any further calls, knowing Jeff was waiting for her at the storefront campaign office.

Between the sun, the plows, and the moderating temperatures, the roads weren't bad. She was pleased with the ease in which she was able to drive around. When she got to the office, Jeff complimented her on her outfit, which made her feel good, but the atmosphere of trouble hanging over the headquarters was so thick it was palpable, so heavy it weighted on Kari's shoulders.

"What's going on?" she asked Jeff.

"Trouble with a capital T."

"More missing flyers? More lost data?"

"No, but more of the same kind of thing. We've got double trouble this time. We got dealt a one-two punch. First of all, someone called the phone company yesterday and ordered most of our lines disconnected. Only the first line is still working.

"When the other lines went out, the people who were here assumed it was storm damage, so nobody reported it right away. By the time Eileen called Repair Service to ask when it might be fixed, it was late in the afternoon. Repair checked and said there was no storm damage. The phones had been shut off in accordance with an order they'd received."

"But who called it in?"

"They gave a bogus name—'J.T. Hendricks.' We have no one by that name. It was a man, they said. With all the suspicions already on me, people are starting to *really* look at me funny on this one. No one's come right out and accused me to my face yet, but I've heard whispers. I've caught looks." He shook his head. "This is bad for me."

"Can't they turn the phones back on?"

"Yeah, sure...on Monday. But we'll have to spend the weekend with just one line, and unable to put you people to work on the phones. Dammit! It's the weekend, people are home, we could reach a lot of folks to persuade them to vote for our guy...and we can't use the phones!"

"You said double trouble."

"Yeah." He sounded glum. "Badley gave a speech last night. Maybe you heard it on the radio?" Kari shook her head. "Well, he answered all the points Larrimore is making in his speech today, refuted all the charges Larrimore plans to make, just knocked all the oomph right out of Larrimore's speech. Took the claws out of the tiger.

"It's apparent that *somebody* slipped an advance copy of Larrimore's speech to Badley. But who? Who's the spy? What do we do...hire a P.I. agency to tail every volunteer? Get expensive video monitoring equipment set up in the storefront? Get paranoid and keep watching each other for clues? It's unreal." He paused. "Meanwhile, I *know* people think it was me. And it *wasn't!*" He punched a desk with his hand.

"You need a friend. What're you doing tonight?" Kari asked. "I have a neat new recipe for roast pork with cranberry sauce. Just downloaded it off the computer this morning. Want to be my guinea pig? I bought all the ingredients this morning. Is friendship and roast pork a tempting combination?"

"If you'll let me contribute something to the dinner. How about letting me make a big tossed salad and some scalloped potatoes? Will that go with the roast pork?"

"I'm drooling already."

"That's because it's almost lunch time," Jeff said, the familiar grin returning to his face. "C'mon. I'll buy you a quick bite to eat and we'll hit the road."

Kari wanted a chicken salad and bacon sandwich, but the thought crossed her mind that one good aspect of the weather delaying Max's visit was that now she had a chance to lose a couple more pounds before he met her face to face. So she ordered tuna salad on wheat toast with a diet Pepsi and Jell-O. Jeff, who had no weight worries with his lean frame, ordered a cheeseburger, cole slaw and fries, and a cup of coffee. For dessert, he put away a slice of lemon meringue pie. "I feel guilty doing my glutton thing when you're being so good," he said.

"Relax. You don't have a weight problem. Why should you suffer through a diet lunch?"

"You don't have a weight 'problem' either...unless you let it be a problem to you. Your weight is just part of your outer shell. It's what's inside that counts. Your weight is just another meaningless statistic."

"I thought a man embroiled in politics would be in love with statistics. Aren't they necessary for winning elections?"

"Yes, they're necessary in politics. But I never confuse politics with real life."

They headed back over to the Southdale Shopping Centre. There was a huge discount supermarket there, and Jeff posted Kari at the door to talk to the shoppers going in and out while he took up a post at the department store at the other end of the plaza.

Kari was getting more comfortable with the pitch, engaging more people in conversation when possible. Before, she had handed out flyers to anyone who would take them, but gave them the spiel only if they asked a question or otherwise seemed inclined to talk. Now, she found she was starting conversations, earnestly explaining to one and all why Larrimore was the better candidate.

"I'm sure Chris Badley would make a fine mayor," she told one woman. "But Ron Larrimore would be ever so much better! Doesn't Jeffersonville deserve the best we can get? And that's Ron Larrimore!" And she was off on an impassioned monologue about the ways in which Larrimore surpassed Badley in qualifications and the ways Larrimore could improve life in Jeffersonville. She earnestly recited his list of past accomplishments, and finished with, "I'm not being paid to say this. I'm not being paid to stand here in the cold and talk to you. I'm doing it 'cause I believe in the man. He's what we need for Jeffersonville. He's what we need for *us*. He's what *you* need at the helm of *your* town. Please vote for Ron Larrimore!"

"Bravo." The quiet voice came from right over her shoulder. Whirling around, surprised, she found Jeff behind her. He'd been quietly, surreptitiously monitoring her pitch. "They ought to make a commercial out of that speech!" he proclaimed.

"Not bad for a fat broad, huh?" Kari didn't usually speak so flippantly or comfortably—about her weight. She surprised herself.

Jeff went back to his post by the department store after that, and Kari returned to exhorting discount-grocery shoppers to get out and vote for Ron Larrimore.

To her surprise, a familiar face appeared among the shoppers bustling out of the store. "Kari? Is that you? Lord, lady, I haven't seen you in...what? A year?"

"Marcy?"

"In the flesh...and lots of it." Marcy had never had trouble laughing at her weight. Maybe that was why Marcy had been unsuccessful with every weight reduction plan she'd tried, Kari decided. She just wasn't motivated enough. She'd met Kari when they'd both been enrolled in the same program...a program that had failed both of them miserably.

Though they'd never met before, they'd enrolled at the same time, and they'd gravitated to each other, becoming "diet buddies." The idea was that when one was tempted to eat a no-no, she was supposed to call the other to be talked out of the Snickers bar, hot fudge sundae, or heaping platter of fried food.

Instead, the opposite took place. Marcy, for example, would call Kari and say, "I have such a yen for a triple-tier sundae. I can just see it—banana ice cream, chocolate ice cream, and coffee ice cream with hot fudge sauce and butterscotch sauce, loads of thick, gooey whipped cream, nuts, and a rich maraschino cherry perched on top."

Then Kari, instead of talking her out of it, would be tempted to run out and buy one just like it for herself. When they quit the program together after twelve weeks, each woman weighed 10 pounds more than when she'd joined.

They'd lost touch shortly after quitting the program, but now, here was Marcy, eyes sparkling with merriment as always, fat as ever, and unconcerned about it as ever. "I know I should lose weight," she said with a shrug. "I know it's healthier...and supposedly, I'd be prettier. But I've never had trouble getting dates."

Kari envied her that. "Who are you seeing now?"

"I just broke up with someone. Why? Got someone you want to fix me up with?"

That wasn't why Kari was asking...but it gave her an idea. "Maybe. Have you got time now? I've got a friend. Nice guy. Made a remark just today about fat not being important. He's over on the other side of the plaza right now."

"No. I've got perishables in the bag...and a hairdresser appointment in half an hour. I'll have to hustle to get home, get these put away, and get to the hairdresser real fast."

"Got a picture of yourself, then?"

"Sure. So far, he sounds like my kinda guy, if that's his attitude on fat women. Here." Having rummaged through her purse, she came up with a picture of herself. "Will this do?" It showed her full-length, fat and all, and made Kari feel like a coward for having sent Max that picture of herself from just the neck up. "Well, I've gotta run. You've got my number? It hasn't changed. I'm in the book, too."

"I'll show him the picture, give you a call."

"Bye, hon." Marcy gave Kari a peck on the cheek and scooted toward her car, pushing the grocery cart as she scurried along. Kari pocketed the picture.

In half an hour, Jeff was back. It was growing late, his supply of flyers was gone, the number of shoppers was dwindling, and he was ready to call it a day. "What do I need to bring tonight? Have you got salad fixings? Potatoes? Milk? Flour? Paprika? Butter or margarine?"

"I have everything you need for the scalloped potatoes, and I have oil and vinegar, but no veggies for the salad."

"I'll meet you at your place in half an hour, give or take...or do you need more time, like to shower or something?"

"Is that a hint?"

Jeff laughed. "No, you don't need a bath. I was being polite."

"C'mon over anytime you're ready."

"Great. I'll run back into headquarters, stop at a supermarket, and come right over. I don't need to go home for anything."

"See you in a little while, then.

"That computer key isn't sticking any more, is it? I don't need to bring any tools?"

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"Nope. It's fine. See you shortly."

Chapter 13

With the heat on and the windows closed, the house smelled stuffy. The stale smell assailed Kari's nostrils as she bustled in the kitchen door, and she resolved to do something about it at once. Before she'd even taken off her coat, she had a pot of water heating up on the stove and had dropped some simmering potpourri into it. Before long, the house would smell of pork and potatoes, but that didn't help *now*. Kari went about removing her coat and settling in, and soon the scent of blossoms filled the house.

She set the table, pleased to be having a dinner guest, and then hurried to the computer to log on. She'd left the Mac up and running, so it took no time at all to go online...and discover she had no email at all waiting for her. Not from Max and not from anyone else. Not even spam! Well, Max had said "this evening." It was only 5:30, not really evening yet. She quickly browsed the recipe exchange and found an interesting recipe, downloaded it, then logged off. As she did, she heard Jeff's car pull into her driveway.

"Honey, I'm home," he teased when he saw her standing at the open door. A pang went through her at the thought it might be Max saying those words to her for real some day... Max, who was supposed to be here this weekend, but wasn't. But Kari was pretty good at living in the here and now, and *here* and *now* her friend Jeff was spending the evening with her...which wasn't such a bad plan either.

Jeff was funny, Jeff was fun, and Jeff had her laughing so hard she kept losing her place with the recipe. He had the advantage. Not that the pork roast recipe was complicated, but she'd never made it before. He could do scalloped potatoes with a blindfold on and one hand tied behind his back. And salad certainly didn't require much concentration. So he kidded around as he cooked while she continually lost her place with her recipe. And as they cooked and kidded around, the scent of potpourri filled the rooms and lent a sweet, friendly air to the house. At length, everything was in the oven that was supposed to be, and the salad was complete, minus the dressing, which Jeff wouldn't add till it was time to eat. He'd made a salad that seemed too good for everyday consumption with both Boston lettuce and spinach leaves, sliced mushrooms, sliced black olives, scallions, water chestnuts, green peppers, cucumbers, radishes, bacon bits, and crumbled bleu cheese. Oil, vinegar, salt, pepper, herbs, and crushed garlic would go in right before serving. "I could feast on this alone!" Kari rhapsodized, looking it over eagerly.

"Well, then, another night I'll have to come over and make you one of my *really* special salads, and we'll make a dinner out of it."

"This isn't a special salad?"

"Where's the avocado? Where's the zucchini? Where's the tomato? Where are the croutons? Where's...?"

"All right! I believe you."

She felt comfortable in the kitchen with him. Normally wary of weight cracks from people she didn't know—and the experience with Steve had proved they could come from people she *did* know, too—she had let her guard down with Jeff.

He had earned her trust in that regard. He had said nothing about the fattening potatoes. With flour, butter, and whole milk, they were certainly not a slimming dish. He hadn't even discreetly and helpfully suggested a more sensible dish. The cranberry sauce on the pork roast wasn't exactly slimming either, but not a word had Jeff said. No, he was all right!

Of course, she was in his corner, too. There was the problem at campaign headquarters. Or rather, the series of problems. It was clear that *somebody* was sabotaging the campaign. But it was just as clear to Kari that, whoever was behind it, it couldn't be Jeff.

They were finished in the kitchen, ready to go sit in the living room and talk while dinner cooked. "Want a drink?" she offered.

"You could twist my arm," Jeff replied.

So she did-literally, though not hard enough to really hurt.

"Ow! You're a literal one, aren't you?" Jeff said.

The perpetual grin was broader than ever, and Kari hated to say anything that might make that grin do a disappearing act, but she just had to talk about the problems at headquarters. Maybe together they could get to the bottom of it. First, though, she asked him, "What are you drinking?" "Nothing. Do you see a glass in my hand?"

"Now who's the literal one? What do you want to drink, wiseass?" She gave a playful swat at his behind.

"What does this establishment offer?"

"All the standard stuff."

"Then you've got scotch?"

"How do you want it?"

"Just on the rocks. Thanks."

She made two drinks, and they sat to sip them and talk. "Who do you think is really at the bottom of all this trouble?" she asked.

She didn't have to explain what she meant by "this trouble." The election hanky-panky wasn't far out of his consciousness either, and he sighed a long sigh. "I don't know." He looked at her. "Any ideas? You've been around the place a little while now."

"I turned in my junior detective's badge in sixth grade. But who works there who stands to benefit from Larrimore losing? That's one tack to take. Who's registered to the other party? He or she might be a mole placed in our campaign by the Badley campaign. Or maybe it's someone who's out to make you look bad. The campaign might not be the real target at all. You might be. Got any enemies?"

"You've been watching too much TV."

"Well, somebody's doing it, for some reason. I'm serious, now. Think."

"I am thinking. But I'm not keying into anything."

"Think harder."

Jeff sighed wearily. "Don't you think I have been? For days?"

Instantly contrite, Kari apologized. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. I was only trying to help."

"You didn't upset me...the whole situation upsets me, but I know you're trying to help. Go on. Keep thinking. Maybe you'll puzzle it out."

"Well, either someone's trying to help Badley—with or without his knowledge—or they're trying to make you look bad. You know all the volunteers better than I do. Who stands to benefit from Badley winning? Or to be happy if he does? Or would benefit from you looking bad? Is there another guy there who's competing with you for the attentions of one of the women? Are you dating any of them?"

"No, I'm not."

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"Paying some business attention to one of them that might have been misconstrued by a jealous co-worker boyfriend? Or would-be boyfriend?"

"I don't know that any of our workers are a couple. I don't know that any of the men has a thing for any of the women...which isn't to say that no one does. I don't know what goes on in everyone's mind. I haven't pursued any of the women...which isn't to say that some jealous co-worker hasn't mistaken my professional attentions for something else." He paused in thought, then shrugged his shoulders. "I just don't know."

All the talk of male-female relationships reminded Kari that she'd meant to try to fix Jeff up with Marcy. "I have a friend, by the way, who's lots of fun to be with, and if you're not involved with anyone right now, I'd love for you to meet her. I ran into her today at Southdale. I hadn't seen her in a year. She's recently broken up with someone."

"Rebound romances are dicey."

"Ah, but she doesn't have a jealous suitor working for the campaign."

"How do you know?"

"That's true...how do we know who's really interested in anyone?"

"How *do* you really know who's interested in anyone?" Jeff echoed.

Kari got up and went over to her pocketbook, pulling out Marcy's picture. "This is her. Marcy. I was thinking I could have her over here one day soon, and you, too. If it works, great, you'll go out together. If not, well, three people will have had a nice dinner together, and an enjoyable evening, and no harm done."

"If you're cooking it, I'm sure it'll be delicious if the smell of that pork is any indication." Jeff inhaled deeply, savoring the scent that was filling the whole downstairs. "But I'll pass on that offer, thank you anyhow."

"Too proud to accept a blind date?" Kari teased. But deep down she was disappointed. If Jeff was refusing without even meeting Marcy, it had to be her looks that had turned him off. And since her face was really strikingly pretty, the only negative aspect of her looks was her girth. Marcy was fat, and apparently, Jeff was turned off by that, or else why wouldn't he be willing to date her?

"I—I'm so busy with the campaign," Jeff said. "I don't really want to get involved right now."

"I could fix you up after the election's over."

"We'll see."

Kari knew what "we'll see" meant. It meant, "No." It meant Jeff, despite his pretty speech at lunch, really was put off by weight. She was disappointed, even hurt. It didn't compute, didn't figure. He seemed to accept *her* weight okay. But maybe not in women he dated? Maybe it was only all right for friends to be fat, but not girlfriends?

"Well, let's get back to the problem at headquarters." Kari's voice, as she swiftly changed the subject, was businesslike and brisk.

"I don't know what else to tell you. I'll check the election board's rosters to see if any of the volunteers is registered to the other party, and I'll keep my eyes and ears open...but I've been doing that already. I keep coming up blank. If you can figure it out, you're a better Sherlock than I."

The rest of the evening went fine. The dinner was delicious and was eaten amid much bantering and teasing. But over it all, for Kari, hung a pall from Jeff's refusal to date her fat friend. When she gave him a good night kiss on the cheek, it was with a heavy heart. He had let her down.

Max was something of a disappointment that evening, too. His letter, though certainly not cold, was briefer than usual, and...was it really less warm, or was Kari imagining it? "I'm very tired," he'd said. That was probably all there was to it. Why was she looking for trouble, concerned his interest was waning? Why didn't she accept his statement at face value? *He had said he was tired. Believe it. Let it go at that.*

Why couldn't she accept Jeff's lack of interest in Marcy at face value, too? Maybe he really couldn't deal with dating anyone now. His time was certainly short. And he certainly had other problems to deal with at the moment. Maybe his "we'll see" really meant, "We'll see when the election is over," and not the "no" she took it for. Or maybe he had some other reason for not wanting to date Marcy, some reason Kari couldn't begin to guess at. But what it was, she had no idea.

Then again, maybe she had been right in the first place. Maybe Jeff was simply unwilling to date a fat woman.

Kari took a quick shower, got in bed, and turned on the bedroom TV to watch *Saturday Night Live*. Only, tonight, nothing seemed very funny.

Chapter 14

Sunday morning's note from Max was pretty typical of the letters she'd been getting from him in the mornings—not hot, but warm and friendly, caring and affectionate, saying that he missed her and was counting the days—five, as of this morning—till he would see her. He also asked if she had tried the pork recipe.

She wrote, deleted, and rewrote the beginning of her reply to him three times. The trouble was her figure.

She found it difficult to discuss the pork roast without discussing Jeff. And she found it difficult to discuss Jeff without discussing her disappointment that he wouldn't date Marcy. She found it difficult to explain why that bothered her without discussing her own hefty figure. And she had never discussed her weight with Max.

Surely, he guessed that a woman who liked to eat as much as she admitted to was not thin. Surely, the rounded lines of her face, though it was not a fat face, gave a clue that the rest of her body was also built along rubenesque lines. And surely, Max wouldn't mind her girth. But they had never actually discussed it, and she found herself unwilling to now.

She couldn't write, "I thought Jeff was my friend and a nice guy, but now I find he won't date my fat friend, and so fat apparently matters to him anyhow. And, as a fat woman myself, I am bothered by this." She couldn't write it in any words, no matter how roundabout or lighthearted. She finally gave up trying, and settled for a truncated version of the evening.

She told Max that her friend Jeff, from Larrimore's headquarters, had come over, that they had discussed a sabotage problem at the campaign office for which Jeff was being blamed and of which she was sure he was innocent, and that she had made the roast pork recipe for him. She added that he had pronounced it excellent, that she heartily concurred, and she thanked Max for uploading the recipe to her. She told him all this in rather more stilted, formal language than she usually used in her letters to him, but it was her fourth try at answering his inquiry about the recipe, so she let it go at that.

Sure enough, when he wrote back Sunday night, he asked, "Are you angry at me for some reason I can't fathom?" Her letter had sounded cold, distant. He again told her of his eagerness to see her this coming weekend, adding, "I'll rent a dogsled if I have to, but I'll be there. Listen for the cry of sled dogs, and an eager, desperate man yelling, 'Mush.' (With all the fur on my parka, you might get me confused with the dogs, so I'll give you a hint. I'm the one yelling, 'Mush.')"

"Sweet, funny Max," Kari said aloud to herself, and dashed off a real quick answer to the effect that she was not angry at him and hadn't meant to sound cold and distant, that there was a lot on her mind, from fears of a repeat of the snowstorm to concern over an innocent friend being blamed for something he hadn't done. She fell all over herself apologizing. She certainly didn't want to mess things up now.

Max's letters on Monday morning, Monday evening, and Tuesday morning sounded normal, except that after Monday evening, he told her there would be no more hot talk. "I want you to save it for the weekend, again," Max wrote. "Build up a full head of steam, a sizzling cauldron of unsatiated passions, bubbling and boiling, steaming and stewing, waiting for me to appear on the scene, stir things up even hotter, and then satisfy you till you yell for mercy."

"Mercy!" Kari wrote back. "And also 'Merci.""

On Tuesday evening, Kari spent time at Larrimore headquarters. She was almost reluctant to go there, knowing Steve was working there too. The saving grace was that, being out of work, he had his days free, and he did most of his volunteering then. So far she had broken lucky, not running into him. But she wondered how long her luck would hold.

While Kari was at the storefront on Tuesday, Eileen invited a bunch of the volunteers to a get-together at her house on Wednesday. A notice about it was also posted on the bulletin board. Kari almost declined the invitation, fearing that Steve would be there. After all, he was one of the volunteers. *But I can't live the rest of my life afraid to go here or there for fear of running into him. We're going to see each other sooner or later when I'm visiting Lylah...I guess.* So, she accepted.

An Appetite for Passion

Her good luck held. Steve was not among the people at Eileen's house. But twelve of the fourteen there comprised six couples, and as she looked around the room, Kari felt left out. Almost everyone was there with someone; only she and one other woman were there alone. *Where's Max when I need him?* But that was silly...she didn't *need* Max just because she was alone. *Well, if it's not a case of need, how about "want?" I want Max.*

Two of the couples, unmarried, kept clinging to each other, never straying far from their lovers' sights. One couple, newlyweds, kept throwing meaningful glances at each other, whether they were seated earnestly talking together or temporarily separated and talking to others. Even the long-term marrieds all seemed attentive to their spouses, bringing each other drinks and food, circling the room to make sure the other wasn't bored, and generally making it obvious they were there together.

While Kari was alone, by herself. Since the party was casual, the food was informal too, and served buffet style. Among the offerings, there was spicy fried chicken, and an artichoke dip that she particularly enjoyed, and Kari consoled herself with plenty of both. Though she kept telling herself she wasn't doing herself any favor, doubtlessly adding pounds on a week she'd meant to diminish her silhouette, she found solace in the food in the midst of her loneliness. So she kept returning to the buffet table for more.

After everyone had eaten their fill, the fourteen partygoers settled into something of a circle. Instead of little conversation groups, as there had been earlier, with twos and threes talking together, the conversation became allinclusive. The first topic was the recent snowstorm, and then came the state of the national economy, and then one of the women, who had two schoolage kids, brought up a situation in the local schools.

"Larrimore will take care of that," Eileen's husband said, and they were off and running, discussing the campaign again till someone yelled out, "Hey this is supposed to be a party! Leave the shop talk back at headquarters. We're here to have fun!"

"How about some games?" Eileen suggested.

"I know one," said a man named Chad. "Every woman stands with her back to her man, and...."

"What about us?" The interruption was from Evie, the other single woman there.

"One of you will have to be the man," Chad said, looking at Evie and Kari.

"Do you want to be the man?" Evie asked Kari.

"I'm outta here," Kari said. "Sorry, Eileen. I really need to get home. It *is* a work night. Thanks for a lovely evening."

It was only 9:00, but Kari didn't want to "be the man." She didn't want Evie to "be the man" either. She wanted a real man. She wanted Max. That not being possible at the moment, she wanted the next best thing...to go home and talk to him online. If she couldn't have him in the flesh, at least she could have him electronically.

The question burned in her brain as she drove home. "Do you want to be the man?" The world was set up for couples. It was a two-by-two world. And singles were out of place. Well, with a little luck, she and Max would overcome their geographic obstacles and get together permanently, and then she wouldn't ever have to deal with the Glenns and the Steves of the world, or with "Do you want to be the man?" Her letter to Max that night was filled with longing. And his was filled with promise. Just two more days till they saw each other face to face, in the flesh.

If singlehood seemed a pressing problem Wednesday night, it diminished in importance Thursday night in contrast with the problem she had to deal with then. Actually it wasn't *her* problem; it was Jeff's, again. Another batch of flyers was missing.

The campaign had had a new batch of flyers printed up with a statement from the candidate, endorsements from leading local figures, and ten short, impressive reasons to vote for Larrimore in the forthcoming election. The printer's deliveryman had offloaded them from his truck at the back door, and they'd been left there in anticipation of the van's return from some other errands. The cartons were to be loaded right onto the van.

Somehow, in the hour they'd been left outside, they'd vanished. "What do we need to do—post a guard?" Russ yelled, adding a few choice expletives. Jeff hadn't been anywhere around at the time, but of course, his very absence made it possible that he'd been the one to spirit the flyers away.

He walked into the middle of the tumult and immediately fell under suspicion. "I know you didn't do it," Kari soothed, but Jeff was beyond consolation. He was distraught.

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"Someone is tarnishing my name, and I can't prove my innocence. How do you prove you *didn't* swipe some cartons?"

"Where were you between five and six?" Kari asked helpfully.

"Leaving work, grabbing a bite to eat, and coming over here."

"Where did you eat? Maybe the waiter can provide an alibi."

"I grabbed two hot dogs from a vendor. I doubt he'd remember me. Thanks for trying."

"C'mon home with me for a while," Kari offered. "Let's get away from this atmosphere." Though still smarting over his refusal to date her plump friend, she also still considered him a friend, and right now, he was a friend in need. In need of consolation, and maybe detective work too. Though she doubted she could shed any light on the missing flyers, she could at least offer Jeff a friendly shoulder, a sympathetic ear, and a good cup of coffee.

But Jeff declined. When Kari asked why, he just said, "I'll pass. But thanks." He put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a grateful squeeze.

"C'mon home with me for an hour," she persisted.

"Kari, I haven't been entirely honest with you...." he started, then closed his mouth as he was about to say something else. "Never mind. Thanks anyhow," was all he added.

"Honest about what?" Kari's eyes grew wide with concern.

"Nothing. Never mind."

"I know you didn't steal those flyers!"

"No, I did not." But he wouldn't elaborate on his supposed dishonesty, and Kari couldn't pry any more information out of him. Abruptly, he turned and headed for the door, calling out a general "Goodnight!" and waving at everyone.

What was her friend guilty of? She didn't believe he was the one sabotaging the campaign, yet he'd admitted to dishonesty. She was torn up by his admission...and his refusal to elaborate on his confession. All around her, the general buzz was that Jeff must have done it. Kari didn't believe it, yet she couldn't refute it. In the end, she turned and left, dispiritedly returning home earlier than she'd planned.

Max's letter that night was bubbly and warm.

My dear,

Do you believe it? Tomorrow we will be together. Tomorrow! The two of us in one room, touching, kissing, laughing, talking, touching some more. Making love, making dinner, having fun, having sex. I will get to see the exact color of your hair, your eyes, your skin. Photographs can be misleading, but now I will get to know the real Kari, my Kari, exactly as you are in all your beautiful glory.

I cannot wait. I know it is considered by some to be unmasculine to be so emotional, but I don't give a damn. I want you and I want you to want me, and this strong want of mine is for out of bed as well as in, for your soul, not just your carnal being (but that too!).

I need to feel your hand in my hand as we sit and talk, your foot stroking my leg as we lie together in bed, murmuring of how good our lovemaking was, your hair touching my shoulder as we kiss, your breasts pressed against my chest as we meet in a fierce, yet tender hug.

Kari, my dear, how lucky I am that you share my passion for food. Lucky twice over. Once because I know it will be a source of enjoyment to us as we eat together, cook together, try new restaurants (and old favorites) together, and sample new cuisines. And lucky again because were it not for your searching for new recipes on the recipe exchange, I would never have met you.

Do you care for smoked oysters? I will bring a can of very fine ones that I have. We can feed them to each other tomorrow evening.

Well, I want to go pack a bag so I'm ready to get out of here early in the morning. Again, as last week, I plan to leave work at 5:00 and be at your house at 9:00. I have checked the weather forecast; it's for sunny skies, with temperatures in the high 40s. I see no impediment to our being together.

Here's to the first of many weekends...and other days...together. I'll see you tomorrow, my sweet Kari. Now you say it. "I'll see you tomorrow, Max." Aren't those beautiful words, "I'll see you tomorrow"?

Till then....

Yours, Max Kari couldn't help wondering what would go wrong this time. Nothing seemed to be going right lately. Why should the upcoming weekend be any different?

Chapter 15

After sleeping restlessly all night in anticipation that was half eager and half concerned, Kari finally fell into a deep sleep around 4:00 and was groggily awakened by her rooster alarm. As she shot her hand out to silence the mechanical bird, she came to an instant realization of what day today was... Max would be here tonight!

She sprang from bed to go to the window. It was still dark out, but the visibly twinkling stars reassured her it wasn't snowing. She switched on the radio. There were no reports of fires, floods, snowstorms, earthquakes, newly grown volcanoes, or other natural phenomena such as might intervene to preclude Max showing up on schedule.

So far, so good.

Standing on the scale, Kari saw that her weight was the same as it had been the weekend before. After a week of vowing to be good one day only to eat too much the next, the net result was no loss, but at least no gain.

Kari selected a royal blue blouse and powder blue skirt, soft yet bright, to complement her mood. Nothing was going to go wrong now; she could feel it. Her mercurial mood was on a definite upswing, bolstered by the fair weather and lack of doomsaying on the radio.

According to plan, she had a fridge full of goodies. For starters, she was cooking dinner tonight. When Max left Elm Ridge at 5:00, he wouldn't stop to eat anything, and by the time he got to her house, she wouldn't be the only thing he'd be hungry for. A man who'd just driven four hours needed to buttress his body, as well as needing sustenance for the soul.

Kari made coffee, logged on while it was brewing, and downloaded an uncharacteristically brief, but essentially hurried, letter from Max. He swore, "Only a tornado picking up my car and depositing it in Kansas will prevent me from being at your door at 9:00—give or take a few minutes, depending on traffic." She barely knew what she was doing at work. Somehow, she made it through the day, but she was definitely on autopilot. Her mood still veered between exultant and worried. Max was coming! But what if his car broke down on the road? No, it would be fine...he would get there on time and without trouble. But what if he didn't like her as well in person? No, he knew her from email and the phone; there'd be no problem! But what if Kari-in-person seemed substantially different from Kari-online or Kari-byphone? No, Kari was Kari. She'd been honest with him; she hadn't tried to present a "better" face. If he liked her by email and phone, he'd like her in person. But what if he didn't? No! Stop worrying—he'd be here in less than twelve hours, and things would be fine....in less than eight hours....in four hours.

Somehow she'd made it through to 5:00 quitting time. Her palms were sweaty, her hair a mess from her fingers worrying through it, her nerves a wreck, but it was 5:00, and Max would be leaving Elm Ridge *now*.

But it was *only* 5:00; he wasn't due till 9:00, and she hadn't that much to do till he got there. It would be nice not to have to rush around frantically, getting ready, but how was she going to make these last four hours pass by?

In her eagerness to get home, Kari found herself doing 55 in a 40 mph zone. *I could have an accident—that would really ruin the weekend*. She slowed down to a 35 mph crawl. She wouldn't be home to greet Max if she was in a hospital or police station. Ultra-cautious, she all but inched the car the rest of the way home.

She made one stop along the way, at a local card shop, purchasing a banner that read *WELCOME HOME*. They didn't have one that just read *WELCOME*, but Kari reasoned that "home is where the heart is," so *WELCOME HOME* was appropriate, after all. And maybe this would actually be Max's home in the future.

Bustling about the kitchen, she prepared the meal she'd serve him when he arrived. It was only 6:15, too early to put anything on to cook yet. Nervously fluttering around the house, Kari checked for dust, clutter, any discordant notes, but she'd been keeping up with the housework all week, and the house was in immaculate condition.

She ran a bubble bath, intending to luxuriate, but she was too excited to linger in the tub. She settled into the aromatic bubbles, but she couldn't lie back in the tub and relax, and finally, she washed herself scrupulously and got out again. It was still only 7:00. She put the chicken on to cook. Not your ordinary stuffed chicken, it was one of her favorite recipes, and she hoped it would make a hit with Max. Looking at her watch, she sighed when she saw how early it still was and drifted into the living room.

Booting up the computer, she tried to compose a love poem to Max, but she found herself writing lines that were either cloying or clichéd, and finally she gave up the effort. At 7:30 she returned to the kitchen, peered at her vegetable casserole, checked her watch for the bazillionth time, and pulled the lid off the other casserole dish, in which were her potatoes. Then she set the table, using real linen napkins and putting pretty, deep-blue candles in her candleholders.

Then she wandered back to the computer, logged online, and found two letters from friends. She hoped writing to them would distract her from her nervousness, but instead her nervousness distracted her from concentrating on her email. She wrote both replies with half a head, stopping at 8:00 to start the potatoes cooking. At 8:15 she was left with nothing special to do, too restless to wander the internet downloading recipes or reading the news.

She changed into a jade green pantsuit with a big, loose top, applied fresh makeup, and fussed with her hair. It was still only 8:30. After putting up the veggie casserole, she paced the house looking for anything out of place. Picking up the phone, she started to dial Lylah's number, remembered Steve, and changed her mind, started to dial Jeff's number, remembered the events of the evening before, complete with his statement that he hadn't been quite honest with her, and again, changed her mind.

The pure of a motor outside her window caught her ear. Running to the window, she made out headlights in her driveway, though she couldn't tell what make or color of car they were shining from. Was it Max? Should she let him in the front door—because he was special—or the kitchen door—because—hopefully—he would soon be "family?"

As she stood at the window, dithering over which door to open, Max...yes, it was definitely him...settled it by striding briskly toward the front door. Scampering to the door, Kari managed to get there first, throwing it wide and calling out, "Max?" though it wasn't really a question at this point.

There was an awkward moment when he got to the front door. She wanted to throw her arms around him...yet, she'd never met him face to face

before, and it seemed odd hugging a "stranger." Yet, surely, this man was no stranger. They'd shared wishes, shared secrets, shared sex talk on the phone.

Max, for his part, seemed just as unsure of his next move. He stood there, seeming hesitant, finally asking, "Kari?"

"Of course it's me! Come in!" And he did, putting his suitcase down in the middle of the room and letting her put her arms around him. After a barely perceptible beat, he responded, wrapping his arms around her, holding her close to him.

The thickness of his coat came between them, and she resented its intrusion, its presence between her hungry body and the body she yearned to feel against her. How would she get to know the shape and feel, the texture and strength of her new lover's physicality, if all these damn layers of material got in the way? "Take this off." It was almost more a command than a suggestion. At very least, it was a request.

Max removed the coat, and Kari took it to hang it up. But she ate up the sight of him before turning her back to go to the closet. He had a body that had known exercise, a body that in no way but the slightest swell of belly betrayed his love of good food. Kari had imagined him more rotund despite the photo she had of him, which clearly showed he didn't share her weight problem.

When she turned back to him, after hanging the coat away, she found him looking at her intently. "Do I look like you pictured me?" she asked.

"No one ever does," he answered very quickly.

"Let me put your suitcase upstairs."

"It'll wait," Max said. Then, after a minute. "Well, at least let me carry it up the stairs myself. And I can see the rest of the house while I'm at it."

Kari proudly gave him the grand tour, pausing at the computer to point out where she got his email and wrote back to him. Upstairs, she actually blushed on leading him into the bedroom. She had a guest room upstairs, too, though she barely gave him time to stick his head in the door. She seldom spent any time in there, herself, except to browse among her bookcases, which were in there. And these days, her own life was so exciting that novels bored her by comparison.

"Dinner will be ready in a few minutes," Kari said when they'd got back downstairs. "You have time for a drink first." "Good idea!" Max said, accepting a scotch and soda and producing the smoked oysters he'd promised. Kari, feeling unaccountably nervous, clinked her glass against his so hard that she nearly knocked it out of his hand. She said, "To us."

Max took a deep breath, then clinked her glass in return, toasting, "To happiness.

"So, how long have you lived here now?" Max asked, and they settled into a comfortable conversation about safe subjects...houses, hometowns, nothing too intimate. Kari was surprised to find that it felt like she was getting to know Max all over again. She had thought when he walked in her door, it would feel to her like a long-lost lover had come home. Instead, there was this newness, this awkwardness, this strangeness. And from the stiff, halting quality his conversation fell into intermittently, she sensed he was feeling it too.

They finished their drinks just as Kari decided dinner was ready. She lit the candles on the table, turned down the lights, and cheerily sang out, "Dinner's on." Then, as Max seated himself, she carried the food to the table. "Will you carve?" she asked. "I'm so inept at it, it's pathetic."

"It's not exactly my forte either, my dear," Max said. It was the first time he had called her "my dear" since arriving. The familiar words made her feel better.

"We'll have chopped chicken if I do it," she warned him, so he carved, doing a passable job of it, and the two of them sat to eat. Grateful for the food as an excuse not to have to make conversation, they did little talking.

Kari was pleased; everything had turned out perfectly—the chicken, the stuffing, the veggies, the potatoes. Max put away seconds and, in the case of the chicken and the stuffing, thirds. Kari marveled that his figure didn't betray his appetite.

She opened her mouth to ask, "How do you eat so much and stay so trim?" then thought better of it. It might bring up the subject of *her* girth, and she didn't want to discuss the subject of weight with him yet.

He helped her clear the table and offered to help with the dishes. "You've been driving for four hours," she told him. "I'll load the dishwasher and be done with it. If you want to shower...?"

"Good idea," he said. He already had used the upstairs bathroom while she was showing him the house, so he knew where it was and went up while she finished tidying up after dinner. She rushed, and he was still in the shower when she got upstairs. Good! She slipped into her negligee, anxiously peering into the mirror to see how much of her size it betrayed. She finally decided that there was no hiding the fact she was fat, but that at least the negligee didn't emphasize that fact.

To be safe, though, she got in bed and pulled the covers up to just below her breasts. She turned off the lamp on his side, leaving just her lamp lit. She'd turn that one out soon enough—when he'd had a chance to appreciate the negligee—and then she'd make love to him in the dark.

He emerged from the bathroom naked. His organ betrayed no eagerness, but Kari knew she would soon fix that. As he sat on the edge of the bed, she kissed his bare and slightly freckled back. He leaned back toward her. "I've waited a long time for this," she throatily told him. Her flickering lips worked their way up to his shoulder.

Max swung around, got his legs up on the bed, and got under the covers with Kari. The aggressor, she ran one hand fervently up and down his chest, appreciating the absence of many hairs; only a light sprinkling forested his upper body. She looked at his face, so much more handsome than in his photo, and her heart smiled.

Turning his head, Max caught her square on the lips. At first his kiss felt cool, but gradually, it grew more ardent. Kari returned the kiss with a hunger born of long anticipation. Max's lips parted, bearing her lips with them. His tongue snaked into her mouth, exploring within as if he had never insinuated his tongue in a mouth before and was in uncharted territory.

Probing, parrying, he met her tongue and slithered around it. She fervently pressed her considerable body against his, no longer concerned whether he saw, felt, or cared about her girth. Giving herself to him, she wrapped one arm around his waist and pulled him tight to her straining body, her lower parts pressing against his. She was gratified to feel his male organ uncurling, stiffening, pressing against her insistently. She welcomed the urgent pressure as she would welcome him into her shortly.

He put his hand on her derriere, pulling her to him even tighter. Their bodies ground together, a circular motion that propelled them into greater degrees of desire. She undulated against him, mimicking the motions of lovemaking without entry. His organ, lodged between them, swelled impossibly large and rigid. Surrendering to a shiver, Kari took the lead again and wrapped her hand around his impressively rigid, yet spongy, organ. Max slipped a hand inside the top of her negligee and palmed her nipple. Another, stronger shiver raced through her, and she thrust her breasts out, pushing her nipple against his palm. Stroking her aureole tenderly, Max set off fire flashes in her secret chasm.

"I don't need any more foreplay," Kari finally gasped. "I can't wait. Take me now."

He was rigid; he was ready; he yanked the negligee off her as she switched off the bedside lamp, suddenly conscious of her figure again. Max rolled atop her, his firm body pressing down on her jiggly, cushy body. Their intimate organs met, and hers enveloped his. He slid into her, and she welcomed him home. When he started to pull back, she tightened up as if to prevent him from rocking inside her. Circling with his hips, he stirred inside her without pulling back.

"My Max, my man, my lover." She had meant to murmur the endearments, but in her urgent need, and with him now pounding in and out, above her and in her, the words came out in emphatic spasms, and in more of a shout than a whisper.

She grasped his buttocks, firmly urging him to move faster. He was holding back, restraining himself, but she was eager, needful. It wasn't long before they were slamming their bodies together, racing toward a fiery finale. His sweat-wet flesh slapped noisily against her own drenched skin as he ratcheted in and out of her womanly chasm. She raised her legs, held her feet to his buttocks, and urged him into even faster motions with her heels, pressing them into the tautened muscles of his butt.

A swift climax was inevitable. Kari would have liked to prolong the lovemaking, but she had no more will power for postponing the satisfaction she sought than she had will power for avoiding the foods that tempted her. And once she let go, her body stiffening in the rigid throes of the most spectacular fulfillment available to humankind, Max let go too and joined her in a loud, thrashing, straining, eye-rolling finish to their coupling.

Panting, she clung to him, ardently pressing her grateful lips to his. His lips pulled back from hers, and he kissed her nose. She purred. "Sweet Kari," he said. "Thank you." He rolled off her, draping one arm proprietarily across her waist. She nestled into the crook of his other arm, murmuring of

inconsequential matters in an earnest tone. She had given herself to him fully now. She was his. She felt she had sealed their togetherness when his maleness slid into her sheath.

Max's eyes kept closing. He struggled to stay awake, but he kept nodding off. "You've had a long day," Kari soothed, "and a long drive. Maybe we should go to sleep now."

"Sounds good," Max mumbled, sitting up to make one last foray into the bathroom. He reached for the lamp to light his way in the unfamiliar house, knocking it over in the dark. Fortunately, nothing broke. Kari turned her lamp on. Swiftly slipping out of bed, she hurried into the guest room, found the nightlight she kept for guests who were unfamiliar with the house's geography, and plugged it into a socket in her bedroom.

"Now, if you have to get up in the middle of the night, you won't kill yourself," she said. Max returned to bed, kissed Kari, and fell asleep almost before he was stretched out. In the glow of the nightlight, Kari propped herself up on one elbow and studied Max. He was here. He was in her house, her bedroom, her bed. He was in her life, really in her life, not just by email, but here, right here, in the flesh...and what wonderful flesh it was.

Somehow Kari, too, settled down into the bed without ever being conscious of lying down, and in a moment she, too, was asleep. But all through the night she kept waking up, feeling his form beside her, cuddling up to him. Each time she awakened, she draped an arm or a leg across him as if to ensure he wouldn't slip away while she slept again.

She woke up early again the next morning with a feeling there was a reason to get up. At first, she didn't remember what the reason was. They had rolled apart again, and she didn't immediately realize she had company in the bed.

It wasn't a workday, was it? Was she due in at Larrimore's headquarters early? Kari struggled to wake up and grasp what the need was for getting up early. Then, Max stirred, and Kari felt the bed move. Instantly, she remembered, and her eyes flew open to behold the sleeping figure of the man...her man...in her bed.

Reaching over, she kissed him, not even caring what time it was or whether she was waking him needlessly early. He stirred, and she sat up, bent low, and kissed him on a part that had been asleep till she started kissing. It stirred, waking less sluggishly than Max himself, responding to her even while Max was still struggling to come to consciousness and recognize his surroundings.

Kari made long, sweet oral love to Max, and then he returned the favor. They curled up together and went back to sleep, and the sun rose long before they did. Kari made breakfast, though Max declined to eat half of what she put in front of him. "My god, that's enough for a lunch…or a dinner!" he protested, despite her insistence that it was Saturday, and a special Saturday at that.

He was an amateur photographer—a fact she hadn't known before this—and he brought along his camera when she took him for a drive. "I want you to know Jeffersonville as well as you know Elm Ridge," she told him, driving him around and pointing out sites of local interest as well as sites with personal meaning for her. He took photos of picturesque spots, interesting people, and more than one dog. "Hey! Take some of me!" Kari squealed.

They drove past Larrimore's headquarters. A couple of the volunteers she knew were out front. She waved as she passed, but they were talking animatedly and didn't notice her. She wondered if something had happened that she'd want to know about, like another load of flyers gone missing, or somebody figuring out what had happened to the previous ones, or the speech. She was still sure of Jeff's innocence, despite his admission of flawed honesty.

She and Max had lunch in a restaurant, then caught a matinee at the movie theatre. "Let's have dinner early," he said when they emerged from the theatre at 3:30. This raised the prospect in her mind of a long evening of lovemaking, so she eagerly assented and pointed the car toward home.

They prepared dinner together. She made beef stroganoff—so sinful, with its sour cream, but so good. He made string beans dijonnaise and a salad. Kari threw some noodles into water when the stroganoff was nearly ready.

Dinner was delicious. This time, there was more conversation, though Kari noticed she was doing most of the talking. Again, Max helped clear and offered to help with the dishes, and again, Kari declined, saying that with the dishwasher, she was fine. Max left the room, and she thought she heard him treading up the stairs. She smiled, supposing he was showering for her. When she finished in the kitchen, she walked around the corner into the living room. Max was sitting on the sofa, his coat beside him, his suitcase by the door. Kari stopped, cemented to the spot where she stood. "What—why...? Are you leaving? Don't go!" As soon as she said it, she regretted it. "Are you leaving?" was a stupid question with his suitcase and coat in evidence, and the "Don't go!" had sounded like begging.

"I think it's better this way," Max said in a low, sincere, insistent voice.

"What's the problem?" Kari asked.

"This just isn't right," Max said. And then, when he saw she wouldn't be content with that gloss of an answer, "I'm not comfortable with...you weren't honest with me. If you'd hide your weight problem, pretend you didn't have one, then I don't know what else you'd be dishonest about. I'm not...I'm not comfortable. Honesty is important to me."

No it isn't. But my weight is. She didn't say it aloud, but it was as obvious to her as the stomach that protruded in front of her eyes when she looked down.

Max kissed her chastely—and quickly—on the forehead. "Goodbye, Kari. Thanks for...everything." Then, he took his suitcase in hand and walked out without looking back.

Kari watched forlornly as the headlights receded down the driveway. It was only 6:30. She drifted over to the computer, turned away again at the memory of all the email that had led to...this, then pivoted once again and returned to the machine. She wasn't going to let Max drive her away from her other email friends.

Logging on, she found a letter from a woman named Bobbi, one of her newest pen pals. Kari had met Bobbi after answering an inquiry Bobbi had posted about a recipe. They were newish friends, but Bobbi's was the only letter waiting for Kari, and the incident with Max was burning Kari's consciousness, so Bobbi got to hear the whole story.

As she poured it out at the keyboard, Kari veered around from desolate to angry. The more she wrote to Bobbi of what had happened, the angrier she became till she had built up a solid wall of passionate anger to protect herself from loneliness and an aching heart.

When she logged off, it was still early. She turned on the TV, but she couldn't find anything engrossing on any channel, so she turned it off again and locked up downstairs, then went upstairs in search of a good book. She

took an as-yet-unread mystery from her bookshelf, curled up in bed, and read. But as the book's mystery deepened, it made her think more and more of the hanky-panky at Larrimore's headquarters. Now *there* was a mystery! Finally, Kari put the book aside, turned out the light, and just lay in bed trying to puzzle out who might be behind all the goings-on, and why.

Now her mind kept slipping gears, jumping from one situation to another. The dark of night is when problems are most bothersome, and Kari's bedside lamp did little to dispel her personal demons. Her thoughts drifted from Jeff to Max to Steve and back to Max again.

The central problems seemed to be sex and her weight. If not for her weight, Max would be here in her bed right now. If not for Marcy's weight, Jeff would have dated Marcy...and not fallen several notches down the ladder of Kari's esteem.

If not for Steve's sexual hunger, Kari's best friend's husband would never have made a pass at her. And had her own sexual hunger clouded Kari's judgment or colored her opinion of Max? Was her sexual appetite, like her stomach's appetite, one that overwhelmed logic and clouded reason? Had her attraction to Max been too heavily based on physical need?

She rolled over, as if facing the other direction would get her away from her problems. Indeed, as she flopped around in the bed, she managed to momentarily dispel thoughts of Max. But the void they left was quickly occupied by the mystery again. Not the one in the novel she'd put down, but the very real life mystery of the skullduggery at the election headquarters.

When she finally fell asleep, she had converted her pain to anger at Max. Her anger at Steve had revived. And the disappointment she'd felt at Jeff's refusal to date Marcy had returned to haunt her, along with a nagging worry about his elliptical admission of dishonesty. *Jeff wasn't really the culprit, was he?* And if he wasn't, *who was?*

Chapter 16

You can play it either of two ways when your dreams have crashed. You can sit home, stewing in self-pity, or you can do something constructive to take your mind off your problems.

Sunday morning, Kari opted for the first course of action. It wasn't a conscious choice, but she didn't feel up to doing anything positive...or, for that matter, much of anything at all. Max was gone, and her dream with him. Kari remained closeted at home all that day, seeking solace in a novel, switching back to last night's mystery when the new novel failed to keep her brain from racing down the Max track, turning on the TV when she gave up on books for the day, and finally, disconsolately, cleaning the house from top to bottom again.

All that week, Kari came straight home from work at night. She wasn't up to seeing the gang at Larrimore headquarters. She didn't even feel like seeing any of her friends. And she especially didn't want to answer any questions about Max...questions that would have been inevitable had she spent time with anyone she knew.

The weekend thereafter—it was just one week since the debacle—she remained home all weekend, leaving the house only to go to the grocery store and for one emergency bakery run.

For a week now, she'd shunned the computer—too many unpleasant associations. That weekend she turned it on again for the first time since Max's unexpected departure the weekend before. There were letters galore from her email friends, all wondering why she'd dropped out of communication and whether all was all right. And all asked how the weekend had gone.

Conspicuous by his absence was Max. Not that she'd expected—or wanted—to hear from him. Yet a part of her had wondered if there'd be an

explanation or apology from him. There was nothing of the sort. There was nothing at all.

But writing to her friends, recounting the disaster, helped her work through it. By the end of the second week, she was ready to do something constructive to take her mind away from the unpleasantness with Max, and so Friday night she made plans to return to Larrimore headquarters on Saturday.

Her anger had given way to sadness. She cried for the lost dream. She wasn't quite so sure, in retrospect, that Max would have been The One, but she certainly would have liked a chance to find out, would have liked a chance to have been judged on her personality, her temperament, something other than her girth.

And she would have liked a chance to judge him, to decide for herself if *he* was truly what *she* wanted. The more she thought about him, the more things she could find that didn't suit her...but then, wasn't she just being a "Monday morning quarterback?" If he had stuck around, mightn't she have found that they were little things, things that didn't matter? Or would she have ultimately decided Max wasn't the man for her? Now, of course, she'd never know.

The election was imminent. There wasn't much more time for Kari to work at the storefront and do her bit to make a difference. She had now missed two weekends of volunteering. Maybe getting out and working for the campaign would be even more helpful to her than it would be to Larrimore. Besides, she was curious whether anyone had got to the bottom of the hanky-panky. And last of all—though perhaps not last in importance—she missed talking to Jeff.

She hadn't spoken to Lylah in ages—they'd been going off in different directions in life even before the incident with Steve. And none of her other friends was nearly as close to her as Lylah had been. All this made Jeff's absence from her life that much more intolerable.

But when she got to headquarters, she was in for a double disappointment. Jeff wasn't there. And Steve was. The volunteers were working at a frantic pace...so little time left, so many people to persuade to vote for Larrimore. The phone bank was busy, a new batch of campaign posters was ready to be nailed up, and yet more flyers needed to be delivered across town. It seemed that virtually every volunteer on the roster was working today.

Russ was updating a group of volunteers who'd be going out to hand out flyers and talk to voters. There was a change in the approach he wanted them to take, and he needed to coach them on what to say. Someone was needed, too, to drive the van across town, delivering a load of flyers to the site of a rally, and dropping off posters at the home of a volunteer who was pressed for time, had promised to put up posters, but couldn't conveniently get over to the storefront to pick them up.

Kari had a thought. "I'll drive the van over," she said...loudly. "I have an errand at Market Square Shopping Center, so I'll have to leave the van parked there between about two and two-thirty. If you can live with that, I can handle it."

A volunteer named Maggie almost ruined things for Kari when she offered, "I'll ride with you and help you to carry the flyers and posters when you get to where they're going. And I can guard the van while you're taking care of your errand."

"I'll lock the van while I'm on my errand, and I don't really need help with the carrying," Kari said. "Look...muscles." And she playfully flexed her arms. "I guess we need everyone getting out there and working...and if you and I do the same job, that's a needless duplication of effort. Thanks, but I'll be fine."

Fortunately, Maggie backed down with a, "Well, if you're sure...."

Steve kept looking over at Kari, but she narrowed her eyes into slits of hate, stared back, and kept her head held high.

She got a lucky break when she ran into Jeff outside. "How've you been?" he asked enthusiastically. "I've missed seeing you around."

"No time to talk," Kari said. Her brain was bubbling with the plot she'd begun hatching inside the storefront. Jeff's fortuitous appearance was making things jell; it would work even better now. "Look, unless you were just on your way to put out a fire or rescue a damsel in distress, get out of sight, lay low, and be at the south end of Market Square by two. Keep out of sight, but keep your eyes out for the van. Watch for me, but stay in hiding."

"What's up?"

"In the immortal words of Sherlock, 'the game's afoot.' Now, scoot, before someone sees you."

She gave him a quick swat on the rump for emphasis, and Jeff replied with a snappy salute and a "Yes, ma'am!" Then, he obediently wheeled around and headed back to his car.

At two o'clock, Kari parked the van at Market Square. She spotted Jeff's car, parked just a few cars south of the van, and she scoped out Jeff himself, hiding behind a newspaper on one of the shopping centre's benches, discreetly keeping watch. Good!

Kari, with pocket camera in hand, took up a position to the north of the van, also discreetly hidden. As the minutes dragged by and nothing untoward happened, she began to worry that the fish she was after was not among the people who had been in the storefront earlier. No one was taking the bait. She looked over to Jeff, who was restlessly fidgeting, then back at the van, parked undisturbed in the quietest corner of the parking lot.

At 2:15 a car pulled out of the spot next to the van, and another car pulled in. The occupant got out, looked furtively around, then approached the van's locked back door. In a minute, the door was open, and the man was pulling flyers and posters out of the van and loading them into his car.

Kari had no trouble recognizing Steve, and she was sure that, from his vantage point, Jeff could identify him too. Getting out her camera, she inched closer and began snapping pictures of the culprit in action. When she was sure she had a nicely incriminating set of shots, she backed away without having been seen. Steve, driving away with the materials, hadn't a clue he'd been caught in the act.

Walking over to Jeff, Kari wore the grin of the cat who'd trapped the canary. "Got the bastard," she sang out gleefully, giving Jeff a thumbs-up sign. "Now let me transfer the pictures to my computer for safekeeping—I'm not taking any chances—and print out copies, and I'll meet you back at the storefront in half an hour, give or take. Keep your mouth shut about this till I show up with the evidence."

"How did you know it was him?"

"I didn't. I was clueless as to who it was, but it almost had to be one of the volunteers, so with virtually everyone there this morning, I seized the opportunity and set up a trap."

"Clever Kari," Jeff praised her. Kari glowed.

With a hurried "thank you," Kari got back in the van and speeded toward home.

Many of the volunteers—including Steve—were still there when Kari arrived back at the storefront. "Hey, is anybody here an art lover?" Kari sang out as she walked through the front door. "I have some photos you've just got to see...especially you, Russ."

Eileen said, "I noticed you were gone the last two weeks. Are these vacation pictures?"

"No," Kari said. "I haven't been on vacation, just busy. Someone else has been busy too. These pictures don't have to do with *my* being gone. They have to do with some *things* being gone. I told you, these pictures are art...the art of catching a bad guy."

By now, everyone who wasn't on the phone—including Steve—had gathered around Kari. "Aren't these great photos?" Kari asked, passing around the pictures showing Steve raiding the truck and putting the materials in his car.

"Hey, I didn't know you were helping Kari," a volunteer named Joey said to Steve. Joey hadn't quite caught the significance of the photos.

"Oh, he wasn't helping me, I assure you," Kari said. The pictures hadn't gotten around to Steve yet, but he began edging nervously toward the door.

Russ was standing between him and the door. The first three pictures had reached him already. "I wouldn't leave just yet," Russ said, grasping Steve's arm. "I think you have a few questions to answer first."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Steve answered with a thin veneer of bravado.

"Maybe these will refresh your memory," Russ said, brandishing the photos under Steve's nose. The group of volunteers formed a circle around Russ and Steve, and Steve realized he wasn't getting away. His shoulders suddenly slumped. The defiant glint faded from his eyes. A long sigh escaped him, and even his chin sagged.

"There's this woman—Suzanne—at Badley's headquarters," Steve finally began. "I was trying to score points with her. You guys know how that one goes." His voice was pleading now. "And then one of the managers over there...I was trying to score points with him, too, for a different reason. He'd intimated there might be a place for me in Badley's government if he won the election. I've been out of work for four months now!" His eyes beseeched the other volunteers to understand that this was a matter of economics. "Hey, I've got a pregnant wife, no job, and very little left in savings. Lylah's been working, but pretty soon she'll have the baby...and then what?"

"So you were cheating on your pregnant wife with this Suzanne and trying to score points with Suzanne by stealing our materials...and trying to get a job with our illustrious opponent by proving your dishonesty," Jeff said. "If he really would have hired you after that stunt, that's one more reason why we need Larrimore, not Badley, in office. I'm a witness, by the way," he added to Russ. "I saw the whole thing...and so did Kari, of course."

"Eileen, please call the police station and have them send an officer over," Russ said.

"Bitch!" Steve spat the word at Kari.

"I beg your pardon!" Kari replied frostily.

"Shhh. Don't waste your breath on him," Jeff said, putting an arm around her shoulders. Only then did he feel that she was shaking with anger. "Hey! What's with you? Let's get you out of here. C'mon, I'll buy you a cup of coffee." He steered her out the door, calling to Russ, "We'll be next door for a little while."

Seated in a booth at the coffee shop, Kari began to relax a little. She'd been keeping a tight rein on her emotions since the weekend with Max two weeks earlier, and all this excitement on top of that was a little more than she could handle with equanimity.

As she relaxed her grip on herself, a mélange of emotions fought each other to dominate her mood—anger at Max, anger at Steve, relief that the mystery was solved, relief that Jeff's name would be cleared now, joy at seeing Jeff again, sadness that the campaign was nearly over, and mixed in with all this was a tinge of pride at having solved the mystery.

"Not bad, Sherlock," Jeff said. "What gave you the idea to do what you did?"

"When I saw virtually all the volunteers in one place, I figured I'd never get a better time to lay out the bait and see who grabbed it. I guess I'd had an opportunity like that once or twice before, but I never thought of it then. I guess my head was too full of that damn Max."

"That damn Max'? As in Max, the man you're so nuts about?"

"*Was* nuts about. Very past tense. If I ever really was nuts about him. I never got a chance to find out."

"What happened?"

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Kari took a deep breath. This was a subject she had never discussed with Jeff. "A weighty matter came between us," she finally said.

"Let me guess—he's a dope who doesn't appreciate the graceful curve of a beautifully rounded line?"

Kari managed a smile. "You have a future in politics, if you can phrase it in words like that. Very political."

"Ah, but I meant every word. There's beauty in many shapes and sizes, though true beauty is always within. If Max didn't recognize you for what you are, and value you for what you're worth—which is a lot, my friend—then maybe he wasn't the right lover for you."

"Maybe nobody is," Kari said with a hint of dejection. "Maybe I should stick to just having friends and forget about lovers."

"Sometimes friends make the best lovers," Jeff said softly, reaching across the table and taking Kari's hand.

"Sometimes a person isn't sure she can trust her friends either," Kari said just as softly. "Don't I remember a certain friend saying he'd been less than fully honest with me?"

"Yes, I did say that, and I *was* less than honest...admitting only to wanting to be your friend when I really wanted to be so much more. But I didn't want to push you into something you didn't want...and then I knew you had Max...."

"But now I don't have Max any more," Kari said, feeling her eyes sparkle with renewed hope and joy. "And I still could use a friend. Now, when I wanted to find out who was behind the hanky-panky, I followed up on my curiosity. You're presenting an interesting thesis...that friends can sometimes make the best lovers. That's got me curious, too. I'd better follow up on my curiosity and try to prove your thesis, hadn't I?"

Jeff said, "Then we'd better finish our coffee and get out of here. I can't exactly kiss you when there's a table between us."

"Hey...do you like stuffed cabbage? I just made up a batch of it. I was going to freeze eight single-serving portions for future use, but I could save aside two of them for tonight."

"You'd better stop freezing foods in single servings. I don't think you're going to be eating alone very much from now on. As far as tonight's dinner is concerned, I make a pretty good hollandaise sauce. You don't happen to have any asparagus on hand, do you?" "He's good at politics, he's a good friend, he's funny, and he cooks too! Will you ever cease to amaze me?" She got up from her seat in the booth.

"I hope not. But we'll see if you're still being amazed in ten or twenty years." They kissed, now that there was no table between them. In fact, as was Kari's last coherent thought for a while, now nothing stood between them at all.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Multi-published freelance author/editor Cynthia MacGregor has over 50 conventionally published books to her credit, as well as over 20 e-books too. She has also ghostwritten books for others. She's written "everything from catalog copy to promotional video scripts to website copy to... you name it" in addition to all those books "and a great deal more books that haven't seen the light of print yet...but I'm still looking for homes for them."

As well, she has edited numerous magazines and books and websites. Writing is not only her career, it is also one of her hobbies, chiefly in that she writes all the plays produced by the Palm Springs Players, a community theatre group in the village of Palm Springs, "the one in Florida...not its rich and famous namesake in California.

"I don't get a penny for the plays," she says, "but it's fun."

Not surprisingly, she also enjoys wordplay, specifically punnery, and is a member of the online punsters' group PUNY and a frequent attendee at the annual O. Henry Pun-Off World Championship, held each May in Austin TX, where she sometimes appears as a contestant and sometimes is a judge.

"Her other hobby is cooking "and entertaining, 'cause if you're going to cook, you need to have victims...I mean beneficiaries...to eat up all that food."

Cynthia has taught classes in writing, public speaking, and cooking.

The self-described "happiest woman in the world," Cynthia avers that "there is no one in the world I'd want to trade lives with."

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