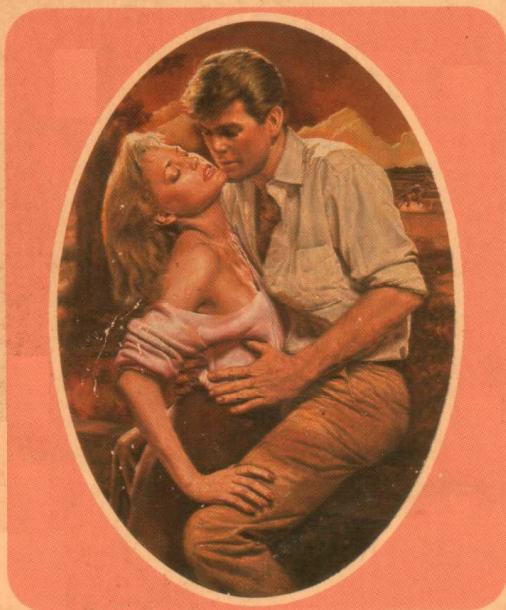


267

A Candlelight
Ecstasy Romance®

A WINNING
COMBINATION

DELL • 19715 • U.S. \$1.95
CAN. \$2.25



Lori Copeland

A WINNING COMBINATION

Lori Copeland

When Kayla Marshall met the shy, gentle salesman at Trahern Tool and Die, she knew she'd finally met the man she wanted to marry. Franklin's inexperienced yet curiously bold touch filled her with a passion unlike any she'd ever known. And when she discovered she was going to bear his child, it seemed a dream come true.

Then Kayla learned the terrible truth. Her beloved "Franklin" was none other than Nick Trahern, the notorious womanizer, the boss she'd known only by his reputation for ruthlessness. How could she forgive the callous impostor who'd tricked her? How could she trust him when he insisted his flirtatious game had turned to love? How could she not believe him when her own heart was telling her to take her playboy "salesman" back into her arms--and never let him go?

CHAPTER ONE

The blustery March wind was sailing men's hats off and making the women grab modestly for their billowing skirts this afternoon, but Kayla Marshall didn't mind at all as she hurried back to her office from her scandalously long lunch hour. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, assuring herself once again that the air most definitely did have that deliciously magic smell of spring in it. Her feet were fairly flying along the sidewalk as she glanced down anxiously at her thin gold watch and noted the lateness of the hour. She hadn't meant to spend so much time at the little boutique she had found, but they were running such an enticing sale she hadn't been able to resist stopping in for a minute, and time had gotten away from her.

As she rounded the corner another sharp gust of wind tore at her, angrily jerking one of the small sacks out of her arms and sending it soaring through the air. Kayla came to an abrupt halt and watched the errant sack whipping around mindlessly, her good humor disappearing rapidly. Out of the corner of her eye she saw a large dark sedan drive up in front of her office, Trahern Tool and Die, and brake to a halt.

Her feet began moving again, her attention riveted to the drifting package as she edged toward her destination once more. The wind showed no signs of setting its hostage free as Kayla trailed helplessly along behind, mutely mouthing all the naughty words she had been punished for as a child.

Another violent burst out of the north sent the small pink sack careening wildly toward the tall blond-headed man who was just stepping out of his car. He glanced up only seconds before the sack hit him squarely in his handsome face. The impact sent him reeling back against his car as Kayla raced forward frantically, trying to ward off the inevitable. Her feet faltered, and her blue eyes widened, first in astonishment, then in outright horror as the thin paper sack began to tear and all three pairs of the shockingly brief bikini panties she had just bought came tumbling down the front of the man's broad chest. Both dismayed gazes fell to the panties strung across his chest, the wind keeping them firmly plastered in place. If Kayla could have dug a hole, she would have gratefully crawled into it.

"I assume these belong to you?" The man's voice was deep, very masculine, with just a tinge of amusement evident.

Kayla forced her eyes away from the frilly unmentionables and slowly raised her head. Her gaze ran up the strong column of a tanned neck, a firm smoothly shaven jawline, lips that were well shaped and looked very, very, kissable, a nose that was not too large, eyes the color of storm clouds on a summer day, hair the color of wheat in the morning sunshine—just an average man, she thought fleetingly as her embarrassed features came face to face with his. Well, maybe more than average, she added on second thought.

"Yes. I'm terribly sorry ..." Her voice trailed off weakly. She felt like such a fool! "Here, let me get these things off..." Kayla reached out to snatch the panties from his chest.

"No, here. I think I can .. ." It was his voice that trailed off this time as his large fingers worked unsuccessfully to untangle the lace of one pair from the button of his rust-colored corduroy suit jacket. "It seems to be caught," he mumbled sheepishly as the pair of white panties resisted his attempts to free it.

"Here, let me try," Kayla offered again, reaching up to undo the entanglement. Her hands were shaking from nervousness as she drew a deep breath, trying to calm herself and get this humiliating experience over with quickly. After working diligently for a few moments Kayla noticed the man was getting a bit antsy, shifting from one foot to the other.

Sighing with annoyance, he grabbed her hands and said sharply, "Look, why don't you just tear the damn things off and get this over with!" His tone of voice was suddenly almost rude.

Kayla glared at him anxiously. "These are brand new panties. I just bought them not fifteen minutes ago." She had always had a practical side.

"Lady, I'll buy you a new pair," he gritted out in a low growl. "Just get the damn things off me!"

With a sigh of defeat Kayla jerked hard on the lacy undies, cringing as she heard the fabric tear, along with his button.

"There. I hope you're satisfied," she said briskly as she plucked the other two pairs from his shoulders and stuffed them into one of the other sacks she was carrying. "That's five dollars down the drain."

"My heart bleeds for you," he said as he dismally surveyed his suit jacket.

Kayla was busily gathering up her purse and other packages, the offending pair of briefs still clasped tightly in her hand. She was now twenty minutes late, and she certainly didn't have time to stand here and argue with this stranger over a pair of panties.

One large hand snaked out and took the scrap of white lace from her hands and held it up for a closer inspection. He emitted a low whistle between his teeth. "Holeeee Moses! Do you actually wear these things?" he asked incredulously.

Kayla paused and surveyed him arrogantly. "Is there something wrong with them?" He had such a cocky look on his face!

"They look to me like they'd be a torture chamber," he said bluntly, his eyes assessing the skimpiness of them. Then, as if a new, more agreeable thought had occurred to him, his gaze sauntered over her feminine curves, a small grin creeping over his handsome features. "Although I'll admit they could start a man's motor running with no problem."

"I am not interested in starting any man's motor, as you so crudely put it, and I certainly don't have time to be carrying on this ridiculous conversation," Kayla told him irritably as she gathered the last of her packages together. "I'm late for work as it is."

"Hey, wait a minute," he called as she brushed rudely by him and started up the set of stairs leading to her office. "How do I know what size . . . uh ... these things to buy you?"

"Forget it," she said tightly as she unlocked the door to the office and started in. "I'll buy my own . . . torture chambers!" The door closed with an irritated bang. That had to be the single most embarrassing incident in Kayla's life. If she never saw that man again, it would be too soon!

Hurriedly dumping her parcels in the small closet next to her desk, she silently thanked her lucky stars that she was working in a one-girl office. When she had agreed to replace Paula for a couple of weeks so she could go on vacation with her husband, Doug, Kayla had known that her office skills would be a little rusty, but she was shocked when she found out just how rusty. The last few days had been chaos, and one of the contributing culprits was frantically flashing its lights at her from the console on her desk.

"Good afternoon, Trahern Tool and Die." She forced her voice to sound pleasant as she punched down the first blinking button. Yes, sir, I'll connect you. One moment, please" Biting her lip, she studied the typewritten sheet next to her, looking for the right extension. Holding her breath, she pressed down on a second button and, she hoped, transferred the call. Repeating the process with fumbling fingers, she answered the five calls that were coming through. Kayla was so engrossed in her work, she was barely aware of the front door opening and the tall blond- haired man stepping into the room.

"Good afternoon, Trahern Tool and ... Oh, I'm sorry, sir! I didn't realize I cut you off I'll transfer your call again." Exasperatedly she searched the extension sheet and frantically poked another button.

"Excuse me, ma'am, I know you're busy, but. . ."

Kayla barely glanced up as she tried to keep track of the lights going on and off. She flushed miserably as she recognized the man from the street. "What do *you* want?" she said curtly. She needed him right now like she needed another incoming call.

"What do I want? My, what receptionist school did you flunk out of?" he chided in a condescending tone.

"None. I owned a dress shop in Florida until a few months ago," she said sharply, still punching buttons, not knowing which call to answer first.

"Please, just go away. I'm terribly busy right now. I told you, you don't owe me anything."

"Owned a dress shop," he mused thoughtfully, ignoring her request. "What happened? Did you develop a case of amnesia and stumble in here by mistake?"

Kayla glared up at him.

"Where's Paula?"

"Lolling around somewhere in the Bahamas right about now. I'm just filling in for her. She won't be back for another week yet. May I help you? Oh, darn!" Kayla snapped as she severed another phone conversation cleanly.

The stranger leaned against her desk, boyish grin on his tanned, handsome face. He was clearly enjoying her frustration. "Why don't you let that thing ring. Nobody's going to reach their party anyway."

With a sigh Kayla leaned back and let the lights blink. "You're right. This thing's giving me fits," she admitted glumly. "Did you really want something?" Her large blue eyes rose to meet his smoky gaze. For a moment, just one slight moment, her heart fluttered. She was looking into Tony's eyes. Eyes that could turn dark and sensual when he was sexually aroused, cold and hard when he was angry. Tony's beautiful eyes had enchanted, thrilled, and excited her. At one time Tony Platto had meant the whole world to her. Then he had destroyed that world, and her along with it.

"You really don't know who I am, do you?" the man smiled questioningly.

"No. Thrill me," she said churlishly.

The man leaned forward, his smile turning into a broad grin. Crossing his arms negligently, he surveyed her with a slow, easy familiarity. "I probably could."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not familiar with the regular salesmen that come in here. Do you have an appointment?" she asked sharply. She was uneasily

watching the increasing array of blinking lights before her, ignoring his sexy innuendo.

"I'm here to see Mr. Trahern," he answered, suddenly very businesslike, playing along with her professional tone of voice.

"If you're referring to the elder Mr. Trahern, he's out of town for the next month. If you mean 'Romeo' Trahern, I wouldn't have the slightest idea where he might be." Her tone left no doubt she cared even less where *that* one was. "It's my understanding he doesn't work out of this office and is rarely in town."

"Romeo? My, do I detect a note of animosity toward the son?"

Disarmed, Kayla looked up and, realizing what she had just said, put her hand over her mouth. "Oh, excuse me. That's just one of the things I've heard him called. I'm so rattled today, I'm not thinking straight. Look, honestly, I don't have time to sit here and idly chat with you. Did you have an appointment, Mr...."

Kayla looked up expectantly at him.

"Uh. Franklin. That's my name, Franklin. And, no, I don't have an actual appointment. Mr. Trahern just usually lets me drop in on him from time to time. Why don't you like Nicholas?"

"Who?"

"Nicholas—Nicholas Trahern, the son. What's wrong with him?" His eyes had turned slightly mistrustful now.

"Good heavens!" Kayla said in exasperation. "I didn't say I didn't like the man. In fact, I wasn't even aware his name was Nicholas." She giggled. "I've always heard him referred to as Romeo, Hot Lips, Don Juan, and—" she stopped, and her cheeks reddened again as she offered him a small shy smile.

"And?" he persisted, standing up straighter now.

"Superfly!"

His left eyebrow shot surprisedly upward. "Super *what?*"

Her face clouded with embarrassment, and she lowered her eyes back to the top of the desk, aghast at her easy familiarity with this total stranger.

"Guy!" she amended hurriedly. "And I don't even *know* the louse . . . man. I only know what I've heard about him. But you're right, I don't particularly like what I've heard. I suppose you're a friend of his." She had probably stuck her foot in her big mouth again.

"You might say that. You still haven't said exactly what you don't like about the man." She clearly had him worried.

"Mr. Franklin!" Kayla stood up and put both of her hands flat on the desk and glared at him belligerently.

"Franklin . . . just call me Franklin," he suggested sweetly.

"I just did!"

"No, I mean drop the Mr. and just call me by my first name."

"What is your first name?" Kayla was losing her patience rapidly.

"Franklin!" He grinned boyishly.

Kayla let out a snort of disbelief. "Your name is Franklin Franklin?"

Franklin shrugged his broad shoulders, and his grin broadened. "Catchy, isn't it? But look, you don't have to raise your voice to me." He lowered his head timidly, and a shy expression came over his face. "I know you're upset by all this talk about that. . . disgusting Nicholas and what happened outside a few minutes ago. Believe me, that was the most embarrassing thing that has ever happened to me." His earnest gray eyes peered at her soulfully. "But it was just an unfortunate accident, and I told you I'd be more than happy to buy you another pair." She could have sworn he blushed as he

dropped his head down and stared at the floor. He looked like a whipped dog.

Kayla regarded him suspiciously, surprised at the sudden change that had come over him. When she was satisfied that his discomfort and repentance were real, the anger drained out of her, and she sank back down in her chair tiredly.

"I'm sorry, Franklin, I didn't mean to raise my voice, but this has been a bad day. First of all, I've never met Nicholas Trahern. In fact, I've never even seen a picture of the man. I've *heard* certain things about him that could only lead me to believe that I would never like the man personally. If he's a close friend of yours, then I apologize, and I'm sorry if I've embarrassed you by ... by his nicknames."

"Oh, yes, I know the things you're referring to," Franklin agreed, his eyes growing round and sincere. He came around the desk and sat down on it in front of her. "You've probably heard all those nasty stories about him being a womanizer, a rake, a spoiled playboy who does nothing but gamble, play with his racehorse, drink too much." He searched his memory for more scurrilous faults. "Steal candy from small children, beat dogs—"

"Yes, well, I hadn't heard the part about children and dogs," Kayla had to admit in all honesty, "but I had heard all the other things."

"Well, I hate to say it, but he is *all* those despicable things, and more! I cannot understand what a decent woman would see in him." He reached over and casually picked up Kayla's hand, enclosing it in his large tanned one. "Why in the world would a woman be interested in a man like that, Ms." It was he who was now searching for a name.

Kayla glanced down uneasily at her small hand engulfed in his large one, wondering whether to pull it back or let it remain where it was. The sudden change in his manner had her a bit confused. Deciding that he was probably very harmless, and suddenly aware of the fact that for some reason her hand felt very comfortable in his, she decided to let it pass for the moment.

"Marshall. Kayla Marshall," she offered pleasantly.

"Kayla Marshall. Very pretty." The timbre of his voice was very deep with an almost musical quality to it. Smoky eyes gazed into sky-blue ones for a fraction of a minute before he continued softly. "As I was saying, Kayla Marshall, what makes a woman fall for a man like Nicholas Trahern? I have to admit, I've always been ... very shy, very ill at ease, insecure around women"—his voice dropped even lower, and he began to gently massage her hand, lulling her into a state of placidity—"so I'm simply amazed to see how smoothly the cad operates. We've been friends for years, and I can't help but like the guy. But it's outrageous how women flock to him. It's simply uncanny," he said with a depressed sigh, shaking his head in disbelief.

Strange, but Kayla would not have thought Franklin would ever have any trouble attracting women. He certainly was nice-looking enough—downright handsome, in fact—and the way he was caressing her hand, sending little shivers of delight up her arm . . . that certainly didn't indicate any shyness on his part.

As if reading her thoughts, he dropped her hand, sending it thudding back down on the desk painfully, his head drooping shamefully once again. "Oh, my! I don't know what's come over me," he apologized. "You must think . . . It's just that for some reason, you make me feel so ... so comfortable with you. I hope that you don't think that *I'm* the sort of man who would try to take advantage of a girl, like my good friend Nicholas? ..." His voice trailed off.

"No, no, really, Franklin." Kayla reached over to pat his hand reassuringly with her still stinging one. "I don't think that at all ... really." This poor man definitely did seem to have problems relating to a woman! "And as for your friend Nicholas, some women are attracted to the rich, spoiled, playboy type. I've heard he's extremely good-looking and personable... and, well"—she shrugged her shoulders and smiled apologetically at him—"addall that together, and to some women he *would* be totally irresistible!"

"Yes, I suppose he is. You'd fall for him, too, if you ever met him, wouldn't you?" He raised one brow hopefully.

"Afraid not. His type are a pain in the—" Kayla caught herself before she embarrassed Franklin further. "No, I'd never be attracted to Nicholas Trahern! Now, if you'll excuse me, Franklin, I really do have to get back to answering these calls. If you'll leave your card, I'll see that the elder Mr. Trahern gets it."

Franklin looked momentarily disconcerted as he began to rummage through his suit pocket, trying unsuccessfully to come up with a card. "Sorry." He grinned innocently. "I seem to be all out of my business cards."

"Then I'll be happy to leave a note for him. Was this strictly a social call, or do you do business with the company?"

"Uh . . . sort of a combined call," he hedged nervously.

"Oh, then you *are* a salesman. Do you sell machinery?" she asked pleasantly, inwardly cringing at the ever increasing flash of lights before her.

"No, I sell"—Franklin's eyes darted around the room, finally coming to rest on the mound of books lying on the table in the small reception area—"books . . . encyclopedias."

"Encyclopedias?" Kayla asked blankly.

"Well, not just strictly encyclopedias." He beamed enchantingly. "I sell other types of reference materials... but let's not talk shop. You know, Kayla Marshall, I'm about to do something that's totally out of character for me," he said hastily, changing the subject. "You've given me the nerve to do something I've always dreamed of doing. I'm going to ask a beautiful woman to have dinner with me tonight."

"Good for you, Franklin," Kayla said hurriedly as she took his arm and tried discreetly to escort him to the front door. "I'm sure that *any* woman would be happy to have dinner with you this evening."

"Thanks. What time should I pick you up?"

Kayla's mouth dropped open, and her arm dropped limply to her side. "Me? You're asking me?"

"Oh, I know." Franklin's wide shoulders dropped dejectedly, his beautiful eyes painfully resigned. "You're going to fib to me and say you already have other plans tonight—"

"Franklin . . ." Kayla was so softhearted, it really disturbed her to see the bleak look in his eyes. But really! She didn't want to spend an entire evening with some salesman she had just barely met. In fact, she didn't want to spend an evening with a man, period.

"Don't worry about it. I'm used to women refusing my invitations," he said graciously. "I'll just go back to my motel and have some peanut butter and crackers ... no, I had that last night. Maybe I'll open a can of soup and heat it up on the hot plate I carry with me. It really doesn't matter—I'll find something." He grinned bravely.

Kayla's heart sank. She opened her mouth and forced the words out. "I'd be delighted to go to dinner with you this evening, Franklin. I was just going to say that I might be a little late getting out of here tonight, that's all."

"Really?" His face lit up like a Christmas tree. "Now, don't you worry about how late you are. I haven't got another thing to do," he assured her elatedly. "Just tell me what time to pick you up, and I'll be here!"

Kayla bit her lip nervously, wondering how in the world she had gotten herself into this mess. "If you don't mind, Franklin, I'd like to go home and change first." Reaching for a small pad and pencil, she scribbled her address down, then handed it to him hesitantly. "I'll be ready by seven."

"Great!" His handsome face beamed angelically. "Kayla, I . . . thanks for doing this. And I want to assure you, you'll be perfectly safe in my company. I'm not like ... my good friend Nicholas." He showed her his most serious face. "Thank you, Franklin. I'm sure we'll have a lovely evening." She smiled valiantly.

Kayla stood at the door and watched Franklin walk jauntily to his dark sedan, whistling softly under his breath. He seemed like such a nice, sincere man, and anyway, what was one night? She could put up with anything for one night. Besides, it had been a very long time since she had been treated like a woman. It had been over a year since she and Tony had broken off their relationship. She closed her eyes against the swift shaft of pain that coursed through her heart at the thought of Tony and Maggie. By now their baby would be around six months old, probably working on cutting his first tooth. Kayla stood in the doorway fighting the overwhelming urge to let the tears fall unchecked again as the gusty wind tossed her hair around wildly. For what seemed the millionth time, she tortured herself with the mental picture of a little dark-haired baby with eyes the color of smoke. It could have been her and Tony's baby. Tony had been her first and only love. She didn't want an involvement with another man. Not now, not ever. When Tony had come to her with tears in his eyes, begging her understanding about a one- night indiscretion, as he had so elegantly phrased it, with another woman that had resulted in her pregnancy, Kayla's world had fallen apart. Honesty was high on the list of qualities she admired, but oh, how she had wished that he could somehow have found a less painful way to let her know. If he had just walked out on her and let her believe he was in love with another woman, how much easier that would have been than for him to plead that he loved *her*, that his life was being torn apart by the situation he found himself in. But Tony had felt a very definite responsibility toward his child, so he had married its mother, still promising that there would someday be a future for him and Kayla. But Kayla had vowed just as passionately that there would not be.

She had immediately put her small dress shop up for sale and been lucky enough to sell it within a month. Without leaving a trace of Kayla Marshall behind, she had moved to Little Rock, Arkansas, where Paula, her best friend from college, now lived with her husband, and began the slow agonizing task of starting a new life. She had always been a gullible, trusting girl, but she had sworn that never again would she believe in a man's promises.

For the last few months she had drifted aimlessly in a void, her interest in life at an all-time low. Luckily she had made a tidy little profit on the sale of her business, allowing her the luxury of simply existing for a while. When Paula had approached Kayla with the suggestion that she fill in for her at

Trahern Tool and Die while she and Doug went to the Bahamas for a couple of weeks, Kayla had agreed readily, happy to feel useful once again. Happy to just feel anything again. That was some improvement over the last year. Not much, but at least she was beginning to make some progress.

Snapping back to reality, Kayla closed the door and strolled back across the small room. Yes, it might be nice to be in the company of a man like Franklin Franklin. She grimaced at the "catchy" name. He might be a shy, timid man—although for some reason that didn't ring quite true to her—but she was almost pleased by the prospect. Let the Tony Plattos and the Nicholas Traherns of the world go to hell! And besides, she consoled herself one last time, what was one night? She could afford to be generous. She had nothing to lose. She had already lost it all!

• \

CHAPTER TWO

By the time Kayla arrived back at her apartment that afternoon, it was quite late. Balancing her packages on her knee, she fumbled in her purse for her key, vowing to start putting it in one certain compartment rather than merely throwing it in haphazardly, as she had a habit of doing. She spent the better part of five minutes every day rummaging in her purse before coming up with the elusive key. Finally locating it, she let herself into the small apartment and dumped her parcels on the nearest chair. Pushing back a wayward strand of blond hair, she sank wearily down on the sofa and kicked off her shoes, wiggling her toes in delicious freedom. Her periwinkle eyes lighted a little as she thumbed through the day's mail, smiling as she surveyed the postcard from the Bahamas with Paula's familiar handwriting scrawled across it. "Having a ball, wish you were here!" Kayla grinned and stretched languidly on the couch, closing her eyes for a moment and imagining the steamy tropical climate, the softly swaying palms, the warm sandy beaches. Paula wasn't the only one who wished she was there.

With a long exhausted sigh she unwillingly pushed herself off the sofa and headed toward the bathroom and a quick shower before Franklin came to pick her up. Twenty minutes later she was applying the last touches to her makeup when she heard the peal of the doorbell. Glancing down at her watch, she noted that the man was very punctual. It was seven o'clock on the dot.

I can stand anything for one night, she reminded herself for at least the tenth time since he had left the office that afternoon. Pasting a weak but completely believable smile on her face, she opened the door.

There was something about Franklin Franklin that for one brief moment made her heart thump erratically. Of course, it could very well be the way she suddenly became acutely aware of his tall, athletic physique, or the way his casual red V-neck sweater revealed a muscular chest covered with crisp blond hair. Behind large horn-rimmed glasses gun-metal-gray eyes met her blueberry ones magnetically. With a look of faint amusement he lazily inspected the suggestion of nubile curves beneath the midnight-blue dress she wore. An easy smile played at the corners of his mouth as he spoke, his deep, sensual voice sending a ripple of awareness coursing through her.

"Good evening, ma'am. You look... very pretty tonight." He extended a small beautifully wrapped package, along with a tiny bouquet of forget-me-nots. "These reminded me of the color of your eyes," he explained with an irresistible grin.

"Franklin... you really shouldn't have"—she smiled tenderly—"but I'm glad you did! Don't tell me you brought me candy too." She was examining the pink bow adorning the little package.

"Only in the eye of the beholder. Go ahead and open it."

Kayla felt a little embarrassed at his attentiveness. It was so very sad that such a nice man had not met a woman who would give him the affection and acceptance he so obviously needed. Hurriedly slipping the bow off the pink box, she undid the paper and opened the box. She had to struggle hard to keep her face from displaying her dismay. Lying between the layers of flimsy tissue paper were several pairs of bikini panties—even moreshockingly brief than the ones she had purchased earlier that day.

"Do you like them?" Franklin asked earnestly, pride spreading pleasurably over his face at his, as he evidently thought, excellent taste.

"Yes . . . well. . . Franklin, you shouldn't have . . ." Kayla didn't know what to say. Apparently Franklin had changed his mind about the panties being "torture chambers"—or else he was intent on harsher punishment. The panties nestled in the box would scarcely cover the bare essentials, let alone be comfortable! With inquisitive eyes she discreetly noted that the size was perfect. Now, how in the world could he have guessed what size she wore if he wasn't used to being around women?

"Franklin, how did you know what size to buy?"

"Lucky guess." He beamed proudly.

Kayla's eyes narrowed suspiciously. What was it about this man that made her a bit uneasy? Just because he happened to make a lucky guess about the size underwear she wore? . . . "Well, again, thank you. But it was really unnecessary."

"But I wanted to, Kayla Marshall," he said sincerely, his deep voice once again making her extremely conscious of his overwhelmingly virile appeal. He came a few steps closer to her, and his eyes swept over her face approvingly. "Lovely women should have lovely things. It's been all my pleasure, I assure you."

There was something lazily seductive in his look which made her catch her breath. The sudden strange surge of affection she was feeling for him made her very nervous. He was standing very close now. She could smell his clean manly scent, the sexy, tantalizing smell of his aftershave, and it was making her feel almost giddy. His eyes caressed her softness, and had it been any other man but Franklin, she would have sworn he was debating about whether to kiss her!

"Well"—she laughed nervously—"thanks, again." Good heavens! How many times was she going to thank the guy?

"Again, you're most welcome." With one last admiring glance he stepped back and became all business once more. "I hope you're hungry, Ms. Marshall. Do you like Mexican food?"

Reaching for the light sweater that was draped over the arm of the chair, she picked up her purse, and they exchanged polite smiles.

"I love Mexican food, and please, just call me Kayla."

"Oh, ma'am"—he managed to look mildly embarrassed—"I really don't feel I know you well enough to call you ... Kayla."

Her sense of humor surfaced, and she laughed openly. "You buy me three pairs of the most, uh, delicate panties you can find, and you feel you don't know me well enough to call me by my first name!" Her bubbly laughter filled the room as Franklin stood before her grinning sheepishly. What a perfectly wonderful man! "Forgive me, Franklin," she managed to get out between fits of giggles, afraid she would hurt his feelings, "but I find you—"

"I know." His face suddenly turned grave. "Dull and old-fashioned. But I'm afraid that's just the kind of man I am. To me a woman is special. She should

be treated with respect and reverence." He reached out to touch her hand gently. "Especially a woman like you."

"Certainly *not!* You're not dull or old-fashioned, Franklin." Kayla took his hand in hers and squeezed it affectionately. "You're... you're a delightfully refreshing change from the men I've known. Not that I've known very many . . ." Her voice trailed off as thoughts of Tony flashed through her mind.

"Is there one special man in your life, ma'am?" Franklin's hand increased the pressure on hers, his sooty gray eyes darkening dangerously. For the first time that day he began to wonder at the wisdom of the path he was pursuing with this lovely lady.

"Once there was—but that was a long time ago. Now, come on, Franklin, I believe you mentioned something about enchiladas, tacos, burritos." She slipped her arm through his and walked toward the door.

"Enchiladas, tacos, burritos . . . mercy, you must eat a lot more than you look like you do. I'll have to check my wallet!"

"No way. You're such a nice person, I'm going to take you out tonight." Kayla grinned happily. "Order anything you want. The meal's on me."

From behind the large horn-rimmed glasses Franklin gave Kayla a withering glare. "You'll do no such thing!" he shot back huffily, a note of impatience in his voice. "I was only teasing you. I can afford to pay for your dinner."

Kayla was instantly contrite. The last thing she had meant to do was imply that he didn't have the money to take her to dinner. She had just thought that he was probably a struggling salesman and would welcome going dutch for the evening.

"Of course, Franklin. Whatever you say." She smiled with pleasure. He was really nice! "I'll put my flowers in water, and then I'll be ready to go."

"You know, I didn't notice you wearing glasses earlier today," she said brightly as he helped her into the sedate four-door sedan. "They look nice on

you." Actually, when she stopped to think about it, a wart would look nice on him. But he really didn't seem to have the slightest idea what a devastatingly handsome man he was. He had a sweet personality, too, she mused as he got in on the driver's side and backed out onto the street. Maybe he had a problem in the bedroom. Her eyes sneakily surveyed his legs, which were encased in a tight pair of brown corduroy pants, the fabric fitting snugly over their firm, muscly contours. It was all she could do to keep her inquisitive eyes from roaming from the thighs to a quite different and personal area. Out of sheer respect for Franklin she forced herself to look out the windshield. *Well, maybe just a fast peek*, she thought hurriedly. No, he didn't have a problem in the bedroom. She'd bet her last nickel on that!

"I don't wear them all the time," he was saying as they sped down the street headed for the freeway. "Only when my eyes feel strained."

"Do you come to Little Rock very often?" she asked as he expertly pulled off the ramp and merged into the stream of heavy traffic. He seemed to know right where he was going.

"Fairly often. Damn," he muttered softly under his breath as the traffic began to slow. "The races must have had a big turnout today."

Kayla looked out the window at the line of cars coming from Hot Springs. Paula had said that during horse racing season the traffic was heavy, especially on weekends.

"I wonder how many Snyder brought across the wire today," Franklin mused to himself as he switched over to the faster lane. Kayla knew just enough about horse racing to know that Snyder was one of the more popular jockeys.

"Do you like horse racing?" Kayla asked in surprise. Somehow he didn't seem the type.

Franklin looked momentarily edgy. "Nick owns racehorses. I've always tried to follow his wins."

"I've never even been to a horse race," Kayla admitted. "I'm not much of a gambler."

Franklin glanced over at her, the even whiteness of his smile dazzling. "I can see you at the window now, placing your two dollar bet on a shoo in to show!" He chuckled. His eyes were bright with merriment as he surveyed her honey-blond curls, blown appealingly around her face by the breeze from the open car window.

"I'm afraid I don't know what that means," she confessed.

"When you go to the horse races, you place bets on a horse to win, place, or show, or a combination of all three," he explained patiently, keeping his eyes on the cars ahead of him. "When you bet on show, it's usually a pretty safe bet if you pick a good horse. Of course, it would take a long time to get rich that way."

"Really? Why?" she asked, fascinated at the way his face seemed to beam when he was talking about something he so obviously enjoyed. "Well, if you win, and you've placed your two dollars on a favorite, you get your initial bet back, plus, oh, a little profit. Now, if you bet on a long shot with your two bucks, that's a little more profitable, but still a slow way to get rich."

"Yes, but at least I'd get my two dollars back!" she reasoned pertly. "I suppose you bet everything—the whole two dollars— on a long shot to win."

"The whole two dollars," he agreed, grinning broadly, "on the nose."

"And I'll bet your friend Nicholas bets on the nose, the rump, and the tail." She laughed, not having the least idea what his track lingo meant, thinking how ridiculous her two dollar bet would be in Nicholas's eyes.

The smile faded rapidly from Franklin's face. "He's not a compulsive gambler, if that's what you mean. He does take a certain amount of pride and satisfaction in his horses, though," he defended curtly. "What's wrong with that?"

Kayla glanced over at him, a bit surprised at his tone of voice. "Nothing. It just struck me funny when I thought of how much he would bet and how much you and I would."

It amazed her how protective Franklin seemed to be of his friend. Perhaps he had lived in awe of him for so many years that he resented anyone's saying anything the least critical about him. "I'm sorry. I wasn't criticizing him," Kayla pointed out. "Only thinking out loud."

"You've got the wrong impression of him, Kayla. He's not such a bad guy," Franklin said defensively. "You can't believe all that smutty gossip you hear about him."

"But *you* admitted most of it was true," Kayla argued.

"Did I say that?" he asked in mock surprise, realizing the conversation had grown too serious. "Well, maybe part of it's true."

"Oh, and what part is that, Franklin?" Kayla laughed, enjoying his look of discomfort. Nicholas Trahern might be a conceited snob, but he had managed to find a very valuable asset in his life—a true friend, in the form of one Franklin Franklin.

Flashing her a devilishly handsome grin, he winked broadly. "He most definitely is a Superfly . . . *guy!*"

Kayla's mouth dropped open at sweet, shy Franklin's risque statement. Then, recovering from her shock, she began to laugh so infectiously that Franklin joined in. She wasn't sure if Franklin was good for her, or the other way around. She only knew she hadn't felt so lighthearted in a very long time, and it felt so very, very good. Amid peals of laughter they pulled into the Mexican restaurant, laughing even harder when they saw the puzzled stares they were attracting. They got out of the car, Franklin came around to her side, and it seemed quite natural when he slipped his arm around her waist. They walked into the Spanish building before them, still smiling at each other happily.

Somewhere between the refried beans and the last bowl of tortilla chips, Kayla was sure she was going to explode. For the last half hour they had eaten with the zeal of a condemned man consuming his last meal. As they sat in the small booth in the dimly lit room, she begged off when Franklin asked if she'd like another taco.

"Please, have a heart," she said, puffing both cheeks out like a chipmunk. "I am about to die, *senor*. Have you no mercy?"

"You need to fatten up a little bit," Franklin chided, his eyes running lazily over her feminine curves.

"Now, that does it," Kayla said in mock annoyance. "I should stand up and gun you down for that remark," she threatened. "All the long, grueling days I've lived on nothing but salads and yogurt just so I can be thin, willowy, and oh, so appealing, and you sit there and have the gall to say I ought to fatten up! Bah, a curse on you!"

"You don't have to watch that lovely figure," he said admiringly, his eyes roving intimately over her exquisite form. "Why don't you leave that pleasant task to the men." His strong features had a certain sensuality to them as he picked up her hand and brought it casually to his lips.

Kayla was mesmerized as she felt the light touch of his lips play across her fingertips before he placed a fleeting kiss on them.

"Franklin," she whispered a little breathlessly, "it's so hard to believe you have any difficulty with women—not when you're so . . . affectionate with me. . . ." Her voice trailed off, weak and shaky, as his smoke-colored eyes captured hers, his lips still playing sensuously over her fingers.

"I'm amazed myself," he said lightly. "Let's just say you make me glad I'm a man and can enjoy such a lovely woman's company tonight."

His thick blond hair tapered neatly to his collar, giving Kayla the overwhelming urge to reach forward and touch its lustrous sheen. The rippling of his muscles under the V-neck sweater as he gently but firmly kept her hand in control made her pulse quicken and her heart pound

erratically. His disturbing virility caused her great confusion. At the moment she could not recall ever feeling this attracted to a man. Not even Tony. That thought scared her more than all the other thoughts put together.

Pulling her hand away gently, she forced her eyes to leave his, murmuring softly, "Franklin, I... I don't want to see you get hurt, so I feel that I have to say this. You're a very dear, dear man, but we could never be anything but friends."

"Why?" Franklin asked calmly, picking her hand up again. "Because of the guy that hurt you?"

"Hurt me? How did you know a guy hurt me?" Kayla gave an ironic laugh. She apparently hadn't given him enough credit for being able to read between lines. "*Hurt* seems like such a small word, but yes, because of that guy."

"What happened?" he asked quietly.

It was hard for her to think straight with him gazing at her that way. He had slowly brought her fingers back to his lips again, tantalizing her with whisper-soft kisses.

"Does it matter?" she said tiredly, wishing desperately she would never have to think about Tony again.

"It does to me. What was the guy's name?"

"Tony. Tony Platto." Her stomach fluttered as Franklin's tongue touched first one fingertip, then another. She would swear he had had a lot of practice at this sort of thing if he didn't look so angelic behind those large glasses of his.

"What did he do to you?" he persisted firmly.

"We were engaged. He got another girl pregnant and had to marry her." Funny, that didn't hurt as much as the last time she had told someone about it.

"Did you love him?"

"I certainly thought I did," she admitted painfully.

"Did?" he pursued gently.

"Did, do, I don't know. But it doesn't matter anyway. What we had is over and gone." Her eyes had lost their sparkle and glow. In its place was defeat. Cold, hard defeat.

"And you're going to let one son of a—" Franklin caught himself. ". . . one bad experience sour you on men for life?"

Kayla's blue gaze pleaded with him for understanding. "Franklin, I believed what Tony and I had together was something sacred and special. I believed the sun rose and set in him. I would have gladly laid my life down for him. I trusted him implicitly. I gave him my all. I encouraged him in whatever he dreamed of. I wanted what he wanted. He took all that love and trust and threw it back in my face the night he decided to go to bed with another woman. Yes, Tony soured me on other men, and I just don't know if I can ever care for anyone again. Right now I choose to live my life without men."

"You're sure you can do that?" Franklin cocked one blond eyebrow questioningly. "Don't you think it's possible for you to be attracted to another man? Say, a man like my good friend Nicholas?"

Kayla answered curtly, "Are you kidding? He would be the last man on earth I'd be attracted to!" For some unexplained reason Franklin was stirring up a lot of old longings that she had thought had died along with her love for Tony, and she didn't like it. "Why do you find it so unusual that I don't want a man in my life right now? I was under the impression you weren't"—Kayla paused, searching for the right words—"that you didn't have a lot of experience with women. You apparently are living successfully without women."

"Oh ... well, yes, to be totally honest—" He leaned forward, bringing his face very close to hers, his eyes dead-serious behind the large horn-rimmed glasses. "I *can* be totally honest with you, can't I?"

"You certainly can," she said encouragingly, her fingers beginning to tremble in his strong grasp.

"Uh..." He looked around uneasily to see if their whispered conversation could be heard by anyone. "To be absolutely honest, I have never—" His voice broke off embarrassedly.

Kayla's blue eyes widened as his words hit pay dirt. "Never?" she whispered incredulously.

"Shhhh!" he threatened in a mortified tone. "I've never told another soul that!"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Franklin," she soothed, grasping his hand tighter in hers. "I was just so ... so shocked to think . . . How old are you, anyway?"

"Thirty-six."

"Thirty-six! And you've never—"

"Shhhhh!"

"Sorry!" Kayla glanced around nervously, then continued in a hushed tone. "Haven't you ever even wanted to?" This was too much!

Franklin shrugged his massive shoulders and admitted in a meek voice, "I've thought about it sometimes."

I should hope to shout, Kayla thought irritably. *Thirty-six years old and never . . . Well, he must hold some kind of record!*

"Do you have some sort of problem," she asked conspiratorially. "There had to be some reason for this ... this gross case of injustice!"

"No!" Franklin fired back instantly. "No, no problem. It's, well, I wanted to save myself for my wife . . . that's all. I told you, I'm an old-fashioned guy," he said defensively.

Kayla drummed her fingers on the table and stared at Franklin critically, wondering if this guy was for real. She halfway wished he hadn't been so candid and told her *all* about his life. Now, suddenly, he began to seem like a challenge. Thirty-six years old . . . and never! Shish!

"Perhaps I've been too straitlaced," he said guiltily, reaching for her hand again, "but Mother always warned me against ... bad girls." He cocked one eyebrow and peeked from behind his glasses at her studious face. "Of course, I don't know *why* I'm telling you all of this. We're both going to be in the same boat now, since you've sworn off men."

Troubled blue eyes met bleak gray ones. "Aw, come on. You're puttin' me on, aren't you, Franklin?" She smirked accusingly, absolutely refusing to believe her ears.

"I'm telling you the truth!" he insisted adamantly. "Franklin Franklin has *never* gone to bed with a woman in his life." Doom was written all over his handsome features.

"Well, try not to worry about it," she urged optimistically as she patted his hand in sympathy. "Someday the right girl will come along, and you'll be glad you waited." What else could she say to a thirty-six-year-old male virgin? *Hang in there, fellow, and try not to think about it?*

"Well, I suppose if you're ready, we should be starting home," Franklin said gloomily, dropping her hand back onto the table.

Trying not to let her strong feelings of sympathy for him show, she made herself smile brightly. "It's been such a nice evening, I hate to see it end."

"You're just saying that," he replied glumly as he scooped up the check and threw a hefty tip onto the table. Kayla's eyes broadened as she glimpsed the wad of bills he carried. He must carry his life savings with him!

The drive home was very different from the rest of the evening with its lighthearted banter. Kayla was lost in her own thoughts as she stared out at the passing streetlights. Franklin seemed to be thoughtful, making only a minimal attempt at any meaningful conversation. Her heart ached for him in

so many ways. She had known him barely a few hours, yet she felt an unusual closeness to him. How she wished he could find some nice girl who would ... She sat up suddenly, alarmed at her outrageous thoughts. For some crazy reason the thought of him with someone else sent a wild stab of jealousy through her. For heaven's sake! What was wrong with her. She certainly didn't want to get involved with this man. No, what she was feeling was pure sympathy for a nice guy who seemed to be having a hard time. Emotionally she couldn't afford to let herself become involved in Franklin's troubles. She just couldn't! He had had these problems for thirty-six years; surely he could live with them a little longer. When he took her home tonight, she would discourage any future involvement with him. Her mind was made up. She wouldn't trust a man with her feelings ever again.

As they pulled up in the drive Franklin killed the motor and sat with his hands draped over the steering wheel. "Well, I guess this is good night," he observed dejectedly.

"Yes, I guess so," she agreed. "I meant it when I said I've had a nice time, Franklin. I wish you'd believe that."

"There's only one way on earth that you could make me believe that, and that's if you'd let me—" His voice broke off.

Oh, good grief Surely he wouldn't have the guts to ask her to go to bed with him, she thought frantically. Not after thirty-six years of abstinence.

"Let you what?" she asked helplessly. She was ready to scream. If he did ask her such an utterly ridiculous question, she honestly didn't know how she would answer him. He was so . . . good-looking and virile!

Almost before she knew what was happening, he slid her over next to him smoothly, one large hand taking her face and holding it gently. "Let me kiss you good night," he finished sweetly. "Oh, I know I'm being much too bold," he went on apologetically, "but you're just so... so... special." He began to run his thumb deliciously up and down the satin creaminess of her cheek, his eyes pleading silently with hers. In one forward motion she came into his arms. Not for a moment did she consider denying his request. She wanted this kiss. She had all evening.

"Franklin, you're not bold. Really, I don't mind," she said eagerly. He pressed his lips to hers, caressing her mouth more than kissing it at first, his mouth feather-touching hers tantalizingly.

"You mean you'll really let me?" he asked hopefully, and his tongue reached out to touch hers warmly. You would have thought she'd given him a million dollars!

"Just a kiss," she reminded him . . . and herself.

"Oh, ma'am, I wouldn't *dream* of asking for anything else," he said in a horrified tone, peering down angelically at her from behind the large frames.

She felt the heady sensation of his lips against her neck, and then he slowly brought his mouth around to capture hers. She kissed him with a hunger that belied her previous thoughts of giving up men. With a soft groan he smothered her lips with demanding mastery, his kiss sending a wild swirling into the pit of her stomach. If Franklin was as inexperienced at lovemaking as he said he was, then he was a real natural at it! Her hand moved from his cheek to his jawline, stroking the clean-shaven smoothness, then running on up to greedily entwine itself in the thick mass of dark-blond hair that curled so enticingly at the back of his tanned neck. He pulled her closer to him, wrapping his arms around her waist, his strength molding her against his granite frame.

When his lips left hers, what seemed like only moments later, she felt an acute sense of disappointment. She had forgotten how nice it was to be held and kissed.

"I suppose this is not only good night but good-bye," he reminded her sadly, his lips leaving hers and searing a path down her neck again.

"Are you leaving tomorrow?" she whispered shakily, her hands tightening in his hair as his mouth reached the curve of her neckline, his tongue flicking lightly at her fragrant skin.

"No, I'm going to be in town for a while. I just thought since you were off men permanently, you probably wouldn't want me hanging around your

doorstep." His mouth recaptured hers more demandingly this time. She kissed him lingeringly, savoring every delicious moment of his hands moving seductively along her back.

"I wouldn't mind," she said hopelessly, all previous thoughts of discouraging him down the drain. "I mean, as long as you're going to be here for a few days, I wouldn't care if you called me."

"Umm . . . well, if you're sure, ma'am. What are you doing tomorrow?" he asked, sipping at her lips as though they were a rich, full-bodied wine.

"Nothing! I'm free all day. It's Saturday," she murmured between heady kisses.

"Will you go on a picnic with me?"

"In March?" she asked weakly as his lips continued to play over hers lightly.

"In March," he confirmed seductively.

"I'd love to." Why fight it. She was definitely attracted to this man.

"Then, I think you'd better let go of my neck," he murmured sexily, "or I'll have to tell my mother on you, Kayla Marshall."

Kayla blushed heatedly, releasing her death lock on his neck, her mouth still mingling with his. "Tell her what?"

Tell her I *finally* met up with one of those 'bad girls' who is supposed to lead me down the garden path," he teased. "Should I fear for my virtue?"

"Do you honestly think I'd deny your wife the surprise of her life on her wedding night? Not a chance." She grinned as she gathered up her purse and slid over to the passenger side. "See you in the morning, Franklin Franklin."

"Good night, ma'am." He grinned sweetly.

She was still smiling as she turned out the light thirty minutes later and laid her head down on the cool linen pillow. Maybe life could begin to hold new meaning for her again. When she had broken off with Tony, she had honestly thought her life was over. Until today she had had no reason to believe otherwise. But a matter of hours had brought a very shy, very honest man into her life. What would it hurt to pursue the possibility of falling in love again? Franklin was not like other men—he was sweet, kind, considerate, and a thirty-six-year-old virgin! With an unbelieving shake of her blond head she pulled the blanket up closer to her chin. Oh, well, if she came to care about him like she strongly suspected she would, there was a good possibility that she would consider changing that too. For his sake as well as her own.

CHAPTER THREE

Saturday dawned bright and beautiful, the perfect day for a picnic in March. Kayla awoke with a new lease on life, and she found herself humming happily as she fixed a basket lunch for her and Franklin. She had just wrapped the last ham sandwich and hard-boiled eggs when she heard the doorbell ring. Her breath quickened and her cheeks warmed as she realized just how much she was looking forward to spending the day with him.

With a happy little skip she walked to the door and swung it open, welcoming Franklin with a radiant smile. "Hi!"

His whole face lit up as he surveyed her. "Hi, yourself, ma'am."

"I'm almost ready," she told him, stepping aside to let him in. As he brushed past her her heart thudded, then settled back down to its normal rhythm. "Where are we having our picnic in March?" She smiled.

"I know a nice little place I think you'll enjoy," he said absently, admiring the nice way her slacks hugged her rounded bottom. "Want me to carry anything?"

"If you'll take the hamper, I'll get the blanket and my sweater.

I hope you're hungry. I've packed a big lunch," she called from the hall closet.

"Starved," he called back, glancing around the small, neat living room. It had a feeling of warmth and cheerfulness to it. The touch of a woman—a very lovely woman.

"Well, I'm ready if you are." Kayla was standing before him again, her face eager and excited.

"Kayla ..." Franklin's face had grown serious now, his eyes troubled. "I think there's something you should know."

"Franklin." Kayla took his arm and steered him toward the front door. "You don't have to tell me anything about yourself. I like you just the way you are. For today let's just enjoy each other's company." Poor Franklin was so insecure around women he felt he had to always give them his pitiful life story!

"But—"

"No *buts*," she stated firmly.

"Whatever you say." He let out a deep breath. What a hell of a mess he had gotten himself into this time!

"Your car's nice," Kayla commented as he helped her into the passenger side. She thought she might try to boost his morale by pointing out all the good things he had going for himself.

"It's not mine," he said, curt to the point of rudeness.

These abrupt changes of manner were beginning to baffle Kayla, but then, maybe that was his problem—he was unpredictable! "Oh, well, it's nice anyway," she said. "Whose is it?"

"Hertz's."

"Oh."

"Don't you want to know what kind I drive?" he snapped impatiently.

Kayla turned and looked at him in surprise. "What kind do you have, Franklin?" she asked, a bit tense. He didn't seem to be in the best of moods at the moment.

"A damn Ferrari!"

"That's nice," she said coolly. "I have a damn Ford." If he meant to impress her, he was going at it in the wrong tone of voice. "Does your 'damn' Ferrari get good gas mileage?"

He whirled to glare at her, anger showing in his eyes. "Doesn't it strike you the least bit odd that a book salesman would be driving a Ferrari?" he demanded irritably.

Brother! He must have gotten up on the wrong side of the bed this morning. What did he want her to say? That he wasn't good enough to go into debt for the rest of his life for an extravagant car that was apparently in the shop for repairs? She felt her anger rising as she glared back at him coldly. "Does it strike you odd that I drive a Ford? Good grief, Franklin, I don't *care* what kind of car you drive. Those things don't mean a hill of beans to me. I like a person for what they are, not for what they have!"

The tenseness disappeared swiftly from the set of his broad shoulders, and she found it impossible to resist his disarming smile. "Sorry I came on so strong," he apologized. As they waited at a stoplight, he reached over to tilt her face around to meet his gently. "For a woman who's been hurt once, you're too damn trusting of men, Kayla," he said softly.

The soft brushing of his fingers against her cheek sent explosive currents through her, and once again she experienced mixed emotions about the man looking at her so intently.

"What a strange thing for you to say, Franklin. Why shouldn't I trust you? Aren't we friends?"

"Kayla!" Franklin said, irritability creeping into his voice once more.

There it was again. That lightning switch of moods! "Franklin, if you'd like to change your mind about our picnic today, it's perfectly all right with me," she told him, getting a little irritable herself. It was going to be a miserable day if this kept up!

His voice, though quiet, had a melancholy tone as his beautiful smoke-colored eyes captured hers. "No, I haven't changed my mind. I want very badly to spend this day with you, Kayla."

Her large blue eyes were misty and wistful as she responded quietly, "And I want to spend the day with you." His fingers slid sensuously from her cheek

to barely touch her lips. He read in her eyes a longing, an honesty that he had never before encountered in a human being. Kayla Marshall was a rare and beautiful woman, and for the first time in his life he felt the faint stirrings of love.

Kayla drowned in the gentleness of his gray gaze, his eyes caressing hers. She hesitantly leaned forward to receive his lips on hers as the loud, impatient blare of a car horn spun them back into their immediate surroundings. They laughed with released tension, and Franklin set the car in motion again. All traces of the previous friction between them were gone. It was going to be a beautiful day after all. Kayla's heart sang joyously as she resumed her vigil out the car window. A truly beautiful day!

They drove for over twenty minutes through the rolling hills. Kayla noticed the way the grass was beginning to green up. It was one of those glorious days that occasionally come along in March. A day when the temperature climbed toward seventy degrees and the wind was simply perfect for soaring a kite toward the teal blue of the heavens. Franklin turned off the main highway, driving along a graveled road for the next mile, talking to her casually about first one thing, then another. They drove over a cattle guard rail, and the car took off over a grassy pasture, heading in a southeasterly direction. Kayla could see rows of white fences in the distance and several sleek Thoroughbred horses standing in the thick carpet of grass.

"Oh, look at those horses," she said excitedly, reaching out to grasp Franklin's arm. "Aren't they beautiful?"

Franklin was gazing out at the spirited, healthy animals as the car sped over the bumpy terrain, a look of pride in his eyes.

"Yeah, they certainly are," he agreed softly. "Those are some of Arkansas's finest. Born and bred right here. Look! See that gray standing over there to the left?"

Kayla leaned forward, peering out his window to catch a glimpse of the horse he had pointed out. Franklin slowed the car to a crawl as they both studied the animal's smooth, glossy coat, evident even at this distance.

"Yes, I see it. That's a racehorse, isn't it?" she guessed accurately. "It looks so . . . majestic! Look how dainty its legs are, and the way it holds its head so proudly!"

"That one should be proud," Franklin said paternally. "She's won the last six races she's run in. She's one of the best fillies racing right now."

Kayla glanced over at him in surprise. "Do you own these horses?" she asked.

"No . . . no." Franklin picked up speed and sent the car on its way again. "They belong to Nick."

Oh, brother, him again, Kayla thought as she scooted back to her side of the car. "Well, even if they are his, they're still beautiful. Does Nick live around here?" she asked. Not that she really cared, but Franklin seemed to dote on his rakish friend so.

"He owns that ranch over there, but he's rarely around to run things. He has a good foreman who keeps the ranch operating smoothly."

"Wonder why he would even bother to have such a large spread when he is obviously too busy off doing whatever he does all the time," she pondered out loud.

"He's off trying to make a living," Franklin said, slightly perturbed again. "He plans to come back here someday and settle down. He's getting to the age—" He gave a short ironic laugh. "Actually he's long past the age when he should have found himself a wife and started having all those children he's always thought he might like to have."

"Nicholas Trahern wants children?" Kayla was shocked. "I mean *legal* children? From what I've heard, he probably has one in every state," she scoffed.

"And what you've 'heard' is just that!" he said gruffly. "Nothing but gossip and hearsay. He does not have a child in every state. He is a little more selective than that, Kayla. Hell, give the man *some* credit!"

Kayla brought one hand up and bonked herself hard on the head. "I'm sorreeeee. I didn't mean to malign your perfect Nicholas! Personally I wouldn't give the man the time of day, but if it makes you happy, I'll consider him a monk!"

"He's not perfect," Franklin conceded in a milder tone, "but he's certainly not the SOB you think he is."

"Okay," she admitted. "One of these days, when the great Nicholas Trahern is in town, you can take me to meet him. But I guarantee I will not like him nearly as much as I like his friend. I'm willing to bet that he isn't half the man Franklin Franklin is. I know that you think he's everything a woman would ever want in a man, but you're wrong." Kayla scooted over close and captured his arm tightly. "The kind of man that most women want is as honest and as caring as you are. I certainly wouldn't want a man who had slept with every woman he came in contact with."

"Nick has *not* slept with every woman he's come in contact with," he gritted out impatiently.

"I know, I know." She patted his arm consolingly. When was she going to learn! "What I meant was... well, *your* wife is going to be the luckiest woman alive. To think that she will be the only one to . . . to . . ."

Franklin broke in heatedly. "Look, Kayla, surely you wouldn't expect your husband to come to you pure as the driven snow! A man has his needs, just as a woman does. Take you for instance. Didn't you sleep with Tony?"

"Well, yes . . . but he's the only man I've ever . . . And we were going to be married, or so I thought."

"There, see? There are certain things in one's past that one can't change. It shouldn't really matter what's happened before in two people's lives. It's what happens *after* they meet each other that should concern them!"

Kayla blinked her eyes and shook her head. "What are we talking about, Franklin? I was merely trying to point out the difference between you and Nicholas Trahern! I just wanted you to see that not *every* woman goes for a

man like him." This man simply would not let a woman help him over his insecurities, or say one bad thing about his idol friend. "And besides," she added irritably, "why shouldn't a woman be thrilled about her husband coming to her a... a virgin? Your wife's going to be getting one!"

"Whoopee!" he grumbled quarrelsomely as he pulled the car up under an old oak tree and braked to a halt. "I would think that she would have enough brains to want him to come to her as someone who had looked them all over and wanted no one but her. A man who loved her and wanted her to be the mother of his children. A man who wanted to spend the rest of his life with no one but her beside him. Wouldn't that make more sense than worrying about what he had done when he was out sowing his wild oats?"

"I suppose," she said thoughtfully, and then her blue eyes brightened. "But don't you see, that's the beauty of it. Your wife's going to have it all!"

Franklin groaned and knocked his head on the steering wheel. "Let's just drop the subject," he said tiredly.

"Fine with me," she said, glancing around at their surroundings. "This is nice. You have good taste, Franklin." She had to bolster his morale.

The next few hours were the happiest Kayla had spent in over a year. To be honest, maybe they were even happier than all the hours she had spent with Tony. Franklin had an easy persuasive way about him. He had spread the blanket out on the ground, and they had talked for hours about their childhoods, the things they liked, didn't like. Actually Kayla did most of the talking, at his insistence. He seemed very hesitant to talk about his life, only commenting on minor, impersonal aspects of it. As the afternoon deepened, Kayla began to have the nagging suspicion that Franklin was becoming more than a friend to her. Was it possible for a woman to fall in love with a man she had met less than twenty-four hours ago? She had heard of such things but had personally always thought the idea was a little farfetched.

Still, when she looked at the man stretched out before her on the blanket, a deep peace entered her being. The nearness of him gave her such comfort, such happiness—not to mention the way her pulse quickened every time he looked at her and smiled that open, friendly smile at her. And the way the

warmth of his laughter sent little cold shivers racing up her spine. No, this afternoon was a turning point in her life. After the hell she had been through during the last year, she could finally see the light at the end of the tunnel. Franklin Franklin was about to capture her heart, and she felt no fear. He was good, he was honest. He would never do anything to hurt her. It almost brought tears to her eyes.

"Why the serious look, Kayla Marshall?" he asked drowsily as he turned over on his back and looked up at her. They were both lying sleepily in the warming rays of the early spring sun, feeling stuffed and lazy from their picnic lunch.

"Just thinking what a nice man you are and how glad I am I met you," she answered honestly, reaching out to push back an errant lock of his dark blond hair.

Two deep lines of worry appeared between his brows, and his eyes filled with a curious deep longing. "Have you ever wished you could live a day over in your life, Kayla?"

"Oh ... I suppose so. Why?" she asked, still absently stroking his hair.

"If I could, I'd live yesterday over," he said truthfully.

"Yesterday?" That seemed an odd thing to say—they had met yesterday.

With one efficient turn he rolled over onto his side and propped himself up on an elbow, gazing at her intently. "There's things that I would do differently."

"Well"—she sighed contentedly, then lay down on her back to stare up at the cloudless sky "•—I suppose we all could say that. Not just about yesterday but about other days in our life." Her thoughts wickedly led her back to Tony. "Did you have a bad selling day yesterday?" she murmured sleepily. "No," he said gravely. "I think I outdid myself." *She has such a nice voice*, he thought fleetingly. *All soft and clear and low*. Everything about her spoke of warmth, love, and understanding. If he ever encountered the man who had hurt her so badly, he would be hard pressed to keep from

bashing his head in! Just the mere thought of anyone causing her pain twisted his insides painfully. The ever-nagging thought of what he was doing to her caused that pain to twist deeper in his gut, but he found himself in a position that he had no control over. What had started out to be a lark, a challenge, a silly game had now developed into something that frightened and disturbed him. Never had a woman turned his head nor touched his heart as this lovely creature lying next to him gazing up at the sky had done. He had always been told that when the right woman came along, he'd know it. For thirty-six years he had waited patiently, and suddenly there she was, cutting off phone calls before she could answer them. But he was everything that she despised in a man, or so she thought. And what would her reaction be when she found out that the quiet, shy Franklin Franklin was the notorious womanizer, Nicholas Franklin Trahern. Nick groaned softly. Somehow he had to keep her from finding that out just yet. For he needed more time with her—time to make her fall in love with the man, not the name. It was his only hope. It sickened him to see the look of trust that radiated from her lovely eyes every time she gazed at him, but he was just going to have to bear it until he could figure a way out of this nightmare.

"Umm ... Then what would you change?" she asked dreamily. "I thought it was a pretty nice day. I know I certainly enjoyed our dinner last night." She reached over and playfully removed his glasses as she ran a piece of grass across his nose. She discerned the merest twinkle in his eyes as he balanced one of the fresh strawberries she had packed for their lunch on the tip of her nose. "You did?" he whispered huskily, wisely changing the subject. His tongue flicked out to catch the succulent berry in his mouth.

She instantly responded to his seductive gesture, and her senses reeled as if short-circuited. With a voice as steady as she could manage, she answered weakly, "Didn't you?"

"Are you serious?" he said, raising one eyebrow skeptically. "Of course I enjoyed last night. Want to share this with me?" He stuck part of the plump red strawberry out of his mouth in invitation to her. In answer her pulse thudded rapidly. His mouth slowly descended to meet hers, leaving her little time to refuse his offer. As if she would even consider such a refusal! She bit into it daintily with her small, even white teeth, and the juice squirted put over them, dripping down the corners of their mouths.

"Umm... good," she agreed with a breathless laugh, her voice sounding tinkling clear in the afternoon's quietness.

"Very," he murmured as his tongue flicked out to catch some of the juice falling from her red lips. "I think I like this better, though," he observed, and his lips slowly met hers one more time. Suddenly she was lifted into the cradle of his arms, and his lips parted hers in an exploring, sensual kiss. His tongue probed the sweet recesses of her mouth as her arms came up around his neck to draw him closer. The world faded from existence as Kayla's last shreds of doubt crumbled and she gave herself up to the sheer joy of being in his arms. They lay locked in each other's embrace, his mouth holding hers a very willing captive. When they finally broke away from each other, their breaths were coming in soft, short spurts.

He gazed at her longingly, his smile as intimate as his kiss had just been. "Ma'am, you do strange things to me," he said hoarsely, his eyes following the uneven rise and fall of her breasts.

"You do strange things to me/" Kayla said, her voice uneven. She could still feel the delicious imprint of his lips on hers. "Are you sure you haven't had years of experience at that sort of thing? It's hard to believe you're shy."

"I've just been waiting for the right woman to help me get over that little obstacle . . ." His last words were smothered by her lips as he claimed them once more. Forcing her mouth open to accept his thrusting tongue, he pulled her roughly against his rigid frame, his mouth eagerly devouring hers again and again. Rockets, bells, horns, flashing lights, everything Kayla had ever read about clanged in her head as this overpowering virile male staked an undeniable claim upon her. Wrapping her arms around him, she pulled him closer, acutely aware of the hardness of his muscular thighs pressing against her. His large hands locked against her spine as his ardor ignited in a searing blaze of passion. Her body melted against his, and her world was filled with nothing but him. He began murmuring her name almost incoherently as his hand lightly touched her through the soft material of her blouse. Her mind was spinning in confusion. She was drowning in his touch, yet concerned at how quickly this was getting out of hand.

"Franklin," she gasped in sweet agony, "your wife . . ."

"My what?" he breathed hotly as his lips seared a path down her neck, across her delicate shoulders.

"Your future wife ... It seems such a shame to have made it all these years, and then—" Kayla's breathing was coming hard and fast as his kisses fairly sang through her veins.

What was the matter with her! Why should she worry about some future wife when she was practically begging for his touch, the undeniable maleness of him.

Franklin broke away, fighting to bring his passion under control. "Yes . . . yes, my wife. I've got to think of my wife!" His voice sounded nearly strangled.

"Oh, Franklin," she whispered, burying her face in his neck and breathing a kiss there, "it isn't that I don't. . . want you. It's just, that I think it would be best for the both of us if this didn't go any further right now." She couldn't stand for him to think that she didn't desire him, because she certainly did. "We've just met, and . . . although I feel very close to you, I ... I. . . things are just moving too fast," she ended helplessly. The poor man must think he really *did* have one of those girls his mother had warned him about. Kayla had probably scared him to death by responding so wantonly to his kisses! His hands felt so warm, so gentle as he cradled her in his arms and buried his face in the mass of her fragrant hair.

"It's all right, sweetheart . . . shhh ... I understand. I'm sorry," he apologized sincerely.

"Oh, it wasn't you, Franklin," she hastened to assure him. "It was me! I don't know what came over me. I don't want you to think that I'm . . . well, that I act like this with every man I meet." Her lovely face was filled with consternation.

"I don't think that," he whispered tenderly. "And I should be kicked for getting out of hand." He gathered her more tightly to him. "Forgive me, Kayla?"

"Of course," she whispered shyly, breathing in the sexy smell of his aftershave. "But I think we've proved something good today, Franklin."

"Really? Now, what would that be?" He grinned uncomfortably, trying to keep her squirming body away from the blatant evidence of her effect on him.

"I think you're starting to pull out of your shyness around women," she said encouragingly. "There certainly wasn't anything shy about the man who was kissing me a few moments ago," she continued. "Your friend Nicholas would undoubtedly be very proud of you."

"Kayla, you're too nice for your own good . . ." His voice trailed off as he leaned down and touched her lips lightly with his one final time. "I don't think even old SOB Trahern would be proud of me at this moment."

"Well, he might not be, but I surely am, Franklin Franklin. All my friends say that I'm too accepting, but my parents always taught me that the important things in life are love, trust, and always having something to hope for. I think I'm ready to start thinking about those things again. I feel we're going to be very good for each other. You did say you lived close to here, didn't you?" "Yes."

"Then we'll have plenty of opportunity to explore our feelings for each other in the next few weeks," she said as she sat up and began to gather together their picnic items. "Who knows?" She grinned saucily. "This may be the start of something big." Her face grew serious once more. "Someone to love, something to hope for. That's all that's really important in life. And maybe, just maybe we can find those things together, Franklin."

"Yes, maybe we can," he murmured uneasily. She was right, it was the start of something big. It was going to be the biggest thing he had ever encountered.

An old saying his parents had always hammered into him popped into his head as he helped her into the car and stowed the picnic basket in the back seat. You can never change the past, but you can ruin a perfectly good present by worrying about tomorrow!

He'd have to take his chances.

CHAPTER FOUR

The following days were ideal for Kayla. Hours sped by rapidly as she fell into the pattern of efficiently handling the office work of Trahern Tool and Die, then spending the evening with Franklin. Although he still showed definite traces of shyness, Kayla noticed a new exciting dimension developing in Franklin. Always the perfect gentleman, he proceeded to court her with the tenderness and affection she had always longed for. Not that Tony hadn't shown her affection—he had; but not in the same way. Franklin never failed to have some small gift in his pocket when he showed up on her doorstep each night—ranging from her favorite candy bar to the ridiculously expensive diamond locket he had given her last night. His offerings never failed to elicit a shower of kisses and affectionate hugs from Kayla. As the days passed, her fondness grew for the man who had accidentally happened into her life such a short time ago.

They had been seeing each other regularly for over a week and a half when Franklin telephoned on a Wednesday afternoon to remind Kayla what time he would pick her up that evening. The mere sound of his voice sent her stomach fluttering.

"Hi, pretty lady. Do you know I find it next to impossible to keep my mind on work lately," Franklin began in a low, suggestive voice.

"Funny. I've found that hard too. What do you think's causing the problem?" She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes dreamily, picturing Franklin's face.

"I don't know. Maybe it's because I keep seeing a pair of big blue eyes looking at me, or I keep imagining the taste of that pink lipstick you wear. What flavor is that?" .

Kayla laughed softly. "It doesn't have a flavor. Besides I resent the fact that your mind is on such trite and inconsequential things as the flavor of a woman's lipstick when you're kissing her. Can't you think of anything more imaginative than that?"

"Oh, my imagination runs wild when I'm kissing her," he assured her seductively, "which, by the way, I'm dying to do right now." "Kiss me?"

"Among other things."

Kayla chuckled wickedly. "By the way, who is this calling?"

"Kayla!"

"Oh, Franklin! I didn't recognize your voice."

"You're turning into a tease," he growled playfully.

"I know, and I'm sorry."

"I'm not. I kind of like it. Want to go to a carnival tonight?"

"A carnival? I didn't know there was one in town."

"There's a small one passing through. I noticed it on the outskirts of town this morning as I came to work. You know what else I noticed?"

"No, tell me." She loved the small-boy tone of his voice when he was excited about something.

"Well, I noticed they had a big double-wheeled Ferris wheel."

Kayla's stomach turned over as she thought about the height of one of those contraptions. "And?"

"And I was thinking about how nice it would be to get you there all alone, and maybe if my luck held out, there would be some minor mechanical problem—"

"I hate heights," she warned.

"Trust me. If that happens, your mind is *not* going to be on heights," he said blandly.

"Promise?"

"You're teasing again, you little witch. What time do you want me to pick you up tonight?"

"Same as usual, I suppose. Things have been very light around here today."

"Old man Trahern still gone?" he asked quietly.

"Both senior and junior, thank goodness. As I mentioned before, Paula said Nicholas is rarely in the office, and the elder Trahern is out of the country. You know, I rather wish Romeo *would* drop in sometime during the day. He keeps the strangest hours. Apparently he comes in at night and catches up on his work, because there's always a pile of paper work to be typed and filed every morning," she mused thoughtfully. "I'm dying to get a look at this man who has most of the women who know him practically drooling."

"I'm sure the guy has a real problem on his hands," Franklin snapped. "Look, I've got to get back to work. I'll pick you up around seven."

Kayla was a bit surprised as she heard the rather sharp click at the other end of the line. Frowning irritably at the receiver, she replaced it in its cradle and sighed. Franklin sounded as if he was in another of his strange moods today. Regretfully turning back to her own pile of work, she hoped she could change that tonight.

When the sporty red Ferrari pulled up in her drive that evening, Kayla had to do a double take to be sure it was Franklin. Up until this moment she had forgotten Franklin's car was in the shop for repairs.

"Boy, this is what I call real class," she said admiringly, circling the automobile slowly. "How long have you had it?"

"A year or so. Do you like it?" Franklin's pride was ill concealed.

"It's gorgeous. It must have cost a fortune," Kayla surmised, wondering how Franklin could swing the payments on a car like this one.

"Get in. It rides like a dream," he boasted as he took her arm and helped her into the passenger seat. Minutes later they were zooming down the highway, with Kayla agreeing that it did indeed ride like a dream.

"Where do you want to eat tonight?" Franklin asked, reaching over to give her a quick kiss.

Kayla's gaze met his lovingly. "Anywhere's fine with me."

The sound of squealing brakes filled the air as Franklin impulsively cut across two lanes of traffic and pulled onto the shoulder of the highway. In one swift movement he pulled Kayla over to his side and crushed his mouth down on hers in a kiss that made her senses reel. His lips moved against hers in an urgent, exploring welcome, devouring their softness. She was powerless to resist his mastery, nor did she want to. His body felt heavy and warm pressed up against hers in the small car, arousing a deep longing in her. He buried his fingers in her soft flesh and moaned almost painfully as his kiss branded her with fiery possession. When she finally broke the embrace, she could feel his ragged breathing on her cheek. She buried her face in his broad chest contentedly.

"Oh, Franklin, I've missed you today," she murmured, trying to regain control of her erratic pulse. "I know it's crazy to . . . to . . ." She didn't want to say "fall in love," but that was exactly what had happened to her. Kayla had fallen in love with Franklin so quickly that she hadn't had time to set up any defenses against him. It wasn't something she had wanted to happen, but since it obviously had, she had no intention of fighting it.

The strong arms that were holding her close tightened in their clasp as Franklin buried his face in the fragrance of her hair.

"To what?" he prompted.

"To . . . feel so . . . close to you. We barely know each other, and yet . . ."

It was impossible to find the words she was searching for. These new and disturbing feelings she had for Franklin were engulfing her, and yet she couldn't think of anything that she wanted more than to simply turn herself over to him—body, mind, and soul.

Franklin was silent as he held her tightly, his eyes closed in shameful misery at what was taking place in his life. It was almost laughable. For thirty-six years women had meant very little to him. Not that he disrespected them. It was simply he hadn't needed them, except for the obvious. But the short time he had spent with Kayla had made him yearn for a different sort of life. A life with a woman like the one he now held in his arms—a woman who would have his children, share his dreams. Would all these hopes be shattered when she found out who he was? He had been so careful. He had taken her only to the most out of the way restaurants. Instead of going to the movies or to disco clubs he had elected to take her on long moonlit drives or secluded picnics, always fearing that they would run into someone who knew him not as Franklin Franklin but as Nicholas Trahern. When that moment came . . . His large frame shuddered to think of the consequences.

"Are you cold?" Kayla hugged him closer.

"No. Far from it," he teased in a voice made shaky by emotion.

"Hungry?" she pursued with concern.

He drew her face up to meet his. "Only for you." He sighed, bringing his lips coaxingly to hers. They kissed with slow intoxicating kisses until their ardor began to mount to simmering proportions.

"I think," Franklin rasped, pulling away from Kayla forcibly, "that we had better put a stop to this. You realize we're providing quite a show for every motorist out there." "I couldn't care less." She grinned, kissing him on the tip of his nose. "But I suppose we should be going."

After one last kiss Kayla scooted back to her seat. The car pulled out onto the highway and merged with the other traffic smoothly.

"What are you in the mood for?" Franklin asked innocently, referring to his original question about where they should eat that evening.

Kayla wickedly slid back over and playfully nipped at his ear. "Do you really want to know?"

"You are making it next to impossible for me to keep my mind where it should be," Franklin scolded, trying to keep his eye on the heavy traffic and steal hurried snatches of kisses from her at the same time. "Have you no shame, woman?"

"Uh-uh. None at all." She teased the lobe of his ear with her tongue.

"Kayla," he protested weakly, his body growing taut and tense from her playful actions. "This is pure torture."

"Oh, all right," she relented, but not before her mouth found his with another searing kiss. "I'll behave."

"At least for the moment," he pleaded. "You have me at a distinct disadvantage, you know. Wait until I can enjoy your little games with you. Then we'll see who begs for mercy." His eyes told her exactly which one of them it would be.

They chatted comfortably as they drove to the restaurant, a small steak house on the outskirts of town.

"You undoubtedly know the quaintest, darkest places," Kayla teased, squinting her eyes as she tried to read the menu in the dim light.

"I like dark places," Franklin assured her quietly.

"You must. I don't think we've eaten in one place where I could read the menu . . . not even once!" She laughed. "What sounds good to you?"

"I think I'm going to have the prime ribs. How about you?"

"The same. And I want a huge baked potato." For the last few days Kayla's appetite had run rampant. At the rate she was going, she would gain back the weight she had lost after her breakup with Tony in no time at all.

After the waitress had taken their order, Kayla turned to Franklin, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "Guess what?"

"I can't imagine." Franklin smiled tenderly, picking up her hand and kissing each finger slowly.

"Franklin," Kayla protested, her senses springing achingly to life, "I want to tell you my news."

"Fire away."

"I can't think when you're kissing me like that," she complained, yet she loved every minute of it.

"Good. Then we're even. I haven't been able to think straight since the day I met you." He brought his tongue across the palm of her hand in feather-light strokes.

"Oh, Franklin," she said softly, her eyes devouring his handsome features, "I wish I had met you years ago."

Before he could answer, the waitress was back, setting their salads before them. With resigned smiles they picked up their forks and began eating.

"What were you going to tell me?" Franklin asked, opening his package of crackers and offering her one.

"Well, I just had this marvelous idea this afternoon. I think I mentioned that I used to own a small dress shop when I lived in Florida."

Franklin nodded, offering her another cracker. "You said something about it."

"I loved that shop." A look of pain crossed Kayla's face. "But when Tony and I broke up ... well... I didn't feel like I could stay there any longer, so I sold it and moved here. I made a tidy little profit on it—in fact, I really haven't had to work since I moved here. Up until lately I wasn't sure I was going to stay here. But now I'm ready to think about starting another shop here in Little Rock. I don't know if getting back into the business world has spurred me on, or what. All I know is that I called a real estate agency this afternoon, and they gave me a list of several available shops to look at." Her face became animated as she laid down her fork and picked up Franklin's hand. "Will you help me look for a new shop?"

"Don't you think you should think about this a little longer, Kayla? Maybe you'll meet some rich man who'll marry you, and you'll never have to work another day in your life," he said seriously, stroking her hand gently.

"Oh, that isn't what I want at all, Franklin! A rich man has never been my goal in life. I would be perfectly happy with just a nice ordinary man. Together we can both work for the things in life that seem important to us." *An encyclopedia salesman would do just fine*, she thought wistfully, but discreetly refrained from saying so. "Besides, if I open a shop here, then we'll be able to go on seeing each other. You did say you lived near here, didn't you?"

"Sort of."

"Sort of! Why are you so evasive about where you live?" Kayla suspected that Franklin had a small apartment somewhere and didn't want her to see it for fear it wouldn't seem prosperous enough. She was sure that his car ate up most of his earnings, although he always carried a large amount of money with him.

"I'm not being evasive. I'll take you there someday," he returned in a passive tone.

"Franklin, I don't *care* where you live, or how you dress, or what you drive. It's *you* I care about." He certainly didn't have anything to worry about so far as the car and clothes went, and she was sure his apartment was clean and presentable.

"Kayla . . . look"—he threw his fork angrily down on the table—"we have got to talk."

"About what?" Kayla gazed at him seriously. So seriously that his nerve failed him totally. Somehow this just wasn't the right time to tell her. He had to do it with diplomacy and tact. If he didn't, he would lose her. He suddenly had no doubt in his mind about that. What else could he expect? He had deliberately misled and lied to her. Come what may, he would eventually have to face the fact and suffer the consequences. But for as long as possible he was going to delay the inevitable.

"About... the advisability of going into business on your own right now," he faltered.

"Oh, I can make it, Franklin! My shop was thriving in Florida. I used to carry these darling dresses—"

"Damn it, Kayla! There are businesses going under by the hundreds right now." He didn't want her going into business by herself. He was a rich man, and *he* wanted to take care of her.

"My goodness, Franklin," she teased, "I'm not a rich woman. I have to work for a living. Granted, I could probably survive for another few months on my savings, but I do have to start thinking about the future. Anyway, if I should happen to marry a man who wasn't rich, then I would already have a nice profitable business established, and I'd be able to help us buy a home sooner," she said with a glint in her eye. "After the children came along, I might be persuaded to stay home, but until then it would seem senseless," she reasoned, desperately hoping she wasn't scaring him to death with this talk of marriage and children.

The plate of beef that had been set before him suddenly looked very unappetizing to Franklin as his mind tried to find fault with her reasoning but failed. Unexpectedly he had to control the powerful urge to slam his fists against the table and blurt out the terrible truth to her. The truth being he was a low-down SOB who didn't deserve the love and complete trust that shone so brightly in her eyes.

Kayla seemed unaware of his dilemma as she dove into her meat, complimenting Franklin on his choice of food, as usual. Whatever avenging angel had decided to get even with Nicholas Trahern was indeed doing a superior job, he lamented glumly as he disheartedly picked up his fork and punched at his meat. In fact, he would probably be given a gold medal!

* * *

Hours later they were still wandering around on the small carnival ground they had driven to after dinner. Kayla had noticed that Franklin's pensive mood was lingering. He was such a strange man. Tender and loving one minute, harsh and almost angry at others.

She desperately wished she knew what bothered him so at times. She had done everything within her power to boost his confidence and assure him that he was a completely desirable man. Everything except. . . Her mind toyed with the idea that had been forming in it all evening. There had only been one man in Kayla's life, and she had loved him with her entire being. Now a second man had taken Tony's place in her heart. Could she do less than offer the same love to Franklin? Although Franklin had proven to be a very ardent suitor, he had never overstepped the bounds he had established, and he had touched her only in controlled passion. She knew that at times that had been very hard for him. More than once she had felt his overpowering need for her as he pressed her tightly against his lean body. His kisses would grow hot and urgent, but always at a certain point he would firmly though lovingly push her aside, his breathing ragged and desirous. Many times she had wanted to tell him that it was all right, that she loved him and would gladly give herself to him. But he had not asked for such privileges, and she was embarrassed to offer them to him. Instead she would go in the house with a deep need unfulfilled and spend the night in restless dreams. Dreams that always featured a tall, tawny-haired man whose kisses could set her blood aflame.

All night the tiny thought had been chasing around in her mind that maybe Franklin was simply too shy to make the first move. Still a virgin, he probably wouldn't have the least idea where to start; he might even be shy about undressing in front of a woman. If that were the case, then she would have to be the one to initiate their lovemaking. That particular thought sent

shivers down her spine and set her pulse racing erratically. In fact, the mere thought of Franklin undressed and lying naked in her arms sent her stomach into a mad whirl. She had seen very little of his body, but what she had seen turned her knees to water and sent a shaft of longing coursing through her. Making love to Franklin would be no hardship whatsoever. She was sure of that. So sure that she had made up her mind to make the first move. Now all she had to do was concentrate on getting him to leave this amusement park and take her home. From then on it would be up to her.

"Franklin, I'm getting tired. Aren't you about ready to go home?" Kayla asked, not for the first time, as she shifted the two panda bears and the one long, monstrous stuffed snake around in her arms. Franklin's aim was deadly with anything you could throw or shoot. Consequently she had had to give some of the prizes that he had beamingly bestowed upon her to a couple of children who had watched his expertise with awe.

"What's your hurry? Let's ride the Ferris wheel again," Franklin protested, never once dreaming what delights lay in store for him.

"Absolutely not! We've ridden that thing four times, and it's made me ill every time!"

"Are you sure? That's my favorite ride." Obviously Franklin felt that all his inhibitions flew right out into space when they were stopped at the very top. For those few minutes Kayla was hard pressed to believe that Franklin was as inexperienced as he claimed to be.

"I'm positive. Nothing could get me on that wheel again. Let's go home."

"Okay, but just one more ride first." He eyed the Bullet interestedly.

"Not that thing either," she said irritably, cringing at the screams of pure terror that erupted from the spinning cars on the ride.

He took her arm and they strolled through the park, stopping at each ride for her to put the final quietus on each one. They were down to the Mad Mouse when she finally decided to bargain with him.

"If we ride one more, can we go home then?"

"I agree." He grinned angelically. It was amazing how amusement parks could bring out the small boy in grown men. "I choose, though!"

Five minutes later Kayla was zooming up in the air on the Ferris wheel once more, hating every minute of it. Clutching her stuffed toys, she buried her face in them as they climbed higher and higher, then slid over the top, her stomach dropping to her toes.

"Aren't the lights pretty from up here?" Franklin observed, leaning over to stare down on the gaily lighted fairgrounds.

"Sit still!" Kayla warned, her knuckles turning white as she gripped the bar across her lap.

Franklin chuckled wickedly, then set the car into motion, rocking it deviously.

"Oh, good grief!" Kayla threw her arms around his neck and buried her face in his chest. "Franklin, please!" she pleaded helplessly.

"Franklin, please what?" he whispered, catching her chin and tilting her mouth up to meet his.

His nearness suddenly made her forget where she was and what was happening as her blue eyes met his silver-colored ones.

"Franklin, please kiss me," she finished, aware of only him.

They kissed for the rest of the ride, her soft curves molding to the hard contours of his body. It was with extreme disappointment that she realized their ride was over. For once that stupid ride had not made her sick!

It was growing late when the Ferrari pulled up in front of Kayla's apartment. Franklin had insisted she share his seat, and they had exchanged

interminable sultry kisses on the slow drive home. Shutting the engine off, Franklin continued to kiss her until his control was pushed nearly to the limit. With resigned patience he released his hold on her and brought his hands back to grip the steering wheel.

"Well, I guess this is good night."

"Good night?" Kayla was surprised. "Aren't you coming in?" As a rule he came in for a while after bringing her home.

"I don't think I'd better tonight, honey." He knew that if he went through that door now, he wouldn't be coming back out— tonight. Kayla was like a powerful drug invading his senses, and his desire to make love to her was rapidly growing out of control. But he knew he couldn't touch her until the truth had been revealed. Then and only then would he allow himself the luxury of taking her in his arms, stripping her clothes off piece by torturous piece... He forced his mind to snap back to what she was saying.

"Why not?" She kissed him again softly, teasingly. "It isn't very late."

"I know it isn't," he agreed weakly, tracing the outline of her lips with his tongue. "I just think it wouldn't be wise right now."

"It couldn't hurt," she pleaded, knowing how hard it must be for him to refuse, yet feeling compassion for his naivete. Yet, how was she going to remedy his inexperience if she couldn't coax him into the house? This car was hardly conducive to making love, and besides, she wanted his first time to be something special . . . something he would remember for the rest of his life. She would not want to cheapen the experience by forcing the issue in the front seat of a car.

He groaned as her fingers easily unbuttoned the first button of his shirt and slipped beneath the material to gently caress the coarse mat of hair on his chest.

"I like all that hair," she noted suggestively, her lips following the path of her fingers.

"Kayla . . ." Franklin's voice was a low moan as he caught her hands and drew them gently out of his shirt. "I've changed my mind. Let's go in." He had to get out of this car or all his gallant vows would go straight down the drain. "Oh, great!" Kayla agreed readily, reaching for her door handle. Her spirits soared as she realized that now her plan for tonight would not have to be aborted after all.

"Only for a minute," Franklin added quickly, picking up his suit jacket and discreetly draping it over the telltale front of his trousers.

Kayla wrapped her arm around his waist as they walked up the walk, silently offering him any encouragement that he needed. Taking her key from her purse, she unlocked the door and they stepped inside the dark apartment.

Franklin reached anxiously for the light switch next to the door, but a small hand stopped him in midair. "Don't turn on the light, Franklin," she ordered softly.

The room was silent; only the sound of a clock ticking caught Kayla's attention. She was so nervous! Never had she tried to seduce a man, and she realized with a sinking heart that she didn't know the first thing about where to begin. Tony had always initiated their lovemaking.

Franklin didn't speak for a moment, and when he finally did, his voice was cautious and unsteady. "Why?"

Kayla took a deep breath and swallowed her pride. "Because I want us to make love."

"No!" Franklin pushed away from her angrily.

Summoning every ounce of strength she possessed, Kayla stepped in front of Franklin and blocked his path. "Yes," she said calmly. "I think you want that too."

"No, no, I don't," Franklin protested firmly, backing away from her fearfully.

"Yes, you do," she insisted quietly, taking each step with him. "I know that you're painfully shy and you'd never ask me ... but that doesn't matter. I've . . . I've fallen in love with you, Franklin, and I want to share that love with you. It doesn't matter if you don't return the feeling right now—"

"Damn it, Kayla, I do return the feeling—"

"You love me?" Her face lit up with radiance.

"I do. So damn much it's tearing me apart. That's exactly why I won't let this happen."

"But if we both love each other, it's only natural for this to happen, Franklin," she argued in a gentle tone, slowly backing him up against the wall. "It isn't as if we were strangers. I think I fell in love with you the first time you brought me those beautiful blue forget-me-nots," she said soothingly as her fingers slid up his chest and began to take off his shirt. "I never forget you, Franklin. Not for one moment. I dream about you at night, daydream about you in the daytime ..."

"Kayla, have mercy," he pleaded huskily as his hands struggled to still her working ones. "There are things you don't understand—"

"I understand that I love you, and you just said you loved me." She was working the buttons open one by one. "I don't need to know any more than that."

"Yes, you do. You don't know anything about me."

"I know I love you. Anything beyond that isn't important. At least not at the moment. Take your arm out of your sleeve," she coaxed firmly.

"No . . . and stop that!" He yanked his shirt closed. "This is insane."

Kayla paused, her doubts surfacing. "You honestly don't want to make love to me?"

"Now, Kayla, I didn't say that!" he moaned, relenting for the moment and pulling her close to his broad chest. "Of course I want to make love to you. I have from the minute I first laid eyes on you, but... the time just isn't right," he whispered in a ragged plea. He closed his eyes against the shaft of pain that sliced through his middle. It was taking everything he had not to sweep her up in his arms and carry her to the bedroom, prove to her how much power she was beginning to have over him. Just the thought of having her in his arms, willing and eager to let him sample the delights of her young slim body, sent his passion soaring. And yet he could not find the words to tell her of his deception.

"I love you, Franklin. Doesn't that mean anything to you?" she asked solemnly. "I thought that when Tony left me, I would never love again. But you came along, and suddenly I wanted to live again. To love again. I know how hard it is for a man with your morals to accept the idea of sex out of marriage, and ordinarily I would agree with you," she hastened to add. "I'm still rather old-fashioned myself. But Tony taught me that when you love someone, you want to be with them ... to share with them . . ."

"If you *don't mind*, I'm not too crazy about hearing what Tony taught you," he growled, pulling her tighter in his embrace, wrestling with the streak of jealousy that had bolted through him.

"Oh, you don't *ever* have to be jealous of Tony," she chastised lovingly, understanding his feelings completely. "That's all behind me now. It's you I love!" Once more her hands moved to rid him of his shirt. As she peeled the fabric back to expose the thick hair on his muscular chest, her breath caught slightly at the magnificence of his body.

"Oh, Franklin, let me love you," she pleaded tenderly, hoping fleetingly that his mother would never find out about her wantonness. Kayla could feel his uneven breathing on her cheek, and she sensed a raging battle in him, one that he was losing with every passing minute. Taking his hand, she tugged him gently toward the bedroom, her heart pounding wildly. Drawing him next to the bed, she carefully removed his glasses, laying them on the bedside table, then hesitantly reached out and unbuckled his belt, slipping it slowly through the loops of his pants. In another few minutes his trousers joined his shirt on the floor, and then the last remaining

piece of clothing was peeled away and her eyes hungrily devoured the man she loved. Only the dim light from the streetlamp filtered through the bedroom window, but it was enough to let her know that she would be hard pressed to find another specimen of manhood quite so magnificent anywhere on this earth. He looked so powerful to her, standing there in the dim light. His chest was broad and well-developed, his waist slim, his legs long and sturdy like those of some long-ago Viking. The hair that covered his body was the same color as that on his head, only thicker. Her fingers trembled as she reached out to touch him, to feel his bare skin against the softness of hers.

"This is sheer madness," he whispered huskily, his voice growing uneven as her hands began to run freely over him, his taut body awakening to her fleeting touches.

"No, it isn't, darling. Don't you want to touch me? Undress me, Franklin," she demanded, firmly placing one of his hands over the top button of her blouse.

"No! I really don't want to..." His voice cracked as his fingers involuntarily unfastened the first button, then the second. "Well, maybe for just a minute."

"I know how hard this must be for you, darling, and believe me, I wouldn't be doing this with just any man, but you have brought so much joy and happiness into my life, Franklin, I ... I want to make you as happy as you've made me," she pleaded against the pressure of his lips.

By now Franklin had managed to undo all the buttons on her blouse, and he slipped it off her shoulders with trembling fingers. His mind was desperately searching for a way out of this situation, and yet his heart was crying out for him to let go and make love to her the way he had dreamed of so often in the last few days.

"See how easy it is," she murmured as his mouth started a slow search down her neck and over her shoulders, his lips devouring the rose-scented softness of her. "Touch me here, Franklin." She guided his hands to her budding fullness. "And here ..." She continued to move his hands to places where she found his touch pleasurable.

He complied eagerly, suddenly more than willing to be the pupil. Kayla gasped as his hands came alive, touching her intimately with sure, deft strokes. He certainly was a fast learner!

"How am I doing?" he asked a few moments later as they broke apart from a long, heated kiss. "Is there something more I should be doing?"

"No, darling," she gulped, nearly breathless from his over- poweringly virile assault on her body and senses. "You're doing . . . magnificently!"

"Are you sure?" His hands ran smoothly over the velvet texture of her fragrant skin, his lips following lazily in their path. "I always thought that a woman would love for a man to . . ." He pulled her closer to him, whispering something quite seductive in her ear while his hands proceeded to most deliriously demonstrate what he had just described in words.

"Franklin!" she panted, shocked yet thrilled at his aggressiveness. "Oh, Franklin!"

They had only been together a few minutes, but he was already close to achieving near perfection in his first attempt to make love to a woman. It was truly amazing. And she hurriedly told him so, complimenting him as he conquered new territory after territory like a seasoned warrior.

With a groan of defeat Franklin drew her down on the bed beside him, his mouth finding hers again in the darkness, and sought to unfold the beauty of Kayla Marshall for his own selfish pleasure. Her breasts were generous and firm, her waist small and easily engulfed by his large hands. Her legs were slender and willowy, and silken to the touch. He couldn't remember a time in his life when he had felt more self-revulsion than he did now for what he was doing to this lovely woman. Yet he was incapable of stopping.

Their lips met time and time again as they drew from each other a wondrous sense of love and fulfillment. Franklin's touch was more than Kayla had dreamed it would be, tenderly seeking out all her secret places, thrilling and arousing her to the point of madness.

"Make love to me... now, Franklin," she urged, sensing 'hat he was at last ready, after thirty-six long, miserable years, to taste the delights of manhood.

Franklin's conscience managed to rear its head in one final thrust of condemnation, but only briefly.

"I can't, Kayla," he begged, rolling away from her and miserably sitting up on the side of the bed. Again his mind fought for a way out of this nightmare. "You have got to help me," he pleaded raggedly. "I'm not going to be able to do this on my own."

Mistaking his words for yet another expression of his shyness with women, Kayla came daintily to her knees and crawled over to his side of the bed. Wrapping her arms around his trim waist, she planted moist, seductive kisses along his neck, soothing him gently.

"It's all right, Franklin. I understand."

"No, you *don't* understand, Kayla. Believe me, you don't understand. But, so help me God, I love you." He turned to her, his face an agonized mask, his cheeks surprisingly moist.

She pulled him down on the bed with her, the fight totally drained out of him now. Her slight frame slid on top of his, her lips, her mouth, her hands beginning the slow, sensual explorations of love.

With every ounce of love she possessed, she poured her heart into making love to him. Gently she whispered instructions in his ear, encouraging him to relax and enjoy their lovemaking. She stroked his body to rigid firmness, eliciting groans of pleasure from him. His large form trembled as she led him into manhood, praying that it would mean as much to him as it did to her.

When at last their desire reached the point where there was no turning back, he joined with her in a union that was explosive, fiery, and oh, so sweet. The feeling that washed over them and engulfed them was mutual as they clung to each other long after their passion had peaked, then subsided. Once more

love had walked into Kayla's life, only this time the result would be different. This time the man she chose to give her trust, her faith, her very life to returned that love. In her heart she had no doubt of that. Kayla Franklin. It sounded nice. And with that thought floating lazily through her mind she drifted off to sleep in the arms of her love.

The sound of muted thunder and the first drops of rain hitting the window woke Kayla the next morning. They were in for a spring thunderstorm, she mused, snuggling down tighter against Franklin's warm body. She loved thunderstorms and the sound of the wind whipping savagely through the branches outside her window.

A gentle smile found her lips as Franklin's hand reached out to cup her rounded softness. At first she had feared that last night had only been a dream, that when she awoke, Franklin would be gone. But he wasn't. He was here, pulling her against the muscled hardness of his body, kissing her awake with kisses that went from gentle to savage almost in a heartbeat. Their appetite for each other had not nearly been appeased in the night, and it was a different Franklin who made love to her this morning. Gone was the shy, gentle man, and in his place was a smooth, experienced lover who knew how to bring her to the very brink of fulfillment but refused to let her topple over until both their bodies were crying for release.

The storm outside their window was pale in comparison to the tempest inside as their muted cries of pleasure filled the small room. Franklin's mouth muffled her whimpers of satisfaction as together they once more reached the ultimate goal in their love- making. A million stars shattered into the universe as they soared to awesome and shuddering heights.

When it was over, the storm still raged on outside, but inside only the soft whisperings of love could be heard.

"I never had a chance to ask you last night. Was everything ... as you expected?" Kayla murmured against his ear, her passion ebbing away slowly.

"Are you serious? It was wonderful," he whispered back sleepily. "I love you, lady."

She felt a strong sense of elation that his "first time" had been completely successful. She grinned smugly. The second wasn't shabby either!

"Umm. . . I love you too. What time is it?"

Franklin picked up the clock on the bedside table and tried to see the hands. "A little before five."

"Oh," she groaned, wrapping her arms more snugly around his waist, "it's way too early to get up yet."

"Not for me it isn't. I have to be on the road in another hour." He yawned drowsily.

"Oh, do you have to go out of town today?"

"Yes. I was going to tell you last night before you so ... uh... delightfully distracted me." He grinned, finally rolling off her and pulling the covers up over them warmly. "Maybe I'll just lie here a few more minutes," he reasoned tiredly. "I think you wore me out last night. But thanks," he added politely with a smile in his voice.

"You're most welcome," she acknowledged lovingly. "Will you be back tonight?"

"No." His voice grew solemn. "I won't be back in town until Sunday."

"Sunday!" Kayla opened her eyes. "Why so long?"

"It's . . . business."

Business? Kayla found that unusual. Usually Franklin's business trips were only for a day. Or at least they had been since she had known him. Her voice revealed her disappointment as she replied, "Darn. I wanted you to help me look for a place to open my shop."

"I told you you didn't have to open a shop. I can take care of you," he reminded her curtly, but he tempered it with another long kiss.

"I know you can, but I meant it when I said I wanted to help us get a house. No problem, though. Paula will be back Monday, and then I'll have every day free to look for a shop." Marriage hadn't been mentioned yet, but Kayla felt sure that it would be soon.

"Whatever you say," he agreed, dismissing her words immediately. When all this misunderstanding was cleared up, he could change her mind. But before he proposed, he needed a little more time to find a way to straighten things out.

A hard, cold lump of fear rose in his throat as he heard the quiet sound of her breathing. She had fallen asleep while they were still talking, her arms wrapped lovingly around his neck. He would have to find a way soon. He couldn't keep running the chance that she would find out accidentally who he was. The only person likely to spill the beans was Paula, but surely Paula would never associate Franklin Franklin with Nicholas Trahern. He would be extremely careful and stay out of the office even more than he had done for the last week and a half. He could run Trahern Tool and Die by going in late in the evenings, just as he had been doing, and working half the night to catch up on paper work he had promised his dad he would do while the elder Trahern was away. It would all work out, he told himself grimly as his hold on the lovely bundle in his arms tightened possessively. It had to.

CHAPTER FIVE

"I can't tell you how wonderful it is to see the sparkle back in your eyes." Paula leaned forward in her chair and grasped her friend's hand tightly. "You know, I was really beginning to get worried about you."

"I know." Kayla's smile was glowing. "You've been such a good friend. I don't know how you've put up with me the last few months."

"You had reason to act the way you did," Paula assured her, squeezing her hand once more before releasing it, "but whoever this Franklin is, I could personally hug his neck."

"Oh, no, you don't. No one hugs my Franklin's neck but me." Kayla laughed. "Oh, Paula. I know I loved Tony ... but I can see now that what I feel for Franklin is so different ... so . . ." Kayla searched for the words to explain her feelings and there simply were none. She was head over heels in love with Franklin, and life was nothing but pure joy.

"So wonderful? I can see it in your every move," Paula told her. "And I couldn't be happier for you. Where did you say you met him?"

"Right where you're sitting," Kayla exclaimed. "Don't you honestly remember him?" Kayla couldn't see how Paula could forget a salesman as good-looking as Franklin was, even if she was married!

"No"—Paula's face was a mask of concentration—"I don't recall any encyclopedia salesman of Franklin's description. Maybe he's new with his company."

"No, I don't think so. He asked where you were the first time he came in. Oh, well, you'll probably recognize the face when you meet him."

"And when do you think Doug and I will have that titillating experience?" Paula teased.

"Soon. Very soon, I promise. Franklin's work schedule is rather odd, and he travels a lot." Kayla thought back over the frequent two- and three-day trips he had made during the last few weeks.

"There's always weekends," Paula prompted, anxious to meet the man who had so vastly improved her best friend's life. "What about this weekend?"

"No, I don't think so," Kayla replied with a frown. Franklin had told her only last night that he would have to be gone again this weekend. "Franklin is going to be away on business this weekend."

"Franklin must really be a go-getter if he devotes all his weekends to business too." Paula sighed, tossing the last of her sandwich into the waste can.

Since Paula had returned from her vacation they had been too busy to have a long conversation, and while Kayla had been out looking at shops this morning, she had decided to stop by Trahern Tool and Die to have lunch with her friend.

"Yes, that's what I've thought too," Kayla admitted, "but he does seem like such a timid man. Oh, well, I'm sure we can get together soon."

"How's the shop hunting coming along?"

"Slowly. If I find the right size, the rent is too high, and if I find the right rent, the shop's too small." Kayla shrugged. "I seem to be running in circles. I hope Franklin can help me look sometime next week, although I must admit, he is very little help in that area. He doesn't want me to open a shop at all."

"Why not?"

"Oh, something to do with the fact that *if* I find someone to marry, I'll probably want to stay home and have babies." She grinned happily.

Paula smiled knowingly. "Do you think he's trying to tell you something?"

"I think so!" Kayla chuckled. "He hasn't come right out and asked me to marry him yet, but he sure makes a lot of veiled comments about how much he loves me and how he would love to start a family. I think he's trying to get up the courage to ask me."

"Kayla! You should help the poor guy out," Paula scolded.

"Are you serious! I've done everything but write down the words *Will you marry me, Kayla?* on a slip of paper and hand it to him!" Kayla protested.

"Well, I'm sure he'll finally summon up the nerve to ask you one of these days. Are you sure you're willing to devote all your time to being a housewife with three or four babies to care for?" Paula asked with a challenge in her voice.

"I would be if they were all Franklin's," Kayla said with a dreamy sigh.

"I certainly hope you have the good sense to name them something other than Franklin Franklin, Jr. Ugh. No offense intended, but that's the most gosh-awful name I've ever heard of," Paula said bluntly.

Kayla frowned. "Boy, it is, isn't it? But names don't matter. Only the man matters, and I would marry him if his name was Mortimer Snerd."

Paula shook her head. "I can see you're a hopeless case."

Kayla smiled brightly. "Guilty!"

Paula glanced at the clock on the wall, then hurriedly downed the last of her milk. "This has been fun, but I've got to get back to work. Don't you miss this nice little office?"

"Not really. It wasn't all that hard, but I barely got all of the younger Trahern's typing finished before he had another stack on my desk each morning," Kayla confessed, gathering up her purse and the remains of her own lunch.

"Isn't he a doll?" Paula asked absently, applying lip gloss to her mouth. "Who?"

"Nicholas. Isn't that who you were talking about?" "Oh. Yes, that's who I was talking about, but I wouldn't know if he's a doll or not. I never saw him. He always came in late in the evenings after I left. By the way, did you know that Franklin and Nicholas are the best of friends? It's almost impossible to believe, but they are. Two more different men you could never hope to meet!"

"Honest?" Paula paused in combing her hair. "That does sound like an unlikely friendship."

"I'll say! I'm only thankful that Nicholas's rakish ways haven't rubbed off on Franklin," Kayla observed thoughtfully.

"Oh, Nick isn't so bad. His reputation far exceeds the reality, I think. Actually, he's rather nice. I think you should meet him. In fact"—Paula sized her friend up—"you two would probably make a perfect couple. All Nick needs is the right woman to come along and make him sit up and take notice."

"No, thanks!" Kayla refused quickly. "If Bowser wants to sit up and take notice, he'll have to find someone other than me. I hope I'm taken! But you know what? I *would* like to know what the guy looks like."

"You've never seen a picture of him?" Paula asked with surprise.

"No. Is there one around here?"

"I think so. Nicholas and his father had some PR pictures taken several years ago. Wait a minute. I'll see if I can find one." Paula rose and went over to the metal file cabinet. She browsed for several minutes before she closed it slowly. "Darn, there don't seem to be any left. I've sent a lot out lately—I guess I'll have to call the printer for more." She shrugged. "Sorry."

"That's all right," Kayla assured her. "It isn't important. I just thought it would be fun to see what all the fuss was about."

"Nicholas *is* a darn nice-looking man . . . and rich to boot," Paula said thoughtfully. "No wonder women drive him crazy all the time. He's to the point where he practically won't accept a call in the daytime from any woman unless I swear it isn't a personal one."

"Poor baby," Kayla said snidely. "It must be awful to be so sought after!"

"It must," Paula agreed laughingly. "Now will you kindly get out of here and let me do my work!"

"Only if you promise to ask Doug about Saturday."

"Oh, rats! I'd forgotten about that."

"Do you think he'd mind?" Kayla asked worriedly.

"No, I'm sure he won't. I'll let you know what time we'll pick you up. Doug doesn't miss an opportunity to go to the horse races, let alone the chance to go to the last one of the season. Saturday is the Arkansas Derby!"

"Really? Is that something special?"

"All I know is that it's one of the four quarter-million-dollar races they have each year, and they run three-year-olds on the mile-and-one-eighth track. Oh, hey! I bet some of Nicholas's horses will be running Saturday. I'm sure of it. He goes to Hot Springs almost every week. Instead of a picture you can meet him in person."

"Not interested," Kayla said with an airy dismissive gesture. "All I want to do is learn more about horse racing so I can talk intelligently with Franklin about his favorite subject."

"Undoubtedly Doug can help you there. I'll call you tonight and tell you what time we'll leave. Okay?"

"Fine. Talk to you later."

Kayla left Trahern Tool and Die humming softly under her breath. She had some shopping to do before Franklin came by to pick her up that evening. Tonight she wanted to look extra special. For the last six weeks they had spent nearly every night together, excluding the ones when he was out of town. As of yet she hadn't seen his apartment, since it was much easier for Franklin to stay overnight at her place, eliminating the long drive back into town each morning. Kayla shivered as she recalled the nights spent in Franklin's arms. Somewhere along the way the teacher and student roles had been reversed, and now Kayla was the pupil in their lovemaking. Somehow Franklin had turned pro, and Kayla was delighted that she had been responsible for introducing him to the pleasures that a man and woman can share. His lovemaking was more thrilling than she had ever dreamed of, and her happiness knew no bounds. Since she was always on the alert to make herself more knowledgeable about his life, she had asked Paula if Doug would mind taking her to the racetrack this weekend and explaining some of the finer points of horse racing. Since Franklin would be gone all weekend, she would surprise him with her newfound knowledge when he returned. He would be so proud! She just knew it. She was so sure of it that she discreetly refrained from letting him know her plans for the weekend as they lay in bed that night, lazily kissing in the mellow afterglow of their lovemaking.

Her weekend plans were not the only thing she was keeping secret. Her hand moved down to gently touch her stomach, hoping that by the time Franklin returned, she would have other news to give him . . . news that would make him ecstatic. But it was too soon. She wouldn't go to the doctor until Friday, but then . . .

Heaving a long sigh, she rolled over onto his broad chest, her fingers tiptoeing up through the mat of hair. "Have I told you yet today how much I love you?" she whispered.

"I believe you did mention it a couple of hundred times, but I never grow tired of hearing it," he teased, catching her fingers and kissing them gently.

"Oh. You think I'm too obvious about how crazy I am about you?" she asked with a mock pout.

"Not to me you're not. But I'm not sure what all your friends will say when you put on the 'I love Franklin Franklin' T-shirt you bought at the mall today."

"Oh, pooh. I couldn't care less what they say. I *do* love Franklin Franklin."

"And *he* do love you too," he assured her, kissing the tip of her nose. "And he's going to miss you like hell this weekend. I'll be glad when you can start going with me on . . ."

"On what?"

"On . . . these business trips."

"When will that be?" She kissed him seductively, her hand wandering aimlessly over his solid flesh. "Why can't I go now?"

"Honey, I've told you ... in a few weeks you can start going with me." He had made up his mind. When he returned Monday, he was going to take her somewhere where they could be alone for a couple of days, and in that time he was going to find a way to tell her who he was. Well aware of what the consequences could be, he was still determined to go through with his plans. No longer could he live with the lie between them. He loved her, and he would make her believe that. It wouldn't be easy, but he knew that she loved him, and he hoped that she would understand when he explained that although it was a foolish thing for him to do, he had lied to her on the spur of the moment, then dug his way deeper and deeper into the deceit until there was no longer a way to tell her the truth. Whatever the risk, it had to be brought out in the open now. Living from day to day with the knowledge that at anytime she might discover his identity was taking its toll on him. The dark circles under his eyes were not from the long hours he had been working. His clothes fit looser—he had lost his appetite. Only his continuing interest in his racehorses made his life bearable at the moment. But to go to the races, he was again forced to lie and tell Kayla he was off on business. Well, in a way it was business, although not business as she perceived it. No, he had to take the chance and tell her the truth, then ask her to marry him. With that all behind him Nicholas Trahern would be the happiest man alive!

"Kayla, listen to me, sweetheart." Franklin stilled her exploring hands. "I can't take you with me this time, but when I get back Monday, I want us to go away for a few days. What do you say? Just you and me." His gray gaze was solemn . . . and very serious.

"Can you take off work for that long?" she asked with concern.

"That's no problem," he said. "Will you go with me?" Reaching out with one hand, he pushed back a lock of her golden hair, his fingers lingering poignantly at the side of her face.

"I'd go anywhere with you, Franklin. I thought you knew that," she said quietly.

"That's what I'm counting on, Kayla."

She cocked her head at him and smiled. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean I love you . . . remember that. When you look back on this hour, I want you to always remember one thing, I love you. From the bottom of my heart. I love you. Always remember that."

With a groan he pulled her mouth back down to meet his, and for the moment all else was nonexistent. How much longer would their world be secure? Nicholas wouldn't allow himself to think past tonight. Bringing everything he possessed to it, he made love to the woman he held in his arms with almost savage intensity, leaving her both shaken and puzzled by what had suddenly overcome him.

Franklin was such a strange but wonderful man. Kayla wondered if she would ever cease to be amazed at his rapid changes of mood. But it didn't really matter, she reminded herself as she snuggled down in the shelter of his arms. She loved him, whether he was plagued by moods or not. Franklin was the best thing that had ever happened in her life, and if he wasn't perfect ... so what? She wasn't either.

Kayla was thinking similar thoughts when she emerged from the doctor's office Friday morning. A baby! It was true, she was carrying Franklin's baby, and she had not the slightest doubt that he would be thrilled and overjoyed at the prospect of becoming a father. Naturally he would insist on marriage right away. Kayla smiled and touched her stomach wonderingly. Her baby would be lucky enough to have one of the most honest, sincere men in the world to call Daddy. At that moment, in the middle of a bustling, crowded, street corner, Kayla let out a whoop of sheer joy for the baby and her love for its father. Mrs. Franklin Franklin! What more could any woman want?

For ten weeks every spring the little town of Hot Springs, Arkansas, some forty-seven miles southwest of Little Rock, reeled under the impact of twenty-three thousand race fans daily. From the second week of February until the third week in April the ardent race fans thronged their way into the beautiful Oak- lawn Race Track, their spirits soaring at the anticipated sound of "They're off!"

Today was no different as Kayla, Paula, and Doug surged through the entrance gates, caught up in the air of excitement that prevailed in the stadium. The day was a gorgeous one, the sun streaming brightly over the beautifully landscaped track. Kayla would have loved to sit outside for the races, but Doug had already purchased tickets in one of the two five-story glass- enclosed grandstands.

"Boy, this is great," Kayla said excitedly, rummaging in her purse for more money to buy yet another "hot tip sheet" from one of the numerous barkers milling through the crowd, hawking their wares. "Anyone got an extra dollar?"

Doug fished in his pocket and extracted the asked-for currency. "Hey, Kayla, that's the sixth tip sheet you've bought. Don't you think you've got enough?"

"But each of those men said if I followed their tips, the horses they had picked would win today," Kayla protested.

"Ri-ght!" Doug said with a skeptical smile.

Kayla looked confused. "Isn't that right?"

Paula took her arm and steered her through the crowd, laughing at her gullibility. "Lesson number one. Anytime anyone tells you he has a 'sure thing,' run as fast as you can in the *opposite* direction!" she warned.

"The only sure bet around here is the hot dogs," Doug contributed. "Anyone want one?"

Paula and Kayla agreed to wait until later, but Doug's mouth was watering for one of the plump, juicy dogs served in a warm bun and smothered with mustard and relish, so he left the women and made his way to one of the concession stands on the third level.

"Come on, we can go to our seats," Kayla called over the noise of the crowd. "He can find us when he's finished."

Kayla followed Paula down the aisle of steps until they came to the row they were to be seated in. They were going to have an excellent view of the racetrack and Kayla's pulse quickened at the prospect of what was to come. All around her people were studying their racing forms, trying to decide where to place their first bet of the day—the daily double.

"What's a daily double?" Kayla mused, studying her tip sheets and program.

"That's one you're going to love! It only costs you a two-dollar bet. You try to pick the horses that will win the first two races," Paula explained patiently. "For instance, I think I'll bet on this horse, Molly's Mother, to win the first race, and then I think I'll take . . . umm . . . Bold Mary to win the second. If both those horses win, I'll win."

"How do you know which ones to bet on?" Kayla asked, overwhelmed by the choices before her.

"Oh, I pick the jockey with the cutest name, and bet on the horse he's riding," Paula said knowledgeably.

Kayla glanced at her skeptically. "Does that work?"

"It works as well as any system I use. Usually nothing works for me," Paula confessed.

"Well, I don't know." Kayla wasn't too impressed with her friend's betting system. "I wish I could see some of the horses before I bet any money."

"Oh, we will. We'll go down to the paddock before the races start, and you can see some of them. Oh, Yes. Lesson number two. The paddock is the place where they take all the horses to saddle them before the races. I think all horses are supposed to be saddled in view of the public. Then, of course, you'll see the jockeys and their horses in the post parade too."

"Post parade?"

"The jockeys parade the horses in front of the stands before each race. It's neat. I've brought some binoculars so we can see which one of the jockeys is the cutest, and then we can run up and place our bet."

"Oh, good grief, Paula. Isn't there a little surer way to bet?" Kayla could see her two-dollar bets going down the tube if one of those "cute" jockeys turned out to have an off day!

Paula looked hurt. "It's as good as any other system, I tell you!"

Doug returned, carrying cold drinks for each of them and two hot dogs for himself. The threesome sipped their drinks and read the tote board in front of the stands. Kayla watched as the computerized board flashed the names of dignitaries who were in the park today, the time of the first race, post time, and the time of day. One section of the board showed the total bets in separate pools for win, place, and show, along with the odds and pay-off prices. Kayla could easily see why Franklin loved the exhilaration of horse racing. Although she'd barely arrived, she was already eager for the first race to begin. "Have you lovely ladies decided where to put your money for the daily double?" Doug asked between bites of his hot dog.

"Not yet. I haven't gotten a good look at the ... horses yet," Paula amended swiftly. "What about you?"

"No question," he answered. "Trahern has a horse running in each race. That's where my money's going."

Kayla studied her program and saw that Nicholas Trahern was the owner of My Pretty Baby in the first race and Getha Leadout in the second. "Getha Leadout? What kind of a name is that for a horse?" Kayla asked disgustedly.

Doug leaned over and looked at her seriously. "It's pronounced 'get-the-lead-out.' I can tell *you've* never been on your feet screaming at the top of your lungs as the horses come around that quarter pole and your horse is barely in the lead, straining for the finish wire. Personally I can't think of a more appropriate name for a horse at that time," he added with a devilish grin.

"What's the jockey look like who rides him?" Paula asked attentively.

"How should I know." Doug glanced over at his wife irritably. "Anyway, the track is fast today, so you ladies better make your bets carefully. There'll be some tough competition out there today."

"Do you mind if I ask what a 'fast track' is?" Kayla hated to be so dumb, yet the reason she was here was to learn.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Kayla. I was talking about the condition of the track. A fast track is one that's dry and ideal for racing. At least I prefer to bet a fast track. Other times the track can be classified as muddy, heavy, good, slow, or sloppy. I usually bet accordingly."

"Who makes up all these rules for horse racing?" Kayla asked interestedly. "The owners? The jockeys?"

"Good heavens, no. The State Racing Commission sets the rules, along with The Jockey Club. Now, mind you, I'm not an authority on any of this, but I'll try to fumble through your questions," he told her seriously.

Kayla grimaced. She would never be able to remember any of this when she needed it!

"And what about the horses themselves? How would I tell if a horse was a Thoroughbred or not?" she pursued doggedly.

"Oh, my, you'd have to see their papers. At least, that's the only way I could tell. I do know something about horses' markings, though—but surely you're not interested in hearing about that."

"Yes, I am. Now, come on, what are some of the markings?" Kayla persisted.

"Well, now, let me think. Some horses have a sock. That's a white band around the foot above the coronet."

"Coronet?"

"Top of the hoof. Then there's a white marking on the forehead called a star, and a blaze is a large white patch on the face. A snip is a small white or flesh-colored marking on the nose or lips, and a 'bald' horse has an entirely white face, including the skin around the eyes and nose. A stripe, which is usually narrow, extends from between the eyes to the bridge of the nose. And, of course, there's the stocking. That's where the lower part of the horse's leg is all white."

Paula let out a loud fake yawn and fell over into Kayla's lap in boredom. "*Never* ask Doug a simple question without expecting a detailed answer!"

"Well, she wanted to know!" Doug said defensively.

"Honestly, Paula. I *do* want to hear this. Go on, Doug," Kayla insisted.

Doug shot his wife a superior look, then continued. "Then, of course, Thoroughbreds can have different colors. Chestnut, roan, gray, bay, black, and brown are all recognized by The Jockey Club."

"Goodness!" Kayla frowned and decided to change the subject. "I noticed when I was reading the program that all the horses running today are three years old."

"That's right," Doug said, studying the sheet before him. "Wednesday they ran the fillies and mares—"

"Whoa! Explain!"

"A filly is a female horse under five years old. A yearling is between one and two years old. A colt is under five years old and male. Then a horse is male and over five years old," Doug explained patiently, "and a mare is female and over five years old. As I was saying, on Thursday and Friday they ran the four-year-olds and up, and today they'll be running all three-year-olds. Clear?"

"As mud," Kayla said glumly.

"I know it's confusing." Doug laughed. "Look, a lot of this information would be easier to digest if I could point out some of the horses to you. The races don't start until one, so let's walk down to the paddock, and I'll try to show you what I've just been talking about. Anyone in the mood for a hot dog yet?"

"Doug!" Paula scolded. "Surely you don't want another hot dog this soon!"

Doug looked properly shamefaced, but that didn't deter him from an honest answer. "I could probably eat three more."

Paula shook her head disbelievingly. "We are going to have to carry you out of here today."

"Oh, all right. I'll eat a pretzel with cheese on it instead," he grumbled.

They all decided that pretzels sounded good. Paula and Kayla waited as Doug made the purchase, and then the three of them took the stairs down to the lower level. As they approached what looked to Kayla like a concrete pit with stalls, Doug observed excitedly, "Gosh, take a look at those beauties!"

No one could argue that the horses being led in and the ones already standing in the stalls were not real beauties. Their healthy, sleek coats glistened as the grooms put on their pads, number cloths, and saddles and tightened their girths.

"Aren't their legs delicate," Paula said admiringly. "I don't see how they stand up under the pressures of racing."

"That's usually where a racehorse is most prone to injuries," Doug told them. "In their knees, hocks, legs, and fetlocks. The way they have to pound so hard on the track accounts for a lot of injuries."

"I can imagine," Kayla said, wincing at the thought of the weight those slender limbs had to support.

Kayla watched the far corner of the paddock as they brought in a stunning gray filly. Her eyes feasted on its gracefulness, and she thought how much it looked like the one Franklin had pointed out to her the day of their first picnic. The filly pranced in sassily, giving the firm impression that the race *it* was running in was all over but the shouting. That particular Thoroughbred certainly looked like a—what had Franklin called it?—a shoo out?"

The groom led the horse to one of the stalls nearest the entrance to the paddock as another man followed, carrying its tack. Distracted for a moment by the restless movements of a chestnut in the stall directly in front of where they were standing, Kayla failed to see a tall third man enter and walk to the gray filly's stall and kneel down to check the wrappings on the animal's hind leg.

"Oh, hey, look! There's Nicholas right down there!" Paula pointed toward gray filly's stall. "I thought he would probably be here today!"

Kayla glanced toward the far corner of the paddock, halfway expecting to see a harem waving palm leaves above the head of their "master."

"Really? Where?" she asked disinterestedly.

"Right over there by that gray horse. The good-looking one kneeling down in back, checking the horse's legs."

Kayla's eyes followed Paula's pointed finger, and her face lit up brightly. "Oh, gosh, Paula! There's Franklin! He must be here with Nicholas today!" Kayla said excitedly. "I wonder if he can hear me if I yell at him!"

"I don't know. It's pretty noisy in here," Paula said. "Which one's Franklin?"

"The handsome devil in the blue slacks and blue shirt, silly! Isn't he a doll?" Kayla's voice was filled with undisguised love and adoration.

"Blue slacks and shirt ... I don't see anyone in blue slacks and a blue shirt except Nicholas. Is Franklin standing in the stall with the gray filly?"

"Yes, Paula, he's standing right there, talking to the man who's putting that thing on the gray horse's head!"

Both sets of eyes were trained on the men in the far stall. Slowly Paula's face lost its smile as a nagging suspicion began to creep through her mind.

"Is . . . Franklin . . ." Paula swallowed hard. "Is Franklin..."

Kayla looked at her friend in concern. "What's the matter with you, Paula? Is Franklin what?"

Paula cleared her throat and started again. "Is Franklin the one kneeling down again?"

Kayla glanced back down at the stall. "Yeah. That's him. Isn't he cute?"

"Oh . . . Kayla." Paula's heart sank. "There must be some mistake."

"Mistake? What do you mean?" Kayla smiled.

"That's .. that isn't.. that man leaning down is Nicholas Trahern." Paula didn't know anything to say but the truth. Surely Kayla was teasing her.

Suddenly the bright, exciting day turned cold and dismal. Kayla looked back at the man in question. "That's not funny, Paula," she said in a near whisper.

"I never meant it to be, Kayla." Paula reached out and grasped her friend's hand.

"Now, look, there's got to be some reasonable explanation for all this. Don't start jumping to conclusions," Doug cautioned.

Kayla turned a blank face toward them. "I don't know what you two are talking about. Franklin wouldn't lie to me. He wouldn't do that to me..." Her voice trailed off painfully as her eyes once more returned to the paddock. It felt as if someone had slammed a hard fist into the middle of her stomach. Surely this was some cruel, vicious joke.

As if experiencing a rare perception, the tall man in the blue slacks stood up and glanced toward the crowd, his eyes trying to locate what was bothering him. Then his features froze and his face grew pale as his gaze encountered the confused, stunned face of the pretty girl standing next to the railing. In one forward motion he raced to the retaining wall, shouting her name. The sound of his voice had the effect of someone throwing a bucket of ice water in her face, and she whirled and bolted through the crowd. Her mind was one chaotic mass of bewilderment. Her wonderful, shy, loving Franklin had lied to her. He wasn't Franklin at all, he was Nicholas Trahern! The despicable womanizing cad Nicholas Trahern! How he must have laughed at her all these weeks... all the nights when she had patiently led him in the acts of love, showing him what pleased a woman ... the nights when she had whispered how much she loved him. Her stomach threatened to empty itself as she blindly pushed her way through the maze of bodies, searching for a way out of the stadium. Tears were rendering her nearly sightless as she ran from the entrance and fled down the street in the direction of the motel where she and Doug and Paula had rented rooms this morning. They had planned on spending the entire weekend in Hot Springs, but now . . .

The impatient blare of a car horn made her swerve wildly as she ran on down the street. It was happening all over again, the almost unbelievable pain that sliced through her when she thought of his deceit, the lies that he had told her. She thought it had hurt when Tony had betrayed her, but that

had been nothing compared to the bitter, excruciating pain that overtook her now. Somewhere in the far corners of her mind she heard her name being shouted, but it barely registered as she ran mindlessly down the sidewalk.

"Kayla! Dammit. . . stop!" Nick's voice thundered through the air, but she had no intentions of stopping. She would never stop if she could help it. She would run to the ends of the earth if it meant she could for one moment erase men like Tony Platto and Nicholas Trahern from her tortured mind.

Blindly she ran on until she came to the motel. The key delayed her momentarily, her fingers shaking so hard she couldn't insert it into the lock. When she finally managed to get the door open, she rushed into the room and bolted the door securely behind her. Her side was aching from the long, hard run, and salty tears were streaming down her cheeks as she leaned miserably against the door and grasped her stomach. The baby. She had to think of the baby right now! All that running might have hurt it, and this hysterical crying surely couldn't be good for her in her condition.

"Oh, God." She sank down on the floor and buried her face in her hands. "Why have you let this happen to me again?" she questioned pleadingly. "What have I done to deserve your anger and your wrath?" She lifted her face in a plea to her heavenly Father. "I loved him. I truly loved him. How could he have done this to me?" She prayed for an answer, *any* answer, that would ease the pain in her heart. Only the quiet sound of the muted traffic outside filled the room. There were no answers for Kayla Marshall today. And the desolate thought crossed her mind that there might never *be* an answer. Not even tomorrow.

With feigned calmness she straightened her shoulders and began to wipe at the cascading tears. She had to get herself under control. No matter what had happened, she would be able to live through it. She had before, she would again. Only this time she would have something left of her misplaced love. Her hand went back down to tenderly touch her abdomen. This time she would have one thing that couldn't be taken from her. Not ever.

The calm was shattered by a loud fist slamming against the door. Kayla jumped as if she had been shot with a gun, her mind jerking back to the present.

"Kayla, open this door!" Nick demanded hotly.

"Go away, you . . . you snake in the grass," she hissed.

"I'm warning you, Kayla, open this door. I don't want to make a scene, but I will," he warned in a grim voice.

"You'll have to burn this place down before you'll get me to open that door, *Mr. Trahern!*" she shouted. "I don't ever want to see your lying face again as long as I live! Do you hear me?" she yelled at the top of her lungs.

"Yes, I hear you," he acknowledged in a muffled tone, "along with every other damn person standing out here. Now, open the door, and let's talk this over quietly."

"Over my dead body," she announced flatly.

"Have it your way," he said angrily. Kayla flinched as she heard his foot hit the door, splintering the wood violently.

"Don't you dare come in here, Franklin . . . Nicholas ... whatever your name is. I'll call the desk and have them send the police—" Her words were interrupted as the door shook on its hinges once more, sending wood chips flying all over the room.

Kayla ran for the telephone and was frantically dialing the desk when the door finally gave way and Nicholas stormed into the room. Jerking the receiver from her hand, he slammed it back in its cradle, his face a violent mask of anger.

"Sit down, *Ms. Marshall*," he roared.

"I don't have to sit down—" Nicholas pushed her roughly onto the bed and landed next to her, his eyes warning her that she *would* sit down, *and* like it! "You can't treat me like this! Someone will hear you and call the management," she argued.

"I told the bystanders that we were on our honeymoon and having our first quarrel. I don't think anyone's going to be coming to your rescue." His breathing was labored as he tried to still her squirming body. "I think I convinced them."

"Oh, that's right. I'd forgotten for a moment what an excellent *liar* you are . . . Nicholas," she spat out.

A look of pain blanketed his face as his eyes turned stormy. "I want to talk to you about that," he said quietly.

For a moment the struggling ceased as their eyes met in mute anguish. Unwanted tears welled up in Kayla's as she looked at the face that had come to haunt her days and nights. It looked innocent enough. It still had all the features she loved. The smooth, tanned skin, the beautiful silvery eyes, the soft golden hair, the firm, almost rigid jawline that she had kissed so often ... it was all still there. All those familiar landmarks, yet she had the feeling that she was staring at a stranger. A cold, lying stranger.

CHAPTER SIX

"Don't look at me that way, Kayla." Nick's gaze was pained as his eyes met hers. He leaned forward as if to kiss her, and she jerked back angrily.

"Don't you touch me, you dog in the manger!"

"Stop calling me snake in the grass and dog in the manger!" he snapped, struggling with her heatedly. "You haven't even given me a chance to explain!"

"Ha! As if you could!"

"I can. Are you willing to listen?"

"No! I don't want to spend another minute with you, let alone the time it would take for you to explain your little deception," she cried, wrestling with him for possession of her wrists. "I'm warning you, I'm going to resort to violence if you don't let me go!"

Nicholas rolled her over onto her stomach and threw his large frame on top of her, pinning her tightly to the mattress. "We are going to discuss this if I have to sit on you all night, Kayla!"

Kayla pounded the bed with her clenched fists, powerless to move. "I hate you. Do you realize that? I hate you!"

"I know you think you do right now—"

"I don't think it! I know it."

Nicholas closed his eyes in agony. "Don't say that, sweetheart."

"And don't *ever* refer to me as 'sweetheart' again. I'm not your sweetheart . . . I'm nothing to you—" Her voice broke off in a sob.

"That's not true. Good Lord, Kayla, you're everything to me," he said in a husky tone. "I was afraid this was going to happen. I knew I should have told you sooner, but that first day . . . you remember the first day we met?"

Kayla lay silently, her mind painfully recalling their first meeting. The way she had picked her silly panties off his broad chest.

Nicholas took her silence for a sign that she was listening. "Remember how you let me know in no uncertain terms how you felt about men like me . . . Nicholas Trahern. I knew that I would never get to first base with you if you found out that I . . . Well. . . *that's* what made me say my name was Franklin."

Kayla grunted disgustedly and buried her face deeper in the pillow.

"And that *is* my name ... in a way. Nicholas *Franklin* Trahern. That part wasn't entirely a lie," he said lamely, a trace of self-righteousness in his voice.

Kayla refused to answer him.

"Are you listening, sweetheart?"

"No. Let me up. I want to go home."

"No. Not until I make you understand that what's happened between us in the last six weeks has not been a lie. I am in love with you, Kayla."

Kayla's anger overcame her, and she shoved against him violently, knocking him off her. She scrambled over to the side of the bed and glared at him coldly. "You actually want me to believe that what you did to me you did from love? Well, I'm sorry, Frank— Well, I'm sorry. That is certainly not my idea of love. You must have had a good laugh at the way I believed that you had never been with another woman." Her voice cracked and she swallowed hard. "Did I amuse you, *Nicholas*, when I coached you in all the things that please me?"

"Don't do this, Kayla," Nick said harshly, his eyes growing misty. "Don't cheapen what we had. I know what I did was wrong."

"Well, at least you're man enough to admit that. Yes, Nicholas. What you did was cruel and despicable ... and I will *never* forgive you for it."

"Don't say that. You don't really mean it."

"I don't think I'm getting through to you, Nick. After today I hope I never see you again. As far as I'm concerned, I've never met Nicholas Trahern. The man I loved, Franklin Franklin"—her voice broke, and tears threatened to overtake her— "the man I loved with all my heart and soul died today. That's the way I'm going to look at it. I will grieve over the loss of Franklin until the day *I* die, but as far as *you're* concerned, I feel nothing!"

Nicholas reached out and turned her over and pulled her roughly up against his chest, his mouth grinding into her lips hurtfully. For a moment Kayla was too stunned to try and break the embrace, but when she realized what he was trying to do, she jerked away angrily and slapped his face. "Don't *ever* do that to me again!" she warned in a deadly tone.

"Are you trying to say that you don't still respond to me . . . that what we had is gone because of some stupid misunderstanding?" Nick's face was a tortured mask as he released her and they backed off from each other.

"That's exactly what I'm saying. I detest you. It's as simple as that."

"I will not believe that, Kayla. You don't detest me . . . you detest what I have done to you, and I can't blame you. I know I'm going to have to give you some time... I know this has been a terrible shock . . ."

"I mean it, Nick. Don't ever try to see me after today. You've had your fun. Now the game is over—I don't want to play anymore," Kayla sobbed.

"Kayla, look. Remember when I said that I wanted us to go away for a few days when I got home Monday? Honey, I was going to tell you then, honest I was. I knew that this couldn't go on indefinitely. I was going to tell you who I was and ask you to marry me. You have *got* to believe that, Kayla."

"I wouldn't believe a word you said, Nicholas. Why can't you get that through your stubborn head. Go back to your world of women and horses .. and lies . . . or whatever a man like you does, and leave me alone!"

Nick's face became cold and proud as her words began to sink in. "Is that what you really want?"

"Yes." Kayla turned away from him and walked over to the window. "That's exactly what I want."

"Then I'll be damned if I'll bother you again! I guess I was wrong about you, Kayla. You're just like all other women. Selfish, cold, with not an understanding bone in your body. You've put on quite an act, haven't you? Making me think you were a warm, lovely, unselfish—"

"I want you to leave, Nicholas. Now!"

"With pleasure!" He strode angrily to the door and yanked it open. "I tried to tell you—"

Kayla staunched the flow of words by slamming the door in his face. "You should have tried harder!" she yelled through the splintered wood.

The silence in the room was unbearable as Kayla walked back over to the bed and miserably threw herself down. No matter how hard she tried to believe that she hated Nicholas Trahern, the awful truth kept bleeding through. She didn't hate him. Disappointment, a sense of betrayal, loneliness, she felt all of those at the moment... but hate? Could such a final and forceful word be used to describe her feelings for Nicholas Trahern? There was supposed to be such a fine line between hate and love. On which side did her feelings lie? Rolling over onto her back, she stared at the ceiling in blind apathy. Right now she couldn't tell what she felt. Only one thing was clear in her mind. She would never see Nicholas again if she could possibly avoid it. He would never know about the baby. Luckily she had no ties to this city. Nothing to prevent her from pulling up her roots once more and leaving. Thank heavens she had been unable to find a shop that suited her. As it was, she could leave immediately. There was nothing to prevent

her from going home and packing all her belongings and putting the past behind her. And that's exactly what she would do.

The ride back to Little Rock was strained. Doug and Paula had returned to the motel shortly after Nicholas had departed. They said very little, only that they would pack their bags and take Kayla home. Paula had put her arms around Kayla and hugged her in mute commiseration. Words failed both of them. This had happened twice in a very short span of time, and Paula couldn't give Kayla the comfort that she needed. Kayla felt like an utter fool, and she knew Paula felt totally incapable of dealing with this unexpected turn of events.

Once a fool, always a fool kept running through Kayla's mind as she rode back to the city. It wasn't a very pleasant thought, but now the signs were unmistakably clear. All the times Franklin had acted preoccupied, as if something was on his mind, all the times he had told her they needed to talk, the way his lovemaking had become expert almost overnight, his strange moods ... it all fit together now. She must have been a blind fool to miss the cues, because he had certainly given her enough over the past weeks. Obviously the furthest thought from her mind had been that Franklin was not who he said he was. Love had made her sightless, deaf, and most assuredly stupid. The nagging nausea that had plagued her all afternoon threatened to overcome her as she laid her head against the back of the seat and closed her eyes. Her nerves were a mass of quivering jelly, and she longed to be home where she could let her emotions spill out in private.

When they reached her apartment, she said her good-byes hurriedly, promising to talk to Paula tomorrow. The moment she was inside her apartment, she bolted for the bathroom, thankful that she had escaped the embarrassment of having to ask Doug to stop the car.

Afterward she was too drained even to switch on the light as she walked into the bedroom and fell across the bed. Deciding to lie there until she could get her dazed feelings under control, she closed her eyes and let the tears fall.

When she awoke, it was morning. She was still lying in the same position she had been in when she fell asleep. As she slowly raised herself up another bout of nausea assailed her. Reeling under the intensity of it, she ran for the bathroom at full speed. Ten minutes later she flopped weakly down on the bed and placed a wet washcloth over her forehead. Of all the stupid times to come down with a case of the flu, this was undoubtedly the worst. So many things to do, and she didn't have the strength to raise her head off the pillow. With a tired sigh she closed her eyes again, fighting the new surge of sickness that washed over her. Today was definitely out. Packing and leaving would have to wait until tomorrow. At the moment she felt she would be lucky to see the dawning of a new day, period.

A week later Kayla still lay staring up at the same stain on the ceiling, wishing someone would have mercy and shoot her. Hour after hour of sickness had blurred into days. At first she was sure she had contracted some rare tropical disease that was undoubtedly fatal. Having no idea where she could have picked up such a debilitating illness, she quickly surmised that the germ must have been carried in on the last bunch of bananas she had bought at the store. After several days of not being able to keep even a simple glass of water down, she went to the doctor. It gave her little satisfaction to find out that her rare tropical disease was only a typical reaction to pregnancy. Clutching the morning sickness pills the doctor had prescribed, she had hurried back home to the sanctity of her bed and bathroom, grateful that her days were not numbered, as she had secretly feared. Although she had little desire to go on living at the moment, she had less desire for the alternative.

Paula had been a saint during the last week, stopping by every evening after work to check on Kayla and bring her something to tempt her appetite. Kayla who was still unable even to think about food, much less eat anything, had lost a great deal of weight.

"Hi. I brought you a chocolate shake," Paula called merrily as she breezed into Kayla's bedroom.

Kayla's stomach lurched at the thought of the milkshake, and the smell of Paula's perfume made her grit her teeth.

"Thanks, Paula, just put it in the freezer. Maybe I can drink some of it later on."

"Come on, Kayla. Can't you try to just get a little of it down? You didn't eat any dinner last night, or breakfast this morning."

"I know." Kayla sighed. "I'm sorry, Paula. I appreciate all you're doing for me, but I simply can't eat a thing."

"Does the doctor know how sick you are?" Paula asked worriedly, taking the washcloth off Kayla's forehead and going into the bathroom to run cold water over it.

"He says that some women have a harder time than others at first. The baby and I are healthy, and hopefully in a few more weeks the nausea will pass. If I live a few more weeks!" she added sickly.

"I worry about you," Paula confided, placing the washcloth back on her head. Sitting down on the edge of the bed, Paula peered at her friend's pale features. "Are you all right . . . otherwise?" Nicholas Trahern's name had been mentioned rarely since the day they had come home from Hot Springs. Kayla had been too sick to discuss her problems with Paula, desiring only to get through each day without adding the extra pain of thinking about Franklin. Nights had been the hardest to endure. There had been times when she had cried for hours, longing for his presence beside her, confused by her body's changes ... wishing with all her might that things could have been what they first seemed to be—that Franklin could be here with her, that he could help her through these long days and give her the love and support she so badly needed.

"I'm fine," she answered quietly.

Paula noticed her voice didn't sound fine. "He's asked about you... several times." Paula bit her lip, knowing that the subject was painful, yet feeling that Kayla needed the assurance that he hadn't forgotten her.

Kayla didn't answer, only turned her face toward the wall and closed her eyes.

"I think he cares, Kayla. His feelings and pride have been hurt too. Don't you think it would be only fair to let him know about the—"

"No! I do not want him to know about this baby, Paula." Kayla's voice was calm, yet firm.

"But you need his help, his support right now," Paula reasoned. "You *can't* go through this by yourself."

"Thousands of women do every day. I'm no different. I don't need Nicholas Trahern's support, nor do I want it."

"You're being pigheaded about this, Kayla. Who's going to take care of you while I'm gone?"

"Where are you going?" Kayla opened her eyes.

"I told you . . . Mother is being operated on Friday morning. I promised I'd be there with her. I'll be gone a week or more. Someone has to look after you. You can't take care of yourself right now."

"I'll make it all right. I've always been able to care for myself. You worry too much. Excuse me for a minute."

Kayla jumped up and ran to the bathroom. By the time she returned shakily to her bed, Paula had fixed her a glass of 7-Up and placed it on her bedside stand.

"This is awful." Kayla laughed weakly, her eyes filling with tears. "I feel so... so helpless!" She lay across the bed and cried like a baby. All her senses seemed to be out of whack, and it was the most frustrating experience she had ever had to deal with.

"Let me call Nick," Paula pleaded.

"No."

"Then let me take you to the hospital and have you admitted until I get back. I don't know why the doctor hasn't put you in before now."

"Oh, Paula! Stop!" Kayla covered her ears. "I'll be all right! I really appreciate all you've done for me, but please, please, stop worrying about me. I can't stand all of this fuss!"

"I don't care what you say, I'm going to call Nick—"

"No! You do and I'll never speak to you again. I mean it, Paula! Promise me you'll not even *think* about calling Nicholas."

Paula thought for a moment, then mentally crossed her fingers. "I promise."

"Good." Kayla closed her eyes once more, nausea building again in the pit of her stomach. "At least that's one worry off my mind!"

After Paula left, Kayla lay thinking about her promise. Surely she wouldn't lie to a sick person. That would be unthinkable. No, she had always been able to trust Paula, and she saw no reason to doubt her now. Kayla's secret was safe, and just as soon as she was able to stand on her feet five minutes without throwing up her socks, she would leave this town, as she'd originally intended, and put thousands of miles between her and the father of her baby. All she needed was a little more time.

Bolting off the bed, she ran for the bathroom once again. Just a few more days and she would be her old self again. If not, she was reasonably sure she would be dead. Either way, it would all work out!

The night before Paula left for her mother's, both she and Doug came by to check on Kayla. By now Kayla's hair was limp and scraggly, and her complexion an ash gray. She was in no mood for company, yet she did appreciate all that was being done for her.

"Now, I've left five cans of chicken noodle soup—" Paula began.

"Paula, please. Just leave me a note. I'll read it when my stomach feels up to it," Kayla moaned. The mention of chicken noodle soup had made her queasy. Her mind instantly conjured up all those greasy little noodles floating around in a yucky yellow broth . . .

"Excuse me, Doug," Kayla mumbled, grabbing for her robe and streaking past him.

It was another thirty minutes before Kayla could convince her friends to leave for Paula's mother's. By the time they let themselves out the door, Kayla was feeling drained and irritable, but pleased to be by herself once more. She dozed off and on for the remainder of the evening, waking occasionally to glance out the window by her bed. In the distance she could hear the rolling thunder, which reminded her of the early morning thunderstorm that had awakened her and Franklin the first night they had spent together. For a brief, painful moment she remembered the feel of his lips on hers.

Assuming that another storm was on its way, she rolled over onto her stomach and buried her head under the pillow. She didn't want any reminder of Franklin . . . however remote. During the past week she had intentionally blocked out all thoughts of him, and she felt much too vulnerable at the moment to let her mind dwell on the past. Drifting in and out of sleep, she heard the storm lashing at her windows and the loud peals of thunder, literally rattling the room.

Calm returned with the passing of the deluge, and only the methodical dripping of the rainspouts could be heard when Kayla awakened much later. The peal of the doorbell startled her. Glancing at the clock on her bedside table, she saw that it was nearly midnight. Surmising that Paula and Doug had decided to drive to her mother's in the morning instead of tonight, she lay there in bed waiting for the sound of the key in the lock. -Paula probably wanted to check on her one final time. She had been letting herself in lately to keep Kayla from having to get up. And sure enough, a moment later Kayla heard the sound of the door being opened and footsteps entering her apartment.

"Paula?" Kayla called out softly.

There was no answer, but Kayla could hear the footsteps drawing nearer to the bedroom door. Her heart raced as she realized that Paula would surely have answered her by now. Sitting up in bed, she peered through the darkness toward her bedroom doorway. "Paula," she tried again.

"No, it's not Paula." Nick's voice came to her quietly through the shadows.

That traitorous, conniving ratfink Paula had betrayed her!

"How did *you* get the key to my apartment? It was Paula, wasn't it?" Kayla said disgustedly. "You can just turn around and let yourself back out, or I'll call the police," she ordered impolitely.

"Just dry up. I'm here, and you're not going to call the police," Nick said irritably. "Where in hell is the light switch?"

"Find it yourself," Kayla said crossly, then flopped back down on the bed and covered her head with the pillow. Great balls of fire! How much had Paula told him? Surely she wouldn't have told him everything! Even if she hadn't, Kayla would never forgive her for giving Nick her apartment key and letting him come over here tonight. What a perfectly rotten trick to play on a friend. Kayla's hand crept up under the cover and tried to push her stringy hair into some semblance of order. She looked like death warmed over, and here Nick was standing in her bedroom, searching for a light switch!

"Don't turn on the light," she hissed from beneath the covers in a muffled voice. There was enough light streaming in from the lamp Paula had left on in the living room for him to see. What did he need—floodlights?

"Why not?" His familiar voice brought back a flood of unwanted memories.

"Just leave it off. What do you want?"

The sound of footsteps moving closer to her bed caused Kayla's breathing to quicken. Although he didn't make a move to touch her, she was acutely aware of his presence in the room.

"Take that sheet off your head. I want to talk to you."

"You can talk to me like this. What do you want?" She wasn't about to let him see her looking this bad.

He moved closer to the white lump on the bed. Kayla cringed as she heard his foot land in the large pan she kept by her bed in case she couldn't make it to the bathroom in time.

"What in hell—"

"That's my 'urp' pan! Get your foot out of it!"

He jumped back like he had been burned. "Your ... I hope it wasn't . . . full!"

She would have gladly given everything she owned to be able to tell him "Yes, it was ... filled to the brim!" But unfortunately it wasn't. She decided to do the second most cruel thing and simply not say anything. Just let him wonder if it had been used or not.

"Well, was it?"

"I can't remember."

"I'm turning on the light," he said authoritatively.

"You turn on that light and I'll scream the rafters down," she warned, pulling the sheet up higher over her head.

"Okay, okay," he relented. "Don't make a scene." He felt his way over to a chair and sat down, slipping his shoes off quietly. Before he put them back on again, he wanted to get a good look at them in the light.

They sat in the dark for a few minutes, neither of them speaking. As the silence deepened, Kayla became more irritable. What did he think he was doing? Coming over here in the middle of the night and sitting down next to her bed without saying a word! Any minute now she was going to have to make her hourly trip to the bathroom, and she would have to crawl over his lap to reach her goal. The thought was revolting.

"Have you had any dinner?" Nicholas broke the silence at last.

"Yes. I had chop suey and then went dancing with a friend," she lied.

"Be serious. Have you eaten anything or not?"

"No, I haven't eaten anything! And I don't *want* to eat anything. You just wait until I get my hands on Paula!" she fumed, trying to raise the sheet up at its corner for a breath of air.

Reaching over, Nick quickly ripped the sheet off her head and tucked it neatly around her chin. "*If* you don't mind! I felt like I was confronting a member of the Ku Klux Klan!" he explained dryly.

His hand lingered for just a moment as it came into contact with the softness of her cheek. "How are you, babe?" he whispered softly.

Maybe it was from being so sick for so long. Maybe it was the touch of his hand. Maybe it was the never-ending hours of loneliness. Kayla didn't know. All she knew was that suddenly, her defenses started to crumble as she tried to see in the dim light the face she once had loved so dearly.

"Oh, Franklin . . . I've been so sick," she cried, forgetting for the moment that Franklin no longer existed.

"I know, and I'm so sorry, sweetheart." He pulled her head against his broad chest, and the sobs tore out of her, long racking sobs that she had held in for weeks, sobs that shook her body violently and cleansed her soul. Holding her close, he murmured words of comfort into her ear, assuring her that he was here now, that she wasn't alone any longer. When there were no more tears left, he switched on the bedside lamp and went to the bathroom for a

cold washcloth. She lay limply on the bed, her face a molten red, hiccups jarring her body, and wished she didn't have to face him yet. Bringing the cloth back, he placed it on her face and sat down on the bed next to her. "Why didn't you tell me about the baby?"

"It's none of. . . *hic* . . . your ... *hic* .. . business!"

"None of my business! Dammit. That's *my* baby you're carrying, too, you know," he said sternly.

"I don't ...*hic*... look at it that.. *hic*... way!" she returned with as much dignity as the situation would allow.

"Well, I *do* look at it that way. We'll get married immediately." There was no particular emotion in his voice as he said the words, Kayla noted. Not "I love you, Kayla, baby or no baby" or "You're going to marry me because I can't live without you." No! Just the cold, indifferent "We'll get married immediately."

"I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on . . . *hic* . . . Earth," she told him bluntly. "I could wring Paula's neck for telling you!"

"You're not being sensible, Kayla. If you think I'm going to let my baby be brought into this world without the benefit of my name—"

"There is absolutely *nothing* you can do about it, Nicholas." She spit the words out at him nastily.

"What do you mean, there's nothing I can do about it? There's plenty I can do about it. You watch me!"

"I'll be happy to watch you. It so happens that I called a lawyer shortly after I found out about my pregnancy . . . just in case this situation should arise. You're an unwed father, Nick. In essence you have very few rights . . . practically none at all! Not unless you can prove me an unfit mother, and it will be a cold day in hell when that happens," she told him heatedly.

"You forget, Kayla. I have the power and the *money* to fight you every step of the way on this. I'll take you to court and make your life miserable if you try to play dirty with me." His face was contorted with anger now, his gray eyes snapping. "I want *my* baby!"

"Go ahead! Waste your money if you want to! It is not *your* baby. This baby's father was named Franklin Franklin. I had never met a Nicholas Trahern when this baby was conceived. What do you think a judge would say to that, Nick?"

Nick looked uneasy for a moment but quickly regained the upper hand. "All right, so I don't get anywhere in court. Either you marry me and let me give our baby a name, or I'll camp on your doorstep until the kid is eighteen years old! I won't allow you a moment's peace, Kayla. I can be pretty damn stubborn when something of mine is in jeopardy. Think about it, Kayla!"

"I don't need to think about it. Face it, Nick. For once in your life neither your money nor your power *nor* your lies will benefit you. No judge would give you custody of a child under these circumstances. And I certainly would never marry a man simply to give my child a name. My baby will carry *my* name."

Nick sprang up from the bed and stalked to the window. He stood looking out into the night, a tense muscle working along his jawline. "How in hell do you think you're going to support a baby by yourself? You don't even have a job right now!"

"I have some savings. Enough to last until the baby comes," she replied quietly.

"What about hospitalization?"

"I have ... a little for that. Look! I didn't say that I wouldn't let you help me through this." It went against Kay la's grain to acknowledge that she might need financial help during her pregnancy, but she wasn't stupid. She knew that even with her savings, money was going to be extremely tight, and she wouldn't be able to open her own business now.

"You're willing to take my money but not my name—is that what you're saying?" Nick asked snidely.

"No. I'm not willing to take either one now. Forget I mentioned it! I don't want or need your help, Nick. All I want is for you to forget that we ever met. I'm certainly going to."

"You are crazy as hell if you think for one minute I plan on stepping out of your life," Nick said grimly, turning back around to face her. "Whether you like it or not, that baby you're carrying is just as much mine as it is yours. It's my flesh and blood, and if you think I'm going to walk off and leave it, then you're just plain off your rocker. You can refuse to marry me, you can scream your head off that you hate my guts, but that isn't going to change one thing. That baby's half mine, and it's going to know it has a father who loves it, and *wants* it. Do I make myself clear, Kayla?"

Kayla glared at him angrily. "Perfectly! But you can't torment me and my baby if you can't find us! I'll run away, Nicholas. I'll run so far you'll never find me!" she threatened.

"Go ahead and run. I'll find you. I'll hire a man to watch you twenty-four hours a day. Starting *before* I leave this house tonight. You're going to get tired of running, Kayla. Especially with a small baby who needs a home and love and care. Are you willing to treat our baby like that?"

"I hate you, Nicholas," she cried, her nausea rising up in her throat again. His coming here had upset her all over again.

"I'm sorry about that. But you're forcing me into a situation that is not going to be pleasant for either one of us. I'd suggest you reconsider my offer of marriage."

"Never! I'd rather die first."

"Then you better reconcile yourself to the fact that until that baby's born, I'm going to be around to see that you *live* to give birth to it. When it's born, I'll *talk* to *you* in court. Now, are you going to throw up again?"

"Yes. Get out of my way!" She got out of bed and shoved past him.

"I thought so. Your face looks green."

"I don't want to hear your nasty observations," she said sourly as she slammed the bathroom door in his face.

"Good. I wasn't wanting to tell you your hair looks like a chicken's roost."

Kayla slammed the stool lid up and pretended it was Nicholas Trahern she was bending over.

On her way back to bed, she stopped dead in her tracks. Nick was calmly making up the sofa in the front room.

"Just what do you think you're doing?" she asked incredulously.

"Going to bed. Why?"

"Not in *this* house, you're not."

"Oh, yes, I am. It's an hour's drive to the ranch. If I have to fix your breakfast in the morning, I'm not going to drive home, then back."

"Who said you were fixing my breakfast in the morning?" she sputtered.

"Look at you. You must have lost ten pounds in the last week. That can't be good for my baby!" Nick snapped. "I'm going to see that you get some decent meals down you, starting with breakfast in the morning."

"Food won't stay down, Nick!" Kayla said between clenched teeth. "Do you think I'm an idiot? I *try* to eat for the baby's sake."

"Together we'll work on getting something down you that your stomach won't reject. Now, why don't you go to bed and get some sleep. You look like hell."

Kayla could have stomped her foot in anger, screamed, and pulled out all her hair, but she realized how determined Nick was to assert his authority tonight. With a cry of disgust she slammed the bedroom door and climbed back into her bed. When she got back on her feet, she was physically going to throw that ill-tempered, conceited jackanapes right out on his ear! He could bank on that!

CHAPTER SEVEN

April drifted lazily into May, then May into June. Kayla's days were nearly all identical, varying only in the degree to which she was sick each particular day.

Nicholas came by the apartment every morning and evening and patiently tried to coax meals down Kayla's throat. There were many days when barely a civil word was exchanged between them as Nicholas calmly spooned soup or pudding into her mouth, her blue eyes glaring defiantly into his slate-gray ones. The only reason she allowed this outrage at all was that she was still too sick to do anything about it; she was living for the day when she had the strength to boot him out.

As Nicholas straightened up the apartment each day he would talk quietly about his ranch, about some remodeling that he was having done. He took to bringing decorating books by for Kayla to look through in the daytime and asked her to jot down pages that she liked or disliked. For the first six weeks she had hatefully jotted down every page she looked at in the "dislike" column. She wasn't about to help him redecorate his house! Nick would patiently look the list over, then hand her a new batch of magazines with the instructions to "browse through these today."

Kayla did notice one thing. He was always there when she needed him. It was uncanny how she would run to the bathroom and he would be beside her, holding out a wet washcloth when she was finished being sick. He knew when every doctor's appointment was and never failed to show up an hour before she was due so that he could drive her there. Occasionally he would leave her sitting in the waiting room while he went in and visited with the doctor himself. He did all the shopping and all her laundry and fixed all her meals. Kayla wondered when he had time for a life of his own, but he still went to work every day and only occasionally left early after dinner. Kayla assumed he probably had dates on those evenings, but since they rarely said anything personal to each other, the subject was never broached.

She tried to tell herself she didn't care what he did with his time as long as he didn't bother her. And that he didn't do. Never once since he had started taking care of her had he touched her in any way or made any move that

wasn't entirely above reproach. Nor did he tell her he loved her, and he certainly never mentioned marriage again. He was a nice, polite... servant. The baby was always politely referred to as "our baby," and he never failed to bring home some ridiculous toy that the child couldn't use until it was in grade school! A considerable assortment of dump trucks, toy trains, footballs, and tricycles occupied a huge corner of Kayla's apartment now, and each time she glanced over at what she now referred to as "Santa's workshop," she seethed anew. He would never even *see* the baby, let alone watch it grow to an age at which it could use those toys, if she had her way. Daily she nursed her original idea of running away. One day she even went so far as to pack a bag and lug it out to her car. The heat had been atrocious, and the longer she sat there in the driver's seat, the sicker she became, until finally she gave up and went back in the house. When Nicholas came by that evening, he eyed the suitcase suspiciously but said nothing to her. Instead he unpacked it and put it back in the closet. His courteous conduct was driving her batty.

At least he wasn't staying overnight like he had the first night. He did allow her a few hours of privacy before he came back in the morning to fix her breakfast. At first she totally ignored his comings and goings. That part was easy. The Loch Ness monster could have swum through her living room and she seriously doubted whether she would have noticed, as sick as she was.

But as the weeks passed she caught herself watching him as he did the dishes or ran the sweeper. Every once in a while she would catch a whiff of his aftershave, the one he had always worn as Franklin, and her insides would tighten at the memory of the nights they had spent in each other's arms. Nights when he would whisper all sorts of indecent suggestions to her and she would willingly and lovingly comply.

Nicholas dressed immaculately, and now that he had abandoned his horn-rimmed glasses, he was breathtakingly handsome. At times she had to will her eyes to look away from him, traitorously intent as they were on staring at him.

One night after dinner he had slumped into the chair next to her bed and drew a magazine on horse racing out of his briefcase. It seemed he wasn't in any particular hurry tonight.

"I'll bet you don't have the slightest idea what a horse eats while it's in training, do you?" he asked, opening the conversation congenially.

"No." Kayla's curt answer left no doubt that she didn't care what a horse ate while it was in training. "Why don't you go home?" she said crossly.

"I don't want to. Now, take a guess. What would you think a horse would eat?"

"Bacon and tomato sandwiches." Kayla leafed through her romance novel and found the page she had stopped on the night before.

"Wrong. Bran, oats, and hay."

"Whoopee."

"Okay. Take a guess what a filly would weigh. Wait a minute—that isn't a fair question. You probably don't know what a filly is," Nick said apologetically.

"Oh, yes I do." Kayla didn't want to play his little game, but she spoke before she thought.

Nick glanced up in surprise. "What is it?"

"A female horse under five years old."

Again he looked surprised. "That's right. How did you know that?"

Kayla shrugged and went back to her novel. "Doug told me the day we went to the races." A swift shaft of pain sliced through her when she thought back to that horrible day.

"Oh." He looked thoughtful. "Do you know how much one would weigh?"

"Nope. I didn't have my scales with me that day."

He shot her a dirty look. "A little over a half a ton. All right, here's another. Do you have any idea on what date of the year a horse has its birthday?"

"Beats me." She turned over toward the wall and began reading.

"First of January. I can tell this quiz is really turning you on, isn't it?" he said dryly.

"You noticed."

"Hey, how about this one? How much does a jockey usually weigh?"

"A little over a half a ton. No, wait, that was the horse, wasn't it?"

Nick snapped the magazine closed and stood up to leave. "I get the distinct feeling you're not interested in racehorses."

"That's right. I don't *ever* plan on being around any."

"Our baby will be raised around a stable full of them. Don't you think you should take an interest at least for its sake?"

Kayla ignored his question, keeping her face turned to the wall. With a sigh he leaned over and asked, "Do you need anything before I leave?"

"No. Nothing. Thank you."

"Well, then, I guess I'll see you in the morning."

Kayla heard his footsteps walking toward the door. Taking a deep breath, she closed her eyes and called out softly, "Nicholas?"

He paused, then looked back. "Yes?"

"How . . . how much does a jockey usually weigh?"

A flicker of tenderness crossed Nick's face, but Kayla couldn't see it. Her face was still turned steadfastly toward the wall.

"Somewhere between a hundred and ten and a hundred and sixteen pounds."

"Oh . . . that's interesting," she returned nicely.

"Are you sure there isn't anything I can do before I leave?" he asked again.

"No, nothing."

"Good night, then."

"Good night." For the first time Kayla really didn't want him to leave, and for the life of her she didn't know why.

As the bedroom door closed she laid her book aside and salty tears ran down her cheeks. She rolled over onto her back and covered her eyes with her arm. She had been depressed all day. That was the only reason she hadn't wanted him to leave tonight, she told herself.

Suddenly she sat up, her hand going to her stomach. She had felt a tiny flutter! Her baby had moved for the first time! The tears mixed with her laughter as it fluttered again, letting her know that within her body she carried another life. It gave her a feeling of awe and reverence to know that someday that tiny life would call her mother. Nick! He would want to feel the baby move too! She sprang to her feet and ran to the door. Peering out, she could see the red taillights of his car going down the street. Her face crumpled as she let the curtain drop back into place. It didn't matter, she told herself as she returned to her "prison." It had been a foolish idea to begin with. He was the man who was going to try to *take* her baby from her when it was born! Why should she care if he felt his baby move for the first time.

With a relieved sigh at having missed him she lay back down on the bed and switched off the light. Tomorrow was another day. Another painful, endless day.

"You're eating better this morning," Nick observed as he got up to pour them another cup of coffee.

Kayla finished the last of her bacon and eggs and sat back in her chair. "You know, I think I do feel a little better this morning." It was the first of August and for the past few days Kayla had noticed that the bouts of nausea were coming much less frequently now.

"Let's see. You're how far along now?" Nick asked, buttering another slice of toast and handing it to her.

"It's more than four months now. I don't think I can eat another piece of toast, Nick," she protested.

"Sure you can ... put some strawberry jam on it. The baby loves strawberry jam." He smiled coaxingly.

"The baby and I won't be able to get through the kitchen door if I keep feeding it all this strawberry jam." She grinned back, smearing her toast liberally with the red preserves.

"Say, I've noticed you're beginning to pooch out in front a little," Nick observed teasingly.

"Yes, look at this." Kayla pushed back from the table and stuck her slightly rounded stomach out. "I'm going to go shopping for maternity clothes soon. I can't get into anything I own."

"Good. Let me know when you need some money," Nick told her, adding cream to his coffee.

"I don't need any of your money." Kayla's smile disappeared. "I'll buy my own clothes."

"No, you won't," he replied calmly. "Have you felt the baby move yet? It should be getting close to the time when you can feel it. The baby books say sometime in the fifth month."

"Yes, I've felt it." Kayla picked up her toast and started eating again, dismissing the subject of clothes for the moment.

"You did? When?"

"A couple of weeks ago," she said with a shrug.

"Two weeks ago! And you haven't said anything about it?" he asked incredulously.

"That's right. I still don't consider it any of your business." She put the toast back down on her plate, her appetite suddenly gone.

"Well, I'll be damned. I thought you'd at least tell me when you felt it move for the first time." He sounded rather put out with her.

"I didn't think about it," she fibbed.

Nick sat coldly assessing her, his eyes running lazily over her breasts, which had suddenly become fuller, along with her pudgy stomach.

"Will you at least tell me the next time it happens?"

Kayla shrugged again. "It happened just a few minutes ago."

"Honestly?" He slipped out of his chair and reached to lay a hand on her belly. "Do you mind?" He glanced at her question-ingly.

She couldn't bring herself to meet his expectant gaze. "I don't suppose so. Though it might not do it again for a while."

They sat for a moment watching his hand, neither one saying a word. In a few minutes a broad grin broke across Nick's face. "There! It moved, didn't it?" he said excitedly.

Kayla's grin nearly matched his. "Yes! Could you really feel it?"

"Sure, I felt it. That kid's going to be tough! Hey, there it went again!"

Baby Trahern was indeed putting on quite a show for its mom and dad.

"Does it hurt?" Nick asked, suddenly concerned about Kayla's discomfort.

"No, I can barely feel it," she assured him, "although I'm sure that in another few months he'll get a lot rowdier."

"He? Do you think it's a boy?"

"Oh, I don't have the slightest idea. A little girl would be nice too. Don't you think?"

"Oh, damn, I don't care if it's a boy or a girl," Nick said. "All I want is for you to come through this with flying colors and for the baby to be good and healthy."

Abruptly, as their gazes met and held, the mood changed. For one brief unguarded moment love flickered brightly in Kayla's eyes.

"Please don't take this baby from me, Nicholas . . . it's all I have," she begged, forgetting her pride. "You'll have other children. Let me have this one."

"Don't ask me to do that, Kayla." His eyes grew deeply distressed. "I don't want to hurt you any more than I already have, but you *can't* ask me to give up this baby. I love it every bit as much as you do. I would despise myself if I knew that somewhere in the world I had a son or daughter who thought its father had deserted it. All I'm asking is for you to share this baby with me," he pleaded. "Let me take care of my baby, Kayla."

"No, it isn't fair! You have the money to buy anything in the world it takes to make you happy. Why can't you be content with that and leave me alone!" she blazed.

"I can't buy happiness," he protested. "As I said, I don't want to hurt you, but you're not going to take this baby away from me. Not without one hell of a fight."

Kayla shoved away from the table angrily. "You are one insensitive clod, Nicholas Trahern!" She glanced around the table wildly, looking for something to throw at him.

Both their eyes lit on the piece of discarded toast covered with strawberry jam.

"Oh, no, you don't! You throw that at me—" He ducked as the toast and jam sailed by his head, splatting up against the wall nastily.

"Ha! You missed!" he yelled smugly.

"Oh, yeah! Well, I won't this time!" She snatched up the jar of jam and pitched it all over the front of his white dress shirt. Angrily she whirled and started to leave the kitchen.

"Hey! Did anyone ever tell you motherhood has given you one mean, nasty disposition!" he yelled after her.

"Blow it out your ear . . . Superfly!" she shouted back.

"Blow it out yours . . . Mommy." The anger drained out of him as he ran one long finger along the front of his shirt and scooped up the dripping strawberry jam. "Say, this isn't bad," he observed after licking his finger. "I can see why the baby likes it." He grinned and winked mischievously at Kayla.

She gave him a withering glare and stalked out of the kitchen in a huff.

"Oh, well," he said with a sigh and peeled off his stained shirt. "The baby book said there would be days like this!"

"What do you want for breakfast this morning?" Nick was standing at the stove with a spatula in his hand when she entered the kitchen the next morning. She hadn't spoken to him since breakfast the previous day, totally ignoring him when he brought her dinner by last night.

"Bacon and eggs." She sat down at the table and picked up her fork, waiting expectantly for her food.

"You *can't* have bacon and eggs."

"Why not!"

"We are completely out of jam," he pointed out resentfully, "and I know you don't want bacon and eggs without toast and jam to go with it."

Kayla looked sheepish. "Pancakes?"

"How about French toast?"

"Umm ... I suppose so." He was spoiling her rotten.

Nick walked over to pour her a glass of orange juice and a glass of milk.

"You know," she said, "this is silly. I'm beginning to feel good enough to make my own breakfast. You don't need to keep coming over here every morning."

"You wouldn't eat a bite if I didn't fix it," he told her firmly. "I intend to see that you take care of yourself until the baby's born."

A surge of anger went through Kayla. Until the baby's born! Always the baby! "I don't want you around until this baby's born!" she complained. "You're *not* taking my baby, Nick. Somehow I'll find a way to prevent you from ever doing that! And I want a cup of coffee instead of this horrible milk!" She shoved her glass irritably toward him.

"You can't have coffee this morning. Not until you drink your milk," he replied patiently, wiping up the drops of milk that had sloshed out of the glass. "We go through this every morning, Kayla. You need to drink milk for the baby's sake."

Kayla gritted her teeth and slammed her fork down on the table. She knew perfectly well she was acting like a spoiled brat, but she didn't care. His slightest word could set her off.

"How many pieces of toast do you want?" Nick asked calmly, walking back over to the stove.

Kayla refused to answer.

"Two? Good. You must be feeling fine this morning." He dumped a wad of butter in the skillet and turned on the burner. "Did you sleep well last night?"

Kayla sighed, then reached for her glass of juice. "Not very. It seemed awfully hot in my room."

"I don't think your air-conditioner is working properly. I'll call your landlady today," he replied absently.

The word landlady instantly rang a bell in Kayla's head. "My landlady! Good heavens, I just thought of something. I've been so sick I haven't paid any bills for months. It's a wonder I haven't been pitched out in the street for not paying my rent." She was shocked that she could have let something that important slip by her, but she had barely been aware of the days, let alone her financial responsibilities.

"I took care of the bills," Nick answered lightly.

"You what?" Kayla set her glass down and stared at him.

"I said, I took care of your bills while you were sick. Here, you can start on this while I fix the other one." He handed her a plate with a slice of French toast on it, then turned back to the stove.

"What gave you the right to interfere in my personal business?" she snapped.

"Now, look. We are not going to get into a big hassle over the fact that I kept things running smoothly while you were fiat on your back, carrying *my* baby. If it's going to upset you, you can pay me back."

"I most assuredly will!" Kayla picked up the jar of syrup and angrily drenched her French toast. "You write down *every* cent you've spent, plus all the groceries you've been buying lately," she ordered.

"All right, I will. I'll have Paula send you an itemized statement," he agreed blandly. "Now eat your breakfast."

"Don't have Paula send me anything!" Kayla mumbled between bites of toast. "She's nothing but a ratfink. *You* send it to me.

"I thought I was a ratfink too," he mocked, dishing up his slice of toast.

"You both are."

"There's a sale in the babies' department at Sears today. Are you going to go?" he asked, reaching for the syrup.

"I might," she replied crossly. "I need to start buying some things for the baby."

"No, you don't. I've bought enough to supply six babies. Did you see that frilly little thing I brought home yesterday?"

"Yes. And I just hope you can find some needy little baby to give all those beautiful things to, because you're *not* giving them to mine!" ,

"Ours. And, yes, I am." He stuck a piece of his toast in her mouth.

"Stop it!" She brushed his hand away.

"Okay. Let's change the subject. Since you're feeling better, how about going out to the ranch with me tonight after work.

The carpenters have reached a point where I have to okay some changes."

"I'm not going anywhere with you," she said stubbornly.

"What would it hurt to take a drive in the cool of the evening. You haven't been out of this house for weeks," Nick reasoned. "If it's a matter of being with me, I can't see what difference it would make. Whether it's here or riding in the car I'm going to be with you."

Kayla mulled over the tempting proposal. It *would* be nice to get out of the house. It had been so long since she had done anything but lie in bed.

"How long would we be gone?"

"Just a few hours. I promise I won't wear you out."

With a sigh of resignation Kayla gave in. "All right."

"Good." He smiled happily. "We'll have dinner somewhere on the road."

"Great. And now that you're not trying to hide from the world, I hope it will be in a restaurant where there's enough light to read the menu."

Nick looked properly put in his place. "I would have taken you to the darkest places I knew whether I was Franklin *or* Nick. I remember some pretty pleasant times in those dimly lit booths." He grinned one of those smug, infuriating grins he could manage so well.

Kayla blushed, her stomach fluttering at the innuendo in his voice. This was the first time he had said anything really intimate to her since this mess all began.

"Another thing I'd like for you to do is meet my parents one of these days," he said decisively.

Once again Kayla's face flamed a bright red. "Nick! I wouldn't think of it!"

"Why not?" He glanced at her in surprise.

"Meet your parents! With me as big as a barn with your child .. Well, I simply wouldn't do that! Besides, what would be the sense of it?"

"You're carrying their grandchild, Kayla. Don't you think they would want to meet you?"

"You told them about . . . about the baby?" she gasped.

"No, not yet. Mom and Dad are out of the country right now, but as soon as they return, of course I'm going to tell them," he returned calmly.

"No, I *don't* want to meet them. I would be embarrassed to death. And so should you be," she scolded. "Or am I not the first woman you've brought home to meet them carrying your child."

"That's ridiculous and you know it. Have you told your aunt?"

Kayla had once remarked that she had been raised by her aunt after the untimely death of both her parents when she was eight years old.

"No, and I don't know if I will," she returned uneasily. "We're really not very close. I haven't seen her in years. I should have been more careful," Kayla murmured, glancing down at her lap shamefacedly. "Or if *I* didn't have the sense to be, *you* should have taken care of it." Kayla knew why she had left herself wide open for this pregnancy. At the time she had had every intention of marrying *Franklin*, had he asked. But for *Nick* to have been so careless puzzled her. Surely with his vast experience with women he hadn't always been so neglectful!

Nick had picked up the morning paper and was looking at the ad for the sale at Sears, having lost interest with their conversation.

"Well, why didn't you?" she demanded, knocking his paper out of his hand in exasperation.

"Will you cut that out?" He mopped up his spilt coffee with a napkin. "Why didn't I what?"

"Why didn't you take precautions about getting me pregnant?"

Nick lifted his shoulders in an indifferent shrug. "I thought you were."

"You thought! You thought! Why didn't you ask?" she insisted.

"Because it didn't really make a whole hell of a lot of difference to me, Kayla. At the time ... at the time you felt a lot differently about me than you do now, and I assumed that if anything happened, we'd get married. I had no objections to your having my children. I had every intention of taking care of you if anything happened."

"Are you like that with *all* women?" she asked incredulously.

"No. Only you," he admitted sullenly.

Kayla's breath caught at his words. They were very direct, sincere, and honest. Why did he have to be so nice after he had been so deceitful? For that matter, why couldn't he have played it straight with her from the first so this horrible situation would never have arisen.

"Why did you have to lie to me, Nick?" she asked in a hurt voice.

"I told you. It was a spur-of-the-moment, asinine joke. One I'll regret the rest of my life. But I can't change it, Kayla," he said impatiently.

He rose from the table and looked down at her. "Until the day comes when you can forgive me, there's no way I can make it up to you."

Kayla shook her head negatively. "I'm sorry. I want to forgive you, but I can't. No . . . that isn't true. Maybe I have forgiven you." She realized that might be true. At some point during the last few weeks his kindness and tender care had forced her heart to forgive him. "But I can't *forget* what you've done."

His eyes were sad as he reached for his suit jacket and slipped it on. "I know, and I'm very sorry you feel that way. But the fact remains, we have a baby that's a part of both of us, and I intend to claim my part." Kayla held her

breath, hoping he would tell her once again that he loved her and wanted to marry her, but he remained silent. Apparently what little affection he had felt for her had died in the last few weeks. Well, it didn't matter, she told herself defiantly. She wouldn't marry him if he got down on his hands and knees and crawled!

"I'll see you tonight," he said with a tired sigh. "Call me if you need anything today."

"I'm sure I won't." She avoided his gaze, trying not to notice how virile and handsome he looked this morning.

Kayla had to work very hard at keeping the tears at bay as he left the room. For one wild moment she had considered flinging herself into his strong arms and letting him hold her, give her the strength she needed to face the day. But of course she hadn't. He would have thought she was a fool, and she would have been. Her feelings had been turbulent throughout this entire pregnancy, and today was no different. At times she felt as if she loved Nick as deeply as she had loved Franklin. In truth they were the same man in so many ways. Except that Franklin had been shy and insecure, whereas Nick was bold and always in control. Nick was capable of the same tenderness that Franklin had shown her. He brought small gifts to her even though she steadfastly refused them. There was a pile of candy bars and little trinkets a mile high next to her bed. He had spent hours reading to her at night, and watching TV with her when she had been so ill, and he had brought home her favorite flavor of ice cream at least twice a week. All these things he did without expressing any particular feeling for her in words; only for the baby.

But the main ingredient of a happy relationship was sadly missing. Trust. Kayla didn't trust Nick. She was always looking for an ulterior motive and usually had no trouble coming up with one. He was doing all these things for her because of the baby he wanted so badly. If it weren't for the pregnancy, she would never have seen Nicholas Trahern after the day when they had broken up in Hot Springs. She was convinced of that. Although he had offered to marry her, Kayla was sure that he was merely being gallant. He wouldn't leave any woman out in the cold. If he got her pregnant, he would face up to that responsibility. It was as simple as that.

Lately she had begun to wonder if she had been too hasty in refusing his offer of marriage. Although it burned her to think of taking anything from him, she knew that it was going to be terribly hard to raise a baby alone. Especially if he carried out his threat to make her life miserable if she didn't let him have custody of the child. Would that be the best thing for her child? Her hand went lovingly to her rounded belly. Already she loved this child with all her might. She couldn't give it up! He had no right to try and take something that was so precious away from her. He simply had no right! Somewhere she would find a lawyer who would prolong the fight for years, if it came to that. She still didn't believe that Nick could actually take the baby, but as he threatened repeatedly, he did have the power and the money.

Tiredly she left the kitchen and went to take a shower. She *would* go to that sale at Sears today. Maybe if she had her own layette for the baby, it would help her to pull out of her depression. At least it was worth a try.

The department store was hot and crowded, making Kayla wish she had stayed at home. It occurred to her that she didn't feel as well as she had earlier thought, but since she was already here, she might as well take advantage of the sale. With a feeling of apathy she sorted through the tiny baby clothes, trying to picture her baby in her mind. Would it have Nick's proud nose, or his smoke-colored eyes? Quickly she caught herself and deliberately made her mind go blank. She would not spend the whole afternoon mooning over him!

Absently she studied the different brands of prefolded diapers arrayed before her, glancing up in embarrassment as she stepped on the foot of a man standing next to the baby rattles.

"Pardon me." Kayla's eyes suddenly narrowed suspiciously. "What are *you* doing here?" she hissed between clenched teeth.

Nick's silvery eyes focused on her small form, lingering for a moment on her rounded stomach. "Buying *my* baby a bed," he said matter-of-factly.

"A bed! Well, you can just take it back. I'm buying one!" she said sharply. "Besides, it won't be with you at all, let alone lie in a bed!"

"I'm not getting into this with you again," he retorted stubbornly, reaching for a large crib mobile lying on the display rack. "You'd better save your money for the custody suit. You're going to need it."

Kayla's temper simmered as she watched him pick up one of the boxes of diapers that *she* had planned on buying and stuff it under his arm authoritatively. She noted with extreme irritation that he had reverted to his "Franklin" disguise for the afternoon. He had on the large horn-rimmed glasses he had worn during his masquerade, and he peered interestedly at the price of a teething ring. Obviously he was in hot pursuit of another unsuspecting woman, using that shy, inexperienced act he was so good at.

Jealousy ripped through Kayla painfully at the thought of Nick and another woman. Undoubtedly he had been seeing other women all along. A man with his strong appetite would certainly never remain celibate for all these months, and he sure hadn't been sleeping in her bed! The thought was torturous. Nick kissing another woman ... his hands roaming intimately over her body as they had done so often and so deliciously over hers.

Her anger was close to the boiling point. Tapping her foot agitatedly, Kayla warned him tensely, "Put it down, Nicholas! I've already bought one of those too. You're going to be stuck with a thousand dollars' worth of baby items that you'll have no need for."

His answer was to pick up a set of nursing bottles and add them to his growing pile on the counter. "Let me worry about that," he said with saccharine sweetness, turning back around to stare at her pointedly. "Why don't you run on home. You look washed out."

That was the wrong thing to say at this particular moment. Kayla's temper blew. "Nicholas Trahern, you're treading on thin ice with me," she said hotly. "And take those *ridiculous* glasses off. Who are you trying to impress with your meek act today?" She reached up and viciously snatched his glasses off his nose and threw them onto the floor.

Nich stared down at his glasses, his mouth open in consternation. "Now, Kayla, dammit... that was my best pair of glasses!" he complained in a hurt tone. Damn, but she'd been touchy since she got pregnant; and he was getting pretty tired of these rampages she had been going on lately.

"I suppose you're going to tell me you really *do* have to wear glasses!" she said in near hysteria, as though daring him to make something out of her temper tantrum.

"Yes, I do," he said defensively. "I wasn't lying about that. When my eyes are strained, the doctor said I have to wear them."

Kayla glared at him witheringly, all his previous fibs running through her mind. She knew she was being totally irrational, but he was simply pushing her too far!

With one deliberate stomp she shattered first one lens of the glasses, then the other. Looking back up at him belligerently, she said in a menacing tone, "Tell me another one, Nicholas!"

"Well . . . I'll be damned! That takes the cake!" he railed.

Feeling considerably better after her act of violence, Kayla whirled and fled the department store, leaving Nicholas and the saleslady standing staring in mortification at the pile of twisted frames and shattered rubble lying on the floor.

Nick looked at the saleslady sheepishly, then shrugged his broad shoulders philosophically. "Hormones," he offered lamely.

By the time Kayla arrived back at her apartment, she was furious. To think that she had been having second thoughts about Nicholas this morning! She must have been crazy to think that they could ever live with each other. Her anger only in-creased as she saw the dozen or so boxes lying on the sofa with the name of a local maternity shop printed on the sides.

Angrily she ripped the boxes open, irritably surveying the lovely maternity fashions lying in the boxes. Superfly had struck again! Well, she would

return every last one of them. He would *not* patronize her in this flagrant manner.

Shoving her shoes back onto her swollen feet, she gathered up every box and carried them out to her car. For the rest of the afternoon she returned the despised items and got his money back. He had paid a king's ransom for the wardrobe. Then she went to her bank and withdrew from her savings enough money to pay Nick back for the last few months' rent, groceries, and other miscellaneous bills that he had paid for her, and some extra to buy three or four modestly priced dresses and pairs of slacks to see her through the remainder of her pregnancy. When she had finished her shopping, she climbed wearily back into her car and drove home, feeling very proud of her independence and accomplishment. It had nearly killed her, but she had managed to stand on her own two feet once more!

CHAPTER EIGHT

"I'm warning you, I'm tired and I'm cranky, and I don't want to be gone all evening." Kayla followed Nick out the front door, wishing she had never promised to go with him to the ranch. The long day of shopping had worn her out completely, and her back ached, her feet were swollen, and the nausea had returned to a slight degree.

"I know, I know. You've warned me six times already and we haven't even gotten in the car yet," Nick said. "And don't talk to me about being cranky. You didn't have to spend the last three hours at the optician's."

Kayla noticed he was wearing a new set of glasses. The sight of the old Franklin was achingly familiar, and it caused her to close her eyes briefly in the pain of remembrance.

They approached a Renegade sitting at the curb, and Nick opened the door for her. "Hop in."

Eyeing the vehicle disdainly, she taunted, "How many cars do you have, anyway?"

"Only two. I just bought this Renegade to keep at the ranch. Why?" Nick slid behind the wheel and started the engine.

Kayla tried to ignore the fact that he had a pair of cutoff jeans on and his bare legs were sending her into fits. "It must be nice to be filthy rich," she observed resentfully.

"It certainly is," he agreed. "You could be, too, you know. I've offered to make things easier for you." He pulled the Renegade out onto the street. "Take that dress you're wearing, for instance."

Kayla glanced down at her new maternity outfit. "What's wrong with it?"

"Well, I keep waiting for elephants and clowns to come walking out from beneath it," he said bluntly. "Now, why in hell would you return all those lovely clothes I bought you and go buy something like that?"

"Because I distinctly told you *not* to buy me any clothes. You know that. And there's nothing wrong with this dress!" Actually Kayla had considered the red and white stripes a little colorful herself, but it had been a good buy on the sales rack.

"Suit yourself, but you'd better run as fast as your little legs will carry you if you see a circus truck coming down the street," he warned.

They stopped for Chinese food on the outskirts of town. During the meal they managed to refrain from snapping at each other. Nick talked about some of the problems he was having with a couple of his Thoroughbreds. Kayla found herself listening more attentively when he discussed the horses. To her surprise she had begun to grow interested in horse racing and had made a promise to herself that one day she would go back to the races and actually see the horses run.

After dinner they left the restaurant in a more mellow mood. The August evening had begun to cool as they drove toward the ranch. All around them the sounds of summer could be heard as the jarflies and katydids tuned up.

Kayla was reminded of the first picnic she and Franklin had gone on as Nick turned the Renegade into the large gateway and drove across the cattle guard. Tonight Kayla couldn't see any horses standing around in the fields, as she had the previous time.

"Oh, I was hoping some of the horses would be out," she said, disappointment in her voice.

"They're down at the stables. I'll take you there later tonight if you'd like." Nick reached over and pinched her nose playfully.

"I'd love it. I'm surprised they're here at all. Aren't you racing them?"

"Not this week. I'm going to go to Ak-Sar-Ben next weekend and watch a couple of them run."

"Where?" Kayla grimaced at the strange name.

"Ak-Sar-Ben. Think about it. What does Ak-Sar-Ben spell backward?"

Kayla thought for a moment, then smiled. "Nebraska?"

"Right. Omaha. Do you think you'd feel well enough to go with me?"

Kayla's smile vanished. "No."

"Not so fast." He tweaked her nose again. "Are you sure you don't want to think about it? I'll only be gone a couple of days. They have a beautiful racetrack up there and rumor has it that the last horse races you attended turned out to be a less than enjoyable." Nick's voice turned husky. "I'd like to make that up to you, Kayla ... if you'd let me. I'd like to show you a part of my life that's very important to me."

Suddenly the months peeled away and they were back to the old Franklin and Kayla. The atmosphere was almost congenial as they drove along the winding lane leading to Nick's ranch. Kayla considered his proposal silently, wondering where the intense irritation she had felt only a little while ago had gone. How could she forget that the man who sat beside her was going to try to take a large part of her life with him when they separated in a few months. For they would eventually have to separate. After the baby was born, Kayla knew she couldn't live in the same town as Nick. But for now, would it hurt to let down her defenses for just a moment and accept his offer to accompany him to Nebraska? She would love to see his horses race, and it did seem senseless to keep refusing to go anywhere with him when he was with her the greater part of every day anyway. And, she theorized, that too would probably stop before very much longer, since she was beginning to feel so much better now.

"Are you thinking it over?" he asked softly.

"I'm . . . thinking," she answered.

"I promise you'll have a good time."

"Where will we stay?" That thought had occurred to her belatedly.

"In a motel." He glanced at her angelically. "We'll rent two rooms. Strictly on the up and up," he added.

"And if I don't go, what then? Would I actually get to spend two whole days of glorious freedom from all that obnoxious milk you make me drink?" Her smile was mischievous.

"No. I'll just ask that ratfink, Paula, to come over and sit with you while I'm gone."

"You certainly will not. I'm still not speaking to her."

"You're going to have to get over that too. Paula was only looking out for your best interests. I would eventually have found out about the baby whether she told me or not," he replied seriously.

"I don't see how," she argued. "If I hadn't gotten so sick, I would have left town the day after I returned from Hot Springs."

By now they had reached the sprawling ranch house, and Nick pulled up in front of it and shut off the engine. "I wouldn't have let you just walk out of my life like that, Kayla," he said quietly.

Her breath caught at his look of ... of what? Tenderness? Love? She wasn't sure. The moment passed, and Nick forced his gaze away from her and opened the Renegade's door. "Come on, let's take a look at what the carpenters have done."

"Why are you redecorating?" Kayla asked as he came around and helped her out of the passenger side.

"I bought this house several years ago," he told her, taking her arm and steering her up the walk. A profusion of marigolds, zinnias, cosmos, and pinks lined the concrete path, their colors riotous in the late summer evening. "At the time I had neither the chance nor the inclination to fix it up the way I wanted to. It's funny." He paused and surveyed the house and emerald green pastures that surrounded it. "I fell in love with this house the

minute I saw it. I knew this was where I wanted to spend the rest of my life and raise my children."

Kayla's eyes followed his line of vision, and she could easily see the beauty he was referring to. The ranch had a peacefulness about it, a tranquility that could only be found in the lush, rolling Arkansas hills with their tall, majestic maples and oaks.

"That is funny," she said thoughtfully. "Somehow I wouldn't have thought you were the type who would take an interest in a home and family." She didn't mean to sound critical or sarcastic. His words had merely surprised her.

"That only goes to show how little you really know about me, doesn't it?" he remarked curtly.

"I didn't mean that to be offensive, Nick. It's just that I've always had a different opinion of you—"

"I know what your opinion of me has been." He reached into the pocket of his cutoffs and withdrew a key. "My problem is I just don't know how to change it."

The front door swung open, and Nick ushered her inside. Kayla's eyes widened as she stepped inside the redwood house with its chocolate-brown trim, and she stared openly at the homey interior. A large combination dining room, kitchen, and family room met her gaze, and she noticed with delight that the ceilings had exposed wood beams. Several colorful handloomed rugs lay about on the wooden floor at the end of the room where a huge open fireplace stood. Antique pots and cooking utensils sat on the hearth, and one large cooking urn hung over the cold ashes in the grate. Two rust-colored sofas sat facing each other in front of the fireplace with a monstrous round pine coffee table separating them. Kayla had never seen a room so beautiful. Only in magazines had she ever seen such elegance, yet it was all done with such simplicity that she knew that anyone would feel at home and comfortable in these surroundings. Four large windows and a French door let in the light from outdoors, making the room warm and cozy in the gathering dusk.

"Oh, Nicholas . . . this is lovely," she breathed, walking over to touch the charming bow-backed pine settee closest to her.

"Do you like it?" He looked at her, trying to read her face.

"Like it? It's . . . I've never seen a house like this one," she said with awe.

Kayla paused in the dining area to take in the beautiful replica of an old-fashioned harvest table and the marvelous antique pie safe.

"Where did you find these chairs?" she exclaimed. "I love them!"

Nick glanced at the classic cane and chrome side chairs and smiled. "You picked them out, don't you remember?"

Kayla looked at the chairs more closely. "Me? When did I pick them out?" She had no doubts that she would have chosen these chairs but to her knowledge she had never seen this furniture before.

"Don't you remember all the books I had you go through? These chairs were about the only thing you had on your 'like' list!"

"You bought them because I liked them?" she asked wondrously.

"That's right." He took her arm and propelled her forward before she could protest. "There's a lot more I want to do with the house," he told her excitedly. "I haven't even begun on the bedrooms yet, and there's two of the baths that still need redoing." As they approached each room he offered detailed explanations of what he would like to have done with it.

Kayla could do little more than take in all the beautiful furnishings, and she was soon caught up in Nick's enthusiasm. "And a big four-poster bed with one of those lovely old-fashioned patchwork quilts would really set this room off," she told him happily when Nick led her into the guest bedroom.

"That's exactly what I had been thinking," Nick agreed. "Something in blues and reds. I love those two colors."

As they walked down the hall he draped his arm casually around her protruding waist. "Then I thought I'd like to have some of those frilly, sheer curtains hanging at the window and maybe a big wooden rocker sitting next to the window where our guests could look out over the pastures and horses."

Kayla noticed the word *our* but thought that it was a slip of the tongue on Nicholas's part. He was totally absorbed in planning the house.

Strolling on down the hall, they came to a room on the right, close to the master bedroom. Opening the door carefully, he stood back and waited for Kayla to walk in. "Now, don't get mad," he cautioned leerily.

Kayla looked at the room filled with toys, Ethan Allen baby furniture, rocking chairs, and toy trains.

"Nick." That was all she could say. She meant for her tone to be accusatory but failed miserably. Instead it came out very weak and unimposing. "Why are you doing this?" Her eyes took in the large toy giraffe leaning in the corner, looking very lonely as it waited for its master.

"You know why." Nick leaned against the door and watched her carefully. "I want my baby to have everything I can possibly give him."

Kayla sighed and walked over to lovingly touch the yellow comforter that was lying in the crib. It was so dainty and beautiful. The whole room was. It had obviously been planned with care and love. Again it occurred to her that she wished things could be different—that this was going to be her home, that this would be the room where she would love and care for her baby. She could visualize herself sitting in the wooden rocking chair, holding their baby close and crooning a soft lullaby to help it go to sleep. Nick would come in, and together they would put the baby gently in its bed and tuck the lovely yellow comforter around its sweet-smelling body. Together they would kiss it goodnight, then leave the room quietly, Nick's arm around her waist. He would lead her to their bedroom and close the door, the look of love and desire on his face causing her to turn weak with longing—

"A penny for your thoughts." Nick's soft voice interrupted her daydream.

She laughed quietly. "Not worth it. I was only thinking."

"About what?"

"About what a pretty room this is. I hope you'll have many babies to bring home to it. But I hope you won't try to spoil them all to the degree you are . . . to the degree you're planning on." She had started to say "this one" but couldn't manage the words.

"Spoil them? I'm not going to spoil them," he said indignantly.

"Yes, you are," she insisted, walking over to the rocker and sitting down. She began to rock. "My parents died when I was very young. I went to live with my aunt, who wasn't exactly thrilled to have an eight-year-old thrust upon her. She fed me, clothed me, sent me to school, and did all the things that were expected of her, but there was one thing lacking in my life. She never loved me. When I was fourteen, I got my first job. Between school and working I had little time to spend under her feet, so we got along better. When I was sixteen, I moved out of her house and into a little apartment behind the house of an elderly woman whom I worked for. I took care of Mrs. Swain's house and lawn, went to school, then worked six hours at night at a nearby clothing factory."

"I had no idea you came from that sort of background," Nick said quietly from the doorway as he watched her begin to rock faster. "The only thing you ever told me was that your parents died and you lived with your aunt."

Kayla shrugged. "I've never talked about it. Anyway, when I became eighteen, I received a small inheritance from my parents. I stuck it away in the bank, and after college I bought my own dress shop. I worked very hard, Nick, and I made that shop successful. I probably would still be there today if it hadn't been for Tony" She paused and blinked. "Well, what I'm trying to say is, I don't want my child handed everything on a silver platter. Naturally I would never want him to go through what I did, but I want him to live in the real world, Nick. A world where you earn what you have and it isn't simply given to you. I'm sure you have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?" The sound of the rocker made a rhythmic click on the wooden floor as Kayla stared out the window at the gathering twilight.

"I never wanted for anything, if that's what you mean. But my parents didn't throw money around like it was water. Dad has poured his life's blood into the business, and he's taught me the value of a dollar. The Trahern money is the result of a lot of hard work, some very wise investments, and a steady hand at the helm. My son or daughter will be taught the same things, Kayla, but I do have enough money to make life a little easier for my child. Surely you wouldn't want to see it any differently."

"I don't want to see *it* at all," she replied firmly. "I really wish we didn't have to face a long-drawn-out battle over the baby, Nicholas."

"We don't. All you have to do is be reasonable," he returned quietly.

"Reasonable? What you mean is, all I have to do is give up my baby."

"No, I didn't say that. There are other alternatives."

"Marriage?"

"That *was* one." The stubborn muscle of Nick's jaw was working now as he stared past her toward the open window. He was in love with her, but he would be damned if he would ask her to marry him again until she showed some sign of loving him back! "But you've ruled that out!"

If he had asked her to marry him at that moment, she would gladly have flung herself into his arms and agreed. She was tired of fighting him, and yet her pride would never allow her to beg him to marry her. Apparently he wasn't going to renew his offer.

"So what's left?" she asked tiredly.

Nick sighed wearily. "You realize, don't you, Kayla, that if I wanted to, I could make this pretty dirty. With a good lawyer and enough money I could bring in witnesses who would not be favorable to you." He paused, then continued, "But I think too much of you to do that. What I am going to do, though, is this. If marriage is out of the picture, then as soon as the baby's born, I'm going to legally declare that the child is mine and ask the court to

grant me reasonable visitation rights. I intend to fully support the child financially."

"Bring in witnesses! I haven't done anything . . . immoral, Nick!"

Nick's eyes grew cold. "I *said* with enough money I could do a lot of things, Kayla."

Kayla closed her eyes painfully. "That is going to be nothing but a headache for both of us, Nick. What happens when we both marry? I may want to move out of the state."

"Forget it! I'll never permit that, Kayla." His angry words shattered the night air.

"You can't stop me!" Kayla rocked faster, her thoughts tumbling together. "And suppose I *don't* get married. How do you think I'll feel when you and your... wife take my baby for weeks at a time."

"You're crossing too many bridges at one time. I don't have any intention of marrying right away," he snapped.

"You're not seeing anyone right now?" Kayla was mortified that she had blurted out her thoughts like that.

"You mean lately?" Nick looked surprised at the abrupt question. "Since I met you?"

"No, I meant since you reached puberty!" Kayla said crossly, avoiding his eyes as she continued to rock.

"Since I reached puberty ... a few. Since I met you ... no." He grinned.

"I bet it's disgusting how many women you've known in your sordid past," she mumbled grimly, jealousy nearly eating her alive at the thought of Nick with other women. All of the risqué stories she had heard about "Romeo" Trahern came closing in on her, raising her anger to a dangerous level.

Nick sighed and then walked over and knelt down beside her. "I don't know why in hell I'm going to bother trying to explain this to you, but for some reason I want to. You're right, I haven't always been an angel. When I was in college and for several years after, I led a pretty . . . carefree life. But never once did I make any promises, Kayla. When I went with a woman, she knew from the first that I wasn't interested in any long-term commitment. The ladies ... um ..." He cleared his throat, and Kayla could have sworn she saw a twinkle in his eye. "The ladies whom I associated with were usually in complete agreement with me on that score. At that time in my life I was out for a good time, nothing more."

"And I suppose you were accustomed to making a fool out of your . . . ladies," Kayla interrupted, "telling them things that weren't true. How many times were you 'Franklin,' Nick?"

Nick looked at her sternly. "Only once. And you're right again. At that time in my life I wouldn't have thought twice about using a ploy like Franklin to get a date with a lovely girl."

Kayla met his honest gaze. "And you wouldn't now?"

"They would have to cut my tongue out before I would ever play a trick like that again," he said with a grimace. "I've learned a painful lesson this time."

"It was rotten," she began.

"And conniving," he added.

"And miserable."

"And despicable, and all the other things you've hurled at me," he agreed. "But it's also in the past. I won't do it again. That's the only consolation I can offer you."

Kayla could feel the block of ice around her heart beginning slowly to melt as she gazed into his sincere gray eyes.

"Forgive me?" he asked carefully.

"Maybe." She grinned with intense relief. "Okay." His eyes brightened. "How about the big question. Can you forget it?"

Could she forget it? That question had been on Kayla's mind constantly for the last few weeks. Would the lie Nick had told her always overshadow her feelings for him? "I... don't know," she admitted honestly. "I try, but there are times I feel so horribly resentful toward you. When I think of all the times you must have died laughing at the things I said and did. All the rotten things I used to say against Nicholas Trahern ... all the things I called him." She blushed furiously.

"No, I didn't," he replied quickly, reaching out to touch her velvet cheekbone. "I only felt like a rotten heel."

"If you had only been truthful with me—"

"I know. But that's all water over the dam." What she said was true. Nicholas had said the same things to himself over and over again every long, sleepless night since he had met her. "Look at me, Kayla." He turned her face to meet his. "I've spent the last few months trying my damndest to make you see that Nicholas Trahern, cad that he was, is deep down all the things you loved about Franklin. Can't you see, I'm the same man you were attracted to, the same man you willingly let share your bed and your life for that short time." His eyes grew solemn. "Those were the happiest days of my life, sweetheart. For thirty-six years I have looked for a woman who I wanted to love, and when I finally ran across her, I couldn't let her know how I felt because of one stupid indiscretion. Don't you think there might be some way we could start over, Kayla? Maybe if we began again . . . with no lies this time, we might be able to salvage what we once felt for each other."

"I don't know, Nicholas," Kayla broke in. It was so hard to deny him this request, but if they should fail to recapture what they once had, he would still be there to take her baby from her and with more vengeance than he felt now. She wanted to believe him so badly ... but she couldn't rid herself of the persistent, nagging thought that he was trying to gain custody of his child the only way he knew how: by wooing its mother into submission. And if she agreed to a marriage, should he ever ask again, it would only be one of convenience for Nicholas. A marriage he would eventually grow tired of

and reject to go back to the life he had been accustomed to living. Kayla could not take that chance. She would be gambling with the only thing she had left in her life. Her baby. The stakes were simply too high.

Nicholas's hand dropped slowly away from her face, his eyes registering defeat. "All right. If that's the way you want to be, Kayla, I can't change it. I have my pride too, and I won't beg you. What you do with your life is up to you, but what you do with my baby's life involves me. You will never be completely free from me, so you might as well decide to make the best of the situation. I'll be around for a long time to come."

"I'm going to look for a man to marry who weighs two hundred and fifty pounds," she said grimly, "so he can come over and personally knock your block off, Nicholas Trahern!" Her temper finally exploded.

"As long as you're looking, you'd better up that weight by another fifty pounds. He's going to need it if he plans to take me on!"

"You don't scare me," she bluffed.

"Then maybe this will. I just *might* go out and find me a woman to marry who would be as mean as a snake to keep *you* under control. You think having to deal with me as a *father* will be tough, wait till you see what I'm going to turn loose on you as a *stepmother* to our baby."

Kayla shoved out of the chair and started toward him angrily. "You just try it, mister! You just try it!" The thought of having to share her baby with this maniac was bad enough without the added burden of another woman.

Nick grinned wickedly and rushed forward to pick her up in his arms, making her squeal with alarm. "Just a little reminder that I'm still bigger than you are, so you better start watching your step," he warned, walking out of the bedroom with her still clasped tightly in his arms. Kayla squirmed helplessly, aching aware of the familiar smell and feel of him. It was all she could do to keep her anger alive and not wrap her arms snugly around his neck and let him carry her off to anywhere he desired.

"Put me down, you idiot!" she yelled as he strode through the house, ignoring her thrashing fists.

"No way. I'm going to take you down to the stables and lock you up with some of my horses," he threatened. "Maybe I can handle you better that way."

He opened the back door and walked outside with her. They were standing on a large covered patio facing a glistening oval- shaped swimming pool. The same kinds of late-summer flowers that Kayla had seen in the front of the house bloomed in large beds surrounding the pool. Overcome by her natural curiosity for the moment, she stopped her struggling.

"This whole place is gorgeous!" she observed reverently. "No wonder you fell in love with it!"

"Yeah. I'm bad about loving gorgeous things. Gorgeous little things that are starting to weigh as much as one of my horses." He winked, bringing her up closer to his chest.

"It's all your fault," she returned, a spark of combat still in her eyes. "And stop insulting me! If *your* baby wasn't getting to be such a little pig, I wouldn't be getting my appetite back so quickly."

"Remind me to have a talk with him when he gets here." Nick grinned.

Suddenly their laughter died as their gazes met, and they became acutely aware of each other. Nick's arms closed around her possessively.

"You feel good, did you know that, bossy?"

"As in cow? Or disposition?"

"Both."

"You're terrible." She smiled tenderly, hating the feeling of pleasure she was experiencing in his arms.

"No, I'm not. And if it takes me the rest of my life, I'm going to prove that to you," he said in a husky voice.

"Are you going to kiss me?" she asked expectantly, wishing fervently that he would.

Nick looked momentarily taken aback. "Do you want me to?"

"Yes ... and no," she admitted softly, her pulse racing at the more than pleasant thought.

"Yes and no. Now, what kind of an answer is that? You either do or you don't."

Kayla lifted her shoulders impishly. "Hormones, I guess. At least that's what you always accuse me of." That was the only reason she could come up with for feeling so confused about him.

"Well, I'll tell you what." He brought her mouth close to his, barely brushing against the sweetness of her lips. "There's nothing in this world that I'd like better at the moment than to kiss you."

"So," Kayla teased, longing for him to complete the kiss, "what's stopping you?"

His breathing had become heavier as Kayla's arms crept up intimately around his neck.

"When I kiss you the next time, I want there to be no doubt whether you want it or not," he whispered. "When you're sure, you let me know."

Kayla froze, then dropped her arms irritably. "You're *not* going to kiss me?"

"Not today!" He started to walk down the path to the stables. "But I'll seriously consider it when you ask me again ... Mommy." He grinned a lazy, self-assured grin.

"Don't hold your breath!" She reached out and punched him soundly on his broad shoulder.

Nick's delighted laughter rang out over the tranquil Arkansas hillside. Not that he wanted to, but he could wait because—he smiled smugly—he knew she would ask again.

The walk through the quiet stables was lovely. A serenity came over Kayla and Nick as he led her to each stall and they peeked in at the horses. He kept his arm around her, explaining the various procedures for caring for the horses, showing her one of his favorites, who was about to give birth.

"When is the baby due?" Kayla asked in a hushed whisper as they stood at the door looking in at the expectant mother.

"Soon. Joseph said he expects it any day now."

"Is Joseph the man who takes care of the ranch for you?"

"Yes." Nick's hand came out to gently stroke the bay mare's bulging sides. "He's excellent with the horses, and I don't know what I would do without him. What's the matter, girl?" he crooned softly as the mare whinnied lowly. "Are you restless tonight?"

"Who takes care of your house?" Kayla asked.

"For the last few weeks I've been batching it. My housekeeper is away spending some time with her son and his family. Since I wanted to get the redecorating done, I told her to take some time off this summer. Besides, all I've done is sleep here since you've been so sick."

Kayla thoughtfully rubbed the mare's ears, commiserating with this animal who shared her condition. "You don't have to keep coming over every day," she told Nick. "I'm really beginning to feel like my old self."

Nick made no reply as he continued to stroke the horse's belly. He seemed to be lost in thought, to have completely forgotten her for the moment. "How would you like to name Sheba's foal?"

Kayla laughed quietly. "I wouldn't know how to name a racehorse. I'm having trouble coming up with a name for the baby!"

Nick turned to face her. "That shouldn't be too hard. I'll help you."

"Oh, no, you don't! I don't want our baby named something like Daddy's Bouncing Baby Boy," she teased, remembering one of the names she had read on her racing program.

"I couldn't even give a *horse* that name," Nick scoffed. "There's a rule about how many words and letters you can use when you name a horse. Does the same thing apply to naming babies?"

"I don't think so. Besides, I like the name Jared."

Nick thought for a moment. "Jared Nicholas Trahern. Not bad."

"I don't saying anything about *Nicholas Trahern*," Kayla scowled.

"I'll make a deal with you. We'll name it Jared Nicholas Trahern if it's a boy, and Kayla Gayle Trahern if it's a girl. Gayle was my grandmother's name," he told her.

"Kayla Gayle? I don't know, Nick. I hadn't planned on naming it after me."

"Well, I had. I like your name," he said matter-of-factly.

"Kayla Gayle. Well, I'll think about it."

"I really don't care if it's a boy or a girl," Nick concluded, giving the mare one last pat, then shutting the half door to the stall. "I just hope it has its mother's good looks and its daddy's brilliant brains and winning personality."

"Your humility overwhelms me," Kayla observed with a laugh as he draped his arm around her and led her out of the stable.

"No humility involved. I'm simply an honest man."

"Ha!" Kayla grinned but snuggled closer to his side. Honest or devious? That was the question foremost in her mind as they walked casually back to the house under the star-studded sky. Why couldn't she make up her mind which one he was?

"Nick, were you serious when you said"—her voice grew smaller—"when you said you haven't been seeing anyone else ... for a while?" For some reason that was very important to her tonight.

"No, I haven't been seeing anyone else. When would I have the time?"

"I don't mean to interfere with your personal life," she said solemnly. "Now that I'm feeling better, you can... resume your own life."

"I plan on it," he said easily.

"Oh. You do?" Kayla frowned.

"Yeah." He sighed dramatically. "I'll have to start looking for a woman to live in my new house and help me take care of my new baby"—he paused—"on weekends and during the summer, of course ... and protect me from the baby's two hundred and fifty pound stepfather, who's going to be after me for upsetting the baby's real mother all the time. That is, unless you've changed your mind and agreed to bypass all that fun and listen to reason."

"I haven't changed my mind. Besides, I haven't heard anyone asking me to change my mind." She held her breath, waiting for him to ask her to marry him again.

"You know the offer still stands," he said lazily. "Anytime you're ready, you just let me know."

"And in the meantime you'll be looking for that 'other woman'?" she prompted.

"You've got it. You're jealous, I hope?"

"Certainly not! Would you be jealous if I went out with someone else?"

"Certainly not!" he mocked. "Date anyone you choose. It will make you come to your senses sooner."

"Thank you, Mr. Trahern. I just might do that," she replied, wondering who in the world she could get to go out with her in this condition!

"Just be careful where you take my baby," he added, helping her into the Renegade once more. "And drink milk instead of beer, and be home, in bed, alone by nine o'clock every night. Other than that, you have my blessing to go out and have a good time."

Kayla looked at him in disbelief. "Have a good time? With those rules?"

Nick looked at her and shrugged. "That would be tough, wouldn't it? Well"—he slid into the seat next to her and started the Renegade—"my advice is, stay home and forget the whole idea. If you're good, I'll bring my date by and keep you company for the evening."

"My, my. Jared or Gayle, Kayla, Nick, and 'the bouncer,' " she mused playfully. "Sounds like a lovely evening. I can hardly wait." She grimaced as he put the Renegade in gear and sped back down the road toward town.

CHAPTER NINE

The rented station wagon pulled into the Marriott Hotel the following Saturday and braked to a halt. Nick jumped out and went in, coming back a few minutes later with the keys to two rooms. Kayla couldn't help but be a little sorry that, true to his word, he had rented them separate rooms, but she managed to hide her disappointment.

"You *did* say two separate rooms, didn't you?" He grinned, swinging her door key in front of her face.

"That's right," she said calmly.

"Good! I did exactly as instructed," he pointed out. "Two rooms."

"Thank you," she responded coolly, ignoring his tormenting grin.

"Let's take our luggage to the rooms and then go on out to the racetrack," he suggested, opening her door and helping her out. Their plane had gotten in around ten A.M., and Nick had rented a car and driven straight to the hotel.

Within the hour they were turning off Mercy Road to the Ak-Sar-Ben field, a large complex located on three hundred acres in central Omaha.

"They have a coliseum, clubhouse, livestock building, and the finest barn area in Thoroughbred horse racing out here," Nick told her as they drove toward the racetrack. I want you to meet my trainer and groom and some of the jockeys who wear the Trahern colors."

"Do you mean the colors that are on their uniforms?" Kayla asked confusedly.

"Sure." Nick glanced at her. "The owner's silks."

"Of course," she replied dryly.

Nick reached over and patted her tummy. "Hang in there— you'll soon learn the lingo."

As the afternoon progressed she did indeed learn a lot of the lingo. Nick took her into the clubhouse and introduced her to a brilliant array of people, tossing out names and positions that flew right over her head. There was only one uncomfortable moment when Nick was introducing her to some of his friends. They had walked up to a distinguished group of gentlemen, and Nick had readily pulled her forward.

"Frank, Ron, I want you to meet Kayla Marshall, my"—he glanced at her swollen condition in consternation—"very good friend."

"How do you do," Frank said, reaching out to take Kayla's hand in his, his eyes running lightly over her slightly rounded stomach.

"Very well, thank you," Kayla responded, mentally kicking Nick's teeth out. Good friend indeed!

"Why did you tell that man we were friends?" she hissed under her breath as they continued through the clubhouse.

"I said we were *good* friends!" he said defensively. "Besides, what do you want me to do? Tell him the truth?"

"No. I just think we could think of a better word for me than *friend*."

"How about *fiancee*?" he suggested helpfully.

She glared at him pointedly. "I *don't* think so." "Mother? Sister, grandmother? You name it," he said agreeably, handing her a cold drink.

"How about *acquaintance* or *old friend of the family*?" she offered.

A few minutes later she was being politely introduced as a close acquaintance who was an old friend of the family.

The best part of the day for Kayla was when Nick took her to the training stables and introduced her to his trainer and groom. Both men patiently explained their roles and duties, adding considerably to Kayla's knowledge of what went on behind the scenes of Thoroughbred horse racing.

"How many times a day are the horses fed?" she asked, watching the groom ready one of the fillies to be taken to the paddock for saddling.

"While they're in training? Usually three times a day," the groom answered.
"At four A.M., ten A.M., and four P.M."

"Your day must start pretty early," she said sympathetically.

"Yes, ma'am. Pretty early," he agreed with a flashing grin.

"How did My Pretty Baby do in her workout this morning?" Nick asked Sheldon, whom he had introduced earlier as his trainer.

"She's running beautifully today," he assured Nick. "No problems."

Post time was at two o'clock on Saturdays, and by the time Nick and Kayla had had a light lunch, it was time for the races to begin. There was a feeling of expectancy in the air as the race fans began making their bets.

"Here." Nick handed Kayla ten twenty-dollar bills. "Decide which horse you want to bet on, then get to the windows early."

Kayla glanced down at the wad of bills in her hand, her mouth gaping open.
"Good heavens. What's all this for?"

"It's your mad money for today. Go have fun."

"You're crazy, Nicholas! I wouldn't bet that much money. Why, this would pay my rent and buy my groceries all month!"

He had already spent entirely too much on this trip anyway.

Her plane ticket, her motel room—always insisting on paying for all her meals. She sorted through the bills, then handed all of them back except one.
"There. This is all I need."

"Twenty dollars?" he asked blankly.

"Sure. How many races are there?"

"With only twenty dollars, not very many for you," he observed dryly.

"I'll just bet two dollars until I run out," she reasoned contentedly.

"Wow, last of the big-time spenders," he marveled. "Have you figured out where your first two-dollar 'chunk' is going to go?"

"No," she mused worriedly, studying her program once more. "Will you help me?"

"I wouldn't miss this opportunity for the world. It's going to be one of the biggest challenges I've ever faced."

"What? Betting on a horse?"

"No, trying to stretch twenty lousy dollars over the next four hours!"

The afternoon turned out to be not only a challenge but one of the most enjoyable days of Kayla's life. They laughed, placed their two-dollar bets together, munched on hot dogs, drank Cokes and beer, and let their problems of the last few months disappear for the day.

Kayla's excitement grew to fever pitch as they approached the windows late in the afternoon to place their bets on a race that one of Nick's horses was running in.

"I think I'm going to bet four dollars on this one," Kayla announced grandly, in an effort to show her confidence in him.

"Four dollars!" Nick nearly choked on his drink. "Ms. Tightwad is going to blow four dollars on *my* horse!" he exclaimed disbelievingly.

"Cut the theatrics, Nicholas. I know my money's safe." She grinned, picking up her tickets. "I trust your horse."

"Aw," he sighed, putting his arm around her as they strolled back to their seats. "Lucky horse." "He deserves my trust," she said pointedly. "Besides, look how much money he's made for you."

"Ha, ha, and double ha! If I were in this sport for the money, I'd be in bad shape."

"You don't win a lot of money?" she asked in surprise.

"Let's just say that I'm in it for the pleasure, excitement, and the love of the animals. Anything else is strictly speculation."

The roar of the crowd as the horses broke from the starting gate was deafening. Kayla's eyes became riveted on the horse wearing the Trahern colors of yellow and maroon and the number four. Nervously she watched as the horse ran in the middle of the pack, then slowly began to edge toward the inside rail.

"Oh, Nick, she's not going fast enough!" Kayla said with a groan, her hands restlessly toying with her tickets.

"Give her time," Nick said easily, displaying not the least bit of apprehension. "She breaks slow, but she'll make up for it in the last three eighths of a mile," he said confidently.

Kayla held her breath as Getha Leadout worked its way through the field, moving up slowly in position. The voice over the loudspeaker kept the crowd informed of the horses' positions, but Kayla noticed that Nick kept his eyes anxiously fixed on a monitor suspended from the ceiling.

Coming out of the final turn, the horses broke for the homestretch as the crowd surged to their feet in a deafening roar. Kayla and Nick both had to duck as one enthusiastic spectator threw his beer straight up in the air and jumped up and down as the horses streaked toward the finish wire.

Nick pulled Kayla over to his side and yelled, "Now watch your horse go!"

Sure enough, Getha Leadout seemed to find a new source of speed as the number-four jockey brought the horse neck to neck with the lead position. By this time Kayla was doing her own jumping up and down, trying to yell number four on to victory. She was unconsciously shredding her tickets into a million pieces, and they went fluttering wildly to the ground when she gave a triumphant shriek of joy as Getha Leadout streaked across the wire a good full length ahead of the second-place horse.

"She won! Getha Leadout won!" Kayla hurled herself into Nick's arms, hugging his neck with exuberance. "Aren't you excited? Your horse won!"

"I never doubted that she would." He smiled, closing his eyes as he pulled her closer to him, savoring the softness of her body pressing into his. "But I bet I'm not nearly as excited as you're going to be when you find out what you did to your winning tickets."

Kayla glanced down at her empty hand, then to the pile of rubble at her feet. "Oh, for heaven's sake! And that was four dollars' worth!" she said disgustedly.

Nick laughed and hugged her tighter. "I'll share my winnings with you!" he offered as he picked her up and whirled her around happily.

"Oh, Nicholas, I don't really even care! Your horse won, that's all that matters!" Suddenly she realized that she was in his arms. Her gaze came up to meet his, and the world around them faded into nonexistence. "Maybe you better put me down," she whispered a little breathlessly.

"Maybe I don't want to," he whispered back, bringing his mouth down to brush teasingly against hers.

A tiny whimper escaped her throat as his lips touched hers. It had been so long since he had kissed her, so long since she had been in his arms. "I thought you weren't going to kiss me until I asked," she admonished him as her hands came up around his neck and her fingers buried in the thickness of his tawny hair.

"You were getting ready to ask me," he said huskily, bringing his mouth down to touch hers again lightly. "I'm just trying to get back in shape. It's been a long time since I've had you in my arms. Too damn long, in fact."

"I don't know if I was going to ask you," she protested insincerely, growing weak at his touch.

"Well, you're going to now, or I'll end up asking you—"

"Nicholas!" A redheaded woman broke through the crowd, followed by a short, stocky man. Both of them were smiling, motioning to Nick. Nick swore quietly, burying his face defeat- edly in Kayla's hair.

"I knew my luck was too good to be true," he murmured, refusing to release his hold on her.

"Nicholas Trahern! Where have you been lately?" The redhead breezed up and grasped Nick's arm as he stepped reluctantly away from Kayla.

"Janice. How are you?"

"Better since I've seen you," she breathed in a sexy voice. "I've been trying to reach you for the last six weeks! Why aren't you taking any calls lately?"

"Because he's a busy man," her stocky companion interjected, reaching out to shake Nick's hand. "How's it going, Trahern? Your horse just brought me in a bundle!"

"Hi, Pete. Glad it worked out for you. Pete, Janice, I want you to meet Kayla Marshall." Nick pulled Kayla to his side and placed a protective arm around her waist.

Janice surveyed Kayla's obvious pregnancy, then glanced up at Nicholas resentfully. "Glad to meet you, Kayla," Pete said and extended his hand to shake Kayla's.

"Where have you been lately, Nick?" Janice asked, ignoring Kayla's introduction.

"Busy. How are things with you?"

Janice's face took on a petulant look as Pete took over the conversation, quizzing Nick on the upcoming race. Janice stared at Kayla rudely, trying to ascertain her position in Nick's life.

"Let's all go out for a drink after the races," Janice broke in, interrupting the men's conversation. "Or maybe for dinner. It's been a long time, Nick," she pleaded, deciding simply to ignore the pretty pregnant woman by Nick's side.

"Sorry, Janice. Kayla's had a long day. I want to get her back to the motel and let her rest. Maybe another time," Nick said politely.

Kayla was so grateful for Nick's refusal to have dinner with this odd couple that she nearly hugged him.

"We'll do that," Pete said, taking Janice's hand and steering her back in the direction they had come from. "Let's go, baby. The next race will be starting in a few minutes, and I haven't made my bet yet."

"You will call, won't you, Nicholas?" Janice persisted, unwillingly following Pete.

"We'll probably be seeing each other around," Nick said consolingly, pulling Kayla in the opposite direction.

"One of your 'lady' friends?" Kayla asked pointedly.

"She used to be," he said easily. "Say, how would you like for *her* to be the baby's new—"

"Forget it, Nicholas," Kayla warned in an ominous voice.

"Well, it was just a thought." He grinned wickedly.

"A stinking one, I might add!"

"I might add that too. I never did care much for Janice," he admitted.

That little observation made Kayla's day considerably happier.

It was late afternoon when they left for the motel. Kayla had spent a wonderful day, coming out of the racetrack with a lot more money than she had gone in with. She had insisted on paying back the original twenty dollars Nick had given her, despite his indignant protests.

"You're going to have to learn the value of a dollar," she scolded as they got into the car and started toward the motel. "If it hadn't been for me, you would have blown a lot of money today."

"Or made a lot," he grumbled. "But I had fun. What about you?" He smiled at her tenderly.

"I had a wonderful day. Thank you."

"Are you tired?" "A little." She leaned her head against the back of the seat and closed her eyes.

"We're going back to the motel, and you're going to take a hot bath and rest before we go to dinner," he told her firmly.

"I won't argue with that." Her mind skipped back to the way he had playfully kissed her this afternoon, and her stomach fluttered. She had welcomed that kiss and was acutely disappointed when it was interrupted by Janice and Pete. When they reached the motel, Nick unlocked her door, then placed one arm between her and the doorjamb. "You need anything?"

"No." Her stomach filled with butterflies at the way his eyes were hungrily devouring her, yet he made no move to touch her.

"I'm in the next room. All you have to do is holler."

"What do you want me to holler?" she teased coyly, feeling none of the animosity toward him she usually did.

"I'd probably get arrested if I answered that question," he replied lazily. "But feel free to holler anything you want."

"Thank you, I will." She waited expectantly for him to kiss her, but he didn't.

"I'll let you rest for a while, and then I'll give you a ring on the phone. We'll decide where we want to eat. Okay?"

"Okay."

He reached out and absently brushed a lock of her hair away from her face. "I've been meaning to tell you how pretty you are lately. I've always heard that pregnant women had a special glow about them, but I must admit I had never noticed it. To me, they always looked pudgy and miserable."

"And I don't?"

"No." His finger slipped down the side of her face longingly. "You look very lovely and very desirable."

Her pulse leapt at the look in his eye. This was an entirely different man from the Nick *and* the Franklin she had known. And the look in his eye was the look of a man who was in need of a woman. Not just any woman, but the woman he loved.

"I think you'd better go take your bath," he said, letting his hand drop back to his side, "before I make a fool of myself."

Kayla felt such disappointment, it nearly took her breath away. For some strange, unexplained reason she had wanted him to come in with her, to take her in his arms and make love to her for the next week! She would not have uttered a single word of protest had he done just that. As she watched him walk to the room adjoining hers and slip the key into the lock, she wanted to call out and tell him how she felt, but somehow she couldn't push the words out of her restricted throat. Surely if he had loved and wanted her, he would have told her so. She would be a fool to push him. Still, how many times had she stubbornly told him she wanted nothing to do with him? Strange, but that was no longer true. Yes, he had made a mistake and lied to her. But she

had made plenty of mistakes herself. She had to begin to put her trust in someone, sometime, and Nick was the only one she wanted to commit that trust to. If she did marry her baby's father, could that marriage withstand its shaky start and survive to become a happy, long-lasting one?

She lay soaking in the bathtub, mulling over all her puzzling thoughts for a long time. When she finally toweled herself off, her skin was rosy and pink, and she was completely relaxed after the long day's activities.

Liberally dusting herself with a fragrant powder, she surveyed her blossoming figure. Remembering Janice's sleek figure, she wondered fleetingly what chance she had of catching Nick's attention in her condition.

A soft tap on the door adjoining her bedroom interrupted her musings. Slipping into a soft, clinging robe, she unlocked the door and opened it.

"Hi." Nick lounged against the door, a towel wrapped loosely around his neck. "Did I wake you?" His eyes ran languidly over the blue robe, noting that the color almost perfectly matched her eyes.

"No. I just got out of the bathtub." She returned his look longingly.

"I didn't mean to bother you. I decided to clean up and then go down to the bar for a drink while you rested."

"Oh." She didn't know what to say. She wasn't tired now, but she didn't know if he would want her company at the bar.

"Did you happen to bring a *big* bar of soap? These tiny things they have at motels drive me crazy."

"Oh... yes, I brought one. Come on in." She turned and went into the bathroom, coming out a few minutes later with a bar of soap wrapped in a paper towel. "Here, you can keep it. I don't mind the small bars."

"You look refreshed and ready to go," he observed casually, taking the bar of soap from her.

"I feel great. Just a few sore muscles from jumping up and down all day." She smiled.

"Do you have a bottle of lotion?" he asked pleasantly as he sat down on the bed and looked at her.

"Lotion? I think so. Why?"

"I thought I'd offer my services as a masseur," he said nonchalantly.

"Oh . . . that's not necessary." She blushed.

"I know it's not. It would be my pleasure. Get the lotion and come here."

"Nick—"

"Get the lotion, Kayla." His voice was soft and persuasive in the quiet room.

A few seconds later she found herself handing him the lotion with trembling fingers.

"Stop looking at me like I'm the big bad wolf." He grinned, taking her hand and pulling her onto the bed with him. "You're going to enjoy this, I promise."

Kayla had no doubt she would!

"Slip your robe down," he urged, gently laying her down on her stomach. "Are you comfortable lying on your stomach?"

"I'm okay," she acknowledged, letting her robe slip down to her waist.

"I don't want our baby to have a pug nose," he quipped, uncapping the lotion and pouring a small amount into the palm of his hand.

"It won't," she assured him with a muffled giggle.

His large hands reached out and touched her bare skin, slowly smoothing the white lotion soothingly over her back. "Feel good?"

"It feels heavenly," she murmured as the tensions began to drain out of her body. The touch of his hands was not exactly soothing her, though. It was sending her pulse skyrocketing, and her body was responding in a scandalously shocking way.

"You tell me where it feels the best," he said quietly, massaging the small of her back where it seemed always to bother her the most.

"Right there," she murmured.

"Your skin's so soft," he marveled, running his fingers exploringly over the velvet moistness of her rosy flesh. "It's always amazed me how soft and sweet you feel and smell." Lean fingers slipped down the sides of her rib cage, barely touching the sides of her breasts. She moved uneasily, pulling away from him slightly.

"Don't get skittish," he said in a low, soothing voice, and his hand slid down to the backs of her legs and gently kneaded the tired spots. "Are you afraid of me?"

"No," she whispered, her breathing becoming more irregular. "I'm not afraid of *you*." It was herself that she was concerned about.

"Do you think I'm going to try to make love to you?" Kayla was amazed at how calmly he said it.

"I ... I don't know. . ."

"I told you once before, Kayla, I have my pride too. You won't hear me say the words." Kayla's heart sank. Was she going to have to ask him?

Reaching for the bottle of lotion, he poured more out onto his palm and put the bottle back on the nightstand. With deliberate slowness he peeled away her robe, tossing it over onto the chair beside the bed.

"Nick," she protested, reaching for the sheet to draw it up over her bare bottom.

One large hand blocked her effort, gently placing her arm back down by her side. "Just relax and enjoy this, sweetheart. I'm not seeing anything I haven't seen before," he assured her, bringing his hands back to their task. In a few minutes he had covered every inch of her backside with the thick white lotion, gently massaging away the aches and pains.

Gradually, his motions become more lingering, his breathing more ragged; then he tenderly flipped her over onto her back and with a low groan buried his face in her soft, fragrant neck. "I hope I'm making you feel better, because you're making me ache all over, lady," he whispered.

"We shouldn't be doing this, Nick," she said gently, her arms holding him close to her.

For a moment he pulled away from her, his eyes running the length of her body. Then he placed both hands on her swollen abdomen and brought his mouth down to place tender kisses around her navel. "Hello, baby," he murmured softly. "This is your daddy talking to you now. I want you to know I'm here and I love you." His hands tightened possessively as he kissed his way back up her body, pausing to nuzzle the warmth of her breast. "Are you going to breast feed our baby?" he asked languidly.

"I've been thinking about it. Dr. Walters thinks it's a good idea."

"I think so too," he told her, his hands reaching for the lotion once more. "Even though these bring me great pleasure, I think the good Lord meant them to be more than decorative," he murmured, lavishly spreading lotion on the objects of discussion.

Pausing for a moment, he suddenly leaned down, and they kissed deeply, the first real kiss they had shared in a very long time. He had kissed her teasingly this afternoon, but this was a kiss of passion and unconcealed desire. His tongue searched hungrily for hers as his hands closed around her breasts, and she willingly responded to his advances. Exchanging heated

kiss after heated kiss, they lay pressed tightly against each other, both fearing to speak.

Kayla's hands reached out to work his shirt up his back, trying to remove the cloth barrier that was between them.

Understanding her need, he got up and stripped off his clothes, then stood for a moment, letting her drink in the once familiar sight of his aroused body. The look of desire that passed between them spoke more than any words they could say, and as he took her in his arms once more Kayla knew she loved Nicholas Trahern with all her heart.

Whatever had happened was in the past as far as she was concerned. If Nicholas didn't love her, only loved her baby, then so be it. She loved him, and in time maybe he could grow to love her in the same wild, impetuous way she loved him. She was going to work very hard at making sure he did!

With a low moan Nick released her, his breath coming in short spurts. "We're going to have to slow down some," he cautioned raggedly, stilling her wandering hands.

Kayla wanted nothing more than to lose herself in the sweetness of his love, but she still had to wonder where all this was leading. Nick had distinctly said she would *not* hear him ask her to make love. Was he waiting for *her* to make the suggestion? Not that she wouldn't... eventually, but it did hurt her feelings to think he would make her practically beg!

Slipping her hands into the blond hair that grew in lush thickness across his broad chest, she kissed him lovingly, her tongue teasingly searching out all the old familiar places that had driven him wild in the past. Playful kisses soon turned into ravishing ones as they tried to curb their passion but failed.

Nick shuddered and a moan escaped from his lips as he pulled away from her, and he reached for the bottle of lotion once more.

"Nick!" she gasped, every fiber of her body longing for him. "I don't *want* any more lotion rubbed on me, I want—"

His mouth cut off her impatient words. They kissed hotly as Nick laid her down gently. Then, taking a bit of lotion on his finger he began to write on her leg.

Kayla sat up and looked at her leg, and a smile began to form on her lips. Nick pointed to her leg, his silvery eyes aglow with passion. She read his words silently: "Hi, my name is Nicholas Franklin Trahern." Her eyes misted as she noticed that he had deliberately underlined *Franklin*. She reached down and wiped the lotion from her leg, then took the bottle from his hand and wrote, "Hi. I'm Kayla Marshall."

Again the lotion was erased, and Nick took the bottle. "I'm sorry I lied to you, Kayla Marshall," he wrote.

The bottle returned to Kayla.

"I know. You're forgiven" was the cleansing message this time.

Nick reached over and kissed her sweetly and lingeringly, then rubbed the lotion into her leg once more. This time his message would have melted the coldest of hearts. "I want you, Kayla."

"I want you, too, Nick," she wrote with shaky hand.

"Nick?"

He looked up from his scribbling, his eyes asking a silent question.

Kayla nodded, tears forming in her blue eyes. It was Nick she loved, not Franklin.

"Nick wants to make love to you" he wrote once more.

Again she nodded, the tears slipping down her cheeks. She wanted that too.

"We won't hurt the baby, will we?" he whispered hoarsely, pulling her down into his arms. "I don't want to hurt you or the baby," he said, moaning as his mouth covered hers, no longer able to control his trembling need for her.

"No, we won't hurt me or the baby," she whispered through a veil of tears, impatient for his touch.

They came together in a hot surge of eagerness, reminiscent of the days when there had been nothing between them but love and the uncontrollable need to be with each other.

"I'm so sorry, Kayla. I'm sorry for everything that's come between us," he gasped, clasping her tighter as he drew her body close to his.

"I know you are," she whispered, sharing his agony and knowing that the road ahead of them would not be an easy one.

"I do want this baby, Kayla. Let's not fight about the baby again."

The baby. Was that all he wanted after all? It seemed to be uppermost in his mind at the moment.

"We'll work it out, Nick. Somehow we'll work it out," she promised.

"I'll never let you go, Kayla," he breathed against her mouth, his passion finally overriding his words.

Conversation ceased to exist as did the world as he joined his body with hers, both of them pouring out their love for each other in every movement, every murmur of endearment, every devouring kiss. It seemed so right to Kayla, this intense, fervid, poignant love she felt for Nicholas. Could a love so right be wrong? Long before they rushed toward the peak of that magical mountain, then tumbled swiftly over the top, she had answered her own question. No, her love was not wrong. Impractical maybe, but never wrong.

She honestly couldn't tell if Nick returned that love. Certainly he returned her desire. That was obvious as he held her tightly in his arms, his large frame shuddering with the intensity of the moment. He had said he needed her, wanted her. Wasn't that love? Maybe, but she needed to hear him *say* he loved her.

"Are you all right?" he rasped, relieving her of his weight as quickly as possible.

"Yes, I'm all right," she assured him, a trifle irritated. Secretly she wanted to pinch his head off for always worrying so much about the baby! She wanted to lie in his arms for hours like they used to do after they had made love, kissing and whispering love words to each other. Now all he seemed to want to do was make sure they hadn't hurt the child.

Nick pulled her face around to meet his. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing!"

"There is too. Did I hurt you? I'm sorry if I did, but damn, it's been so long—"

"You didn't hurt me!" she snapped, rolling away from him and going into the bathroom.

He was lying quietly, staring up at the ceiling, when she came back. He moved over and let her slide in beside him, reaching to pull her close to him.

"Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine!"

Nick sighed and buried his face in the clean fragrance of her hair. "I'll be glad when you have this baby and things return to normal," he confided. "Those screwed up hormones of yours give me fits."

Kayla stiffened, offended by his words. Screwed up hormones indeed! Was it too much to expect some romantic pillow talk from the man you had just made love with?

"Are you hungry?" he asked, nuzzling her ear playfully.

"No, I'm just sleepy."

"Umm... me too. Let's forget dinner for the next few hours." He yawned and plumped his pillow up more comfortably. "Wake me up in a couple of hours."

"Wake yourself up," she said crossly. "I may want to sleep more than a couple of hours."

"I'll make it worth your while to give up a little sleep," he growled suggestively, kissing the graceful curve of her neck.

"Leave me alone, Nicholas." She shrugged away coldly.

Nick looked surprised, then resignedly covered them both back up again. "As I said, I'll certainly be glad to get the old Kayla back," he murmured.

"You may not get the 'old Kayla' back," she snapped.

"Yes, I will," he mumbled confidently, his large frame snuggling down next to hers.

"You just want *your baby*," she accused resentfully.

"And *my Kayla*. Now, stop looking for a fight and go to sleep. The baby needs its rest. Oof!" The air whooshed out of him as Kayla angrily punched him in the stomach with her elbow. "Good grief, why did you do that?" he exploded, crawling off the bed and reaching for his pants.

"Where are you going?" she demanded.

"To my *own* bed!" he said indignantly. "I have the feeling I'm not welcome here at the moment."

"Yes, you are! You get back in this bed this minute, Nicholas Trahern, you ratfink!" she screamed.

Nick dropped his pants and looked at her in exasperation. "All right! Don't get so upset!"

Tears welled up in her blue eyes as she threw herself back down on the pillows, unable herself to understand her swift changes of mood. Nick draped his trousers back over the chair and patiently crawled back into the bed, taking her tenderly in his arms. He didn't know what to say to her; he merely held her close and let her sob out her frustrations. He wasn't overly concerned with her moods. The baby book said there would be days like this one too. Personally he couldn't wait until the day came when he could take that damn little blue book and dump it in the nearest garbage can!

As much as he hated the thought, he knew he was going to have to give her some breathing room. He loved her, and he had done everything within his power to prove that lately, but she failed to realize just how deep his love was. Now he was going to have to force her into that realization.

"Kayla, listen to me." He turned her tear-streaked face up toward him. "I'm going to ask you one last time. Are you going to stop this nonsense and marry me, or not?"

This was the worst possible time Nick could have picked to ask for her hand in marriage. At the moment she was sure his only love was for the baby she was carrying.

"No! I won't marry you."

"Okay, then I don't see any point in going on like this." Nick put her trembling body away from his resolutely.

"What do you mean?" she said, sniffing.

Nick avoided her blue, limpid gaze, afraid he would never be able to go through with his plan. But if she *was* serious and really didn't have any intention of marrying him, then this was the time to make the painful break.

"I mean that if that's the way you want it, I'm tired of fighting with you." Nick slid out of bed and started dressing. "I'm taking you home first thing in the morning. Now that you're feeling better, I won't be coming around to bother you anymore. There'll be no need for us to see each other until the baby's born."

Kayla's heart leapt at his cold words. "You're walking out on me and the baby?"

"Not on the baby. When the baby's born, I still plan on doing all I've said I'd do. But if you stubbornly refuse to marry me, then I see no reason for me to make a fool of myself and grovel at your feet." His gaze met hers painfully. "When you're ready to come to me—"

"I'll never come to you," she said angrily, feeling betrayed once again. "I only wish you'd told me that I hadn't made an absolute fool of *myself* by sleeping with—"

"No one made a fool of themselves," he growled, picking up his shirt and stalking toward the door. "And no one's been hurt," he added softly. "Be ready to leave early in the morning."

"Don't worry, I will!"

He slammed the door heatedly as Kayla fell back down into the tumbled blankets and sheets and pounded her fists against the pillow in abject frustration, wondering where it would all end.

CHAPTER TEN

"What color do you prefer? Apricot or mauve?" Paula asked, casually leafing through a book she had had her face buried in all evening.

Kayla glanced up, then back down at her own book. "Neither one. Why?"

"Oh, just wondering," Paula responded mysteriously. "What *is* your favorite color?"

Kayla sighed and laid her book aside, unable to concentrate on the story. If she had thought the first months of her pregnancy were bad, it was nothing compared to the last few months. Although all traces of sickness were now gone, the loneliness that had entered her life seven weeks ago was nearly unbearable. Nick had not phoned, come by, or tried to contact her in any way since he had angrily brought her back home from Nebraska. At first her anger had matched his, but as the days drifted methodically by, her rage had dimmed, then faded entirely. Now the feeling that dominated her was one of misery, loneliness, and the aching need to see Nicholas.

If it hadn't been for Paula these last two months, Kayla honestly didn't know what she would have done. Forgetting their differences, Kayla had crawled to Paula like a wounded animal, hoping that she could tell her what to do or where to turn. Paula, though, hadn't done that. Instead she had let Kayla pour out her heart, weighing the pros and cons of marriage to Nicholas Trahern, yet failing miserably to come up with an answer.

October was now here and Kayla's body was growing more cumbersome every day. The baby moved almost constantly now, and as she lay in bed at night, her hand on her stomach, feeling the strong, steady kicks, she would think of the radiant smile on Nick's face the first day he felt the baby move. He had been so proud . . .

"Well. What's your favorite color?" Paula persisted.

"Color? I don't know, Paula. Why? Is it so important for you to know my favorite color?"

"It's not important. I was just making conversation," she said lightly. "What about blue?"

"No, I don't particularly care for blue." Kayla pushed herself off the sofa with a strangled grunt. She walked to the kitchen and poured herself a glass of ice tea, then stood looking out the window of her kitchen as she sipped from the glass. The trees were beautiful this time of year. The one big maple in her backyard was vividly alive with the colors of fall. This had always been one of her favorite times of year—she loved it when the days were warm and the nights crisp and chilly. Unwillingly her mind drifted back to Nick, and she wondered where he was right now. He had been true to his word. He had told her he would not see her again until she came to him, and he had meant it. Kayla had debated about going to him several times, yet her pride had held her back. The baby was all Nicholas wanted. Not its mother.

Walking back to the living room, Kayla noticed Paula was putting her sweater on, making preparations to leave.

"Are you going home?" Kayla asked, a surge of disappointment racing through her at the thought of another long, empty night ahead of her.

"Yes. I promised Doug I would fix him a decent meal tonight." Paula couldn't help but note the look of longing on Kayla's face. "Why don't you come with me? Doug can drive you home later."

"No. I'm not very hungry tonight. I'll make myself a sandwich, then watch TV. Thanks anyway, Paula."

Paula walked across the room and hugged Kayla with fondness. "I wish I could make things better for you."

"I know. And I can't thank you enough for all you've done for me, Paula. In many ways you have made things better," Kayla assured her, returning the hug with affection.

"All you'd have to do is go to him," Paula said solemnly, her big, round eyes gazing at Kayla seriously. "That's all he wants. Some tiny sign that you're willing to bend a little."

"He wants some sign that I'm willing to give him the baby, Paula. And I'm *not* willing to do that."

"Not true." Paula shook her head stubbornly. "He loves you every bit as much as he loves and wants that baby. You're just too stubborn to see it."

"If he loved me, he would never have given me up," Kayla said childishly. "He would have stayed around until the baby was born and—"

"And what? Begged you to let him marry you? Really, Kayla. Up until Nick met you, he wouldn't have asked a woman for a *date* twice unless she was something pretty terrific. He has *never* gone out of his way to court a woman, let alone cater to her whims. You just don't realize how different the man is since he met you!"

"Has he ... is he ... seeing anyone lately?" Kayla knew Paula would know if anyone would.

"Would it matter to you?"

"Of course it would matter to me," Kayla blazed, then quickly regained control of her temper. "I want him to be happy."

"Then I would suggest you get your fanny in gear and marry the man!" Paula said decisively, picking up her car keys and walking to the door. "You're going to wait around until the last minute, and he'll have to marry you on your way into the delivery room. Remember that old Doris Day movie where she was being rolled into the delivery room and the minister was marrying her to the baby's father?" She laughed.

"I remember." Kayla grimaced. "But that's only in the movies, Paula. I think I could pick a better time to get married than five minutes before my baby was born."

"Well, you'd better hurry," she warned. "December isn't that far off. By the way, I like that dress you're wearing. What color is it?"

Kayla looked down at her dress, unaware that it was anything unusual.
"Mint green, I think."

"It's nice. Do you like mint green?"

"Paula, what is this thing you've got about colors tonight?"

"Nothing! I simply asked if you liked mint green!"

"Yes!"

"*Fine!* I'll talk to you later." Paula blew her a kiss and went out the front door.

Another two weeks dragged by as Kayla continued to fight her feelings for Nick. The sound of the phone ringing one Thursday night was a welcome relief. After picking up the receiver on the third ring she was nearly floored when she heard the familiar man's voice at the other end of the line.

"Is this still the prettiest girl in town?"

"Tony?"

"That's right. Tony. Are you surprised?"

Surprised wasn't quite the word Kayla would have used. His voice was a reminder out of a past that she honestly hadn't thought about in months.

"Where are you?" she asked with a shaky laugh.

"Right here in town! I have business here in the morning, so I flew in tonight. Can you meet me for a drink?"

"Well, I don't know, Tony," she hedged, thinking of his wife, Maggie.

"I told Maggie that the first person I was going to call when I got here would be you. She agreed wholeheartedly, Kayla. I'd love to see you. How about it?"

"I guess I could, Tony. Where are you?"

"Some bar out here near the airport. Wait a minute." He put his hand over the receiver, and Kayla could hear him asking where he was. "Listen, maybe you'd better name a place for us to meet. I don't think this is any place for you to be."

Kayla laughed. "Okay." She gave him the name of a popular cocktail lounge and promised to meet him there in an hour. As she hung up the phone she couldn't help wondering why Tony had called. She hadn't heard from him since they had broken up, and as far as she knew, he didn't know where she was living at the moment. Obviously he had inquired about her and found out she had moved to Little Rock.

An hour later she pulled her car into the parking lot of the cocktail lounge and got out. Walking into the dimly lit lounge, she looked for Tony, hoping that he had arrived before her. He had, and as she spotted him he rushed forth, taking her in his arms for a large bear hug.

"Holy..." He stood back and surveyed her ballooning figure. "What is all this?"

Kayla grinned, then blushed prettily. "Kind of overwhelming, huh?"

"How many have you got there?" he teased, draping his arm around her and walking her to the table he had reserved earlier. Kayla didn't think a thing about Tony's affectionate ways. He had always been affectionate toward any woman he was around.

"I think only one, but it must be a very large one." She sighed, sitting in the chair he was holding out for her.

"Gosh, but you look good," he told her, his eyes sparkling sincerely. "It's been a long time!"

"Yes, it has. How are Maggie and the baby?"

"They're both fine. Just fine. Maggie gets prettier every day, and Tony, Jr. looks exactly like me!" he said proudly, fishing in his pocket for his wallet.

For the next five minutes they looked at baby pictures, both of them exclaiming about how cute Tony, Jr. was.

"Do you think I'm just prejudiced, or is that really the cutest baby you ever laid eyes on?" Tony asked seriously, his buttons about to pop of his shirt with pride.

"He's a beautiful baby, Tony. You sound very happy," she assured him.

"I am, Kayla. Happier than I deserve to be," he confessed solemnly.

Kayla reached across the table and took his hand. "I'm glad, Tony. I really am."

"That's why I wanted to see you, Kayla. I told Maggie I have never felt right about what happened between us . . . and I just had to see you again to be sure that your life was as happy as mine is. You don't know how relieved I am to see you all fat and sassy, carrying a baby of your own." He sounded tremendously relieved. "Who's the lucky guy?"

"The lucky guy—" Kayla's happy facade crumbled, and tears sprang to her eyes. She was mortified that she was going to break down in front of Tony, but she could sense it coming. "Excuse me, Tony," she mumbled, blindly fumbling in her purse for a tissue.

The tears started rolling down her cheeks unchecked as Tony hurriedly withdrew a snowy-white handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her. "I gather I said something wrong?"

"No. I have these silly bouts of crying all the time," she snuffed, wiping ineffectually at the salty wetness. "I hope you don't think I'm crazy."

"Not at all. Maggie bawled for three fourths of her pregnancy! I was so happy when she finally had the baby, I could have shouted," he said sympathetically, trying to help her mop up the tears. "Here, let me get you a drink." Tony motioned for a waiter and gave him an order for a glass of white wine. "Now . . . you want to tell me about it? I know tears are just a sign of pregnancy, but there's usually something bothering the mommy to bring them on." He smiled at her tenderly, sensing that in this case there was indeed something bothering the mommy.

Tony had always been a good listener, and suddenly Kayla found herself pouring out the whole story of the past seven months. Amidst tears of recrimination and self-pity Kayla told Tony all about her love for Nick and the frustration it had brought her. Tony was still a good listener, and he let her spill her heart out to him, stopping her only occasionally to question her about some minor detail.

An hour later she was still sniffing but feeling that a tremendous weight had been lifted from her shoulders. It had been marvelous therapy to tell her problems to someone other than Paula. Paula had been a saint, but she was definitely biased in Nicholas's favor.

"So the question is, do you want to marry this guy and give the baby a name, or do you struggle through it all alone?" Tony summed up a few minutes later.

"Not exactly. The problem is Nick wants to marry me for the baby's sake, and I want him to marry me because—"

"Because he loves *you*. Right?"

"Right." Kayla blew her nose daintily on his handkerchief.

"Sounds to me like he loves you," Tony said reasonably. "Most men wouldn't have taken the time and gone to the trouble to see that you were taken care of when you were so sick."

"You would have," Kayla reminded him with a sniff. "As I recall, you said you didn't love Maggie when you married her. Like Nicholas, you felt a responsibility toward your baby."

Tony's fingers played restlessly with the napkin under his drink. "At the time I was very much in love with you, Kayla. I was torn between responsibility and love. But I have never regretted the decision I made. Maggie is one hell of a woman, and I love her very deeply now. It has worked out beautifully for us. Our only regret was the way your life was torn up."

"I can't say that I didn't go through a pretty rough time, Tony, but now, since I met Nick—"

"You realize that love can find you in very strange ways?"

"Yes," she whispered softly.

"This Nicholas. He wouldn't happen to be around six one or two and have blond hair, would he?" Tony inquired abruptly.

Kayla glanced up at Tony in surprise. "Yes. Why?"

"Because unless I miss my bet, he walked in about ten minutes ago with a couple of other guys, and he's been sitting at the bar staring daggers at us ever since," Tony replied calmly, reaching for his drink and taking a casual sip.

Kayla's eyes flew over to the bar and encountered a frosty silver stare. "Oh, my gosh. It is Nick," Kayla mumbled, turning her head away quickly in embarrassment. "I hope he didn't see me!"

"Are you kidding? He hasn't taken his eyes off you since he walked through that door."

"I think I'll go to the ladies' room," Kayla said uneasily, hoping that by the time she returned, Nick would have gone.

Tony stood as Kayla slipped out of her chair and made her way hurriedly across the dimly lit room. The ladies' lounge was in the far rear of the building, safely away from the crowded bar.

Twenty minutes later she could think of no possible further reason to stay in the small room, having combed her hair and put on lipstick until she was sure the attendant thought she was a little weird. Stepping out cautiously, she peered around a potted palm, checking the bar area. A sigh of relief escaped her as she noted that the stool Nick had been perched on was now empty.

"Looking for someone?" an angry masculine voice asked from behind her. She whirled around.

"Nicholas! I thought you had left," she said irritably.

"Not on your life. Who's the man you're with?" he snapped curtly.

"None of your business," she snapped back and started to push resentfully by him. After all these weeks of leaving her alone to brood, he had nerve to suddenly reappear and demand to know who she was with!

"Oh, no, you don't." He reached out and grasped her arm, pulling her back into a dark alcove. Both arms came out to trap her between the wall and himself. "Now. Who is the guy?" he asked again tensely, that stubborn muscle on his jaw working tautly now.

"Tony," she spit out, trying to ignore how close his face was to hers and the smell of his familiar soap and aftershave.

"Tony?" Kayla could see the struggle on Nick's face to place the name. It took only a few seconds for grim recognition to replace the look of puzzlement. "Tony! The creep you used to be engaged to!"

"That's right. Now get out of my way!" Kayla pushed heatedly against the granite wall of his chest.

"What in hell are you doing with him?" Nick reached out and trapped both her flailing wrists in one hand.

"I don't owe you any explanation of who I see," she said, still seething but abandoning her struggles for the moment.

"You think not! Well, you're wrong, Kayla. What does that bum want? Surely he isn't wanting a reconciliation with you in your condition!" he fumed, gripping her wrists tighter.

"You're hurting me!" she said between clenched teeth. "Let me go!"

Nick fought to control his anger, loosening his grip on her very slowly. Kayla was surprised by his hot surge of temper. She had never seen him this angry. On the contrary, he was usually a pretty mild-tempered person.

"All right, I want you to march your little tush right over to that table and tell him to kiss off! Is that clear?"

"Kiss off! Are you mad? I'm not about to tell Tony—"

"Fine. Then I will." Nick whirled and started toward the table where Tony was sitting, his eyes blazing.

"No!" Kayla reached out and latched onto his tweed sports jacket, pulling him to an abrupt halt. "You're not going to go over there and make a scene!" she pleaded.

"Then you're going to tell him you're sorry, but *you* have to leave," he told her ominously. "And I don't mean later. I mean *right now!*"

"Where am / going?" she asked crossly.

"I want to talk to you," he replied sharply, straightening the cuffs of his shirt with short, aggravated jerks. "I'll wait for you outside. And, Kayla, don't try anything cute. I'm not in the mood for it tonight," he warned.

Making her hurried apologies to Tony, Kayla explained the situation and told him she would love to hear from him and Maggie soon. Tony assured her that she would and wished her the best of luck with Nick. Kayla laughed shakily, wondering what awaited her when she left the cocktail lounge. Nick had been in a nasty mood, and she anticipated a very unpleasant evening.

The night was chilly as she stepped out of the lounge and slipped her arms into the light jacket she had brought with her. Nick's red Ferrari squealed up to the curb, and he reached to sling the door open, motioning for her to get in.

"I have my car here," she protested as he pulled her into the car and peeled away from the curb.

"I'll send someone over to pick it up later," he barked.

They drove for several minutes without exchanging a word. The lights from the dash gave Nick's angry face an almost sinister look, making Kayla very uneasy.

Finally summoning up the courage to speak, she asked quietly, "What did you want to see me about?"

"Why were you with Tony tonight?"

Kayla sighed in exasperation. "Because he called earlier and wanted me to have a drink with him. How did you know I was at that lounge?"

"I didn't. I was there with a couple of business associates. I had no idea you would be there with your . . . boyfriend!"

"Good heavens. He's not my boyfriend, Nicholas. He's very happily married and has a child of his own now," Kayla said patiently, losing all desire to argue with him. She was suddenly just happy to be near him once more.

"He's got his nerve, asking you out for a drink," Nick stewed, shifting gears angrily. "If he's so damn happily married, where's his wife?"

"At home, I suppose. He's here on a business trip. And she knew he was going to call me. Where are we going?" she demanded as Nick cursed, then swerved to miss a car in front of him.

"I'm taking you home!"

"Thanks! But suppose I don't want to go home? Tony and I were talking—"

"I don't give a damn what you and *Tony* were talking about. What do you think I felt when I walked in there and saw you with that guy?"

"Nothing. I don't think you feel anything for me," she returned bluntly.

"Well, you're dead wrong! I felt plenty," he nearly shouted.

"You were probably worried about your baby, but you don't have to be. The baby is doing fine!"

"I know that. I talk to Dr. Walters every week," Nick barked curtly.

"You do?" Kayla looked at him suspiciously. "Why?"

"To see how you and the baby are doing. Why else?"

That *did* surprise Kayla. All these weeks she had supposed he couldn't care less how she was doing.

"And you're about five quarts of milk shy of what you should have drunk by now!" he said severely as he jerked the steering wheel to miss another car.

"Dr. Walters told you that? And slow down! You're going to kill us!" she yelled.

"No. Paula told me that!" he yelled back, ignoring her plea for sane driving.

"Paula . . . always Paula!" Kayla threw her hands up in the air disgustedly.

The sports car roared into Kayla's drive, and Nick slammed on his brakes with a screech. Turning the ignition off, he faced her defiantly. "Okay, Kayla, now I'm tired of fooling with you! I have patiently waited for seven long, unbearable weeks for you to come to your senses, and so far I've had no indication whatsoever that you have seen the light of day."

Kayla opened her mouth to respond, but one large hand clamped over it, preventing her words from escaping. "*No!* You're going to listen to me for a change," he said grimly. "I have *asked* you to marry me nicely. I have *pleaded* with you to marry me nicely. I have *waited* for you to marry me nicely. In fact, I am damn sick and tired of asking, pleading, waiting, *and* being nice! *You* are going to go into that house, pack a bag, then call a taxi, and come directly to my ranch. Now, I know you're wondering why I want you to come out in a taxi, but you have *got* to let me have one small shred of pride left, Kayla. At least I can always tell myself you *did* come to me, in a way. I'm not accustomed to getting down on my hands and knees and crawling to a woman, though in this case I'd crawl around the world if it would help. I know you don't believe I want you. I know you think it's only because of the baby that I want to marry you, but you're about as far out in left field as you can get. I want *you*. True, I want the baby, but I want *you* more. And I assure you I have *never* told another woman that in my life!" His gray gaze was solemn as he held her head, his hand clamped tightly over her mouth. "I want you to think back to the last night we spent together before all this fiasco began. I think you'll be able to come up with *the* most important thing I ever said to you. Not the lie. I want you to think of the truth I told you that night.

Think hard, Kayla. It's important. And when you remember, you call that taxi and come to me. I'll be waiting."

His free hand reached out and opened the door; then, releasing her mouth, he urged her out.

Kayla was standing out in the crisp night air, watching his red taillights disappear into the darkness before she realized that he was really gone. He had simply put her out in front of her house and driven off!

Slowly her mind ran over all he had just said to her. What *had* he told her that last night before she found out his true identity? She let herself into the dark apartment and without turning on the lights sat down on the sofa, her mind traveling back to six months ago. She had gone by Paula's office to have lunch with her, and they had discussed Kayla's love for Franklin. She had gone shopping that afternoon, wanting to look her best for Franklin that evening. He had taken her to dinner, and then they had made love. She remembered lying in his arms and his asking her to go away with him that coming Monday. She remembered the soft kisses, the hushed words they had shared. She could almost see his eyes, slumberous and solemn, as he had turned her face up to meet his and whispered . . . She blinked back the coming tears. He had whispered ... A beautiful smile lit her face as she sprang from the sofa and ran toward the bedroom to pack her bag.

It was growing very late as the taxi pulled across the cattle guard and drove up to the ranch house. A bright harvest moon hung suspended in the sky, casting its silvery beams over the quiet, lush pastures.

Kayla paid the driver as he set her bag out on the drive. The house was dark except for one light burning in the back, where Kayla knew Nick would be waiting. As the cab pulled away she walked up to the door and knocked softly. When no one answered, she tried the knob and found it unlocked. Opening the door, she slid in silently, knowing deep in her heart that she would be welcome. After all, this was her home now.

She walked quietly through the darkened house, her way lit by the shafts of moonlight streaming through the windows. In the distance she could see the light coming from Nick's den. Love filled her as she pushed the door open and stood in the faint rays of the lamp.

Nick turned from the window he had been staring out of, a glass of scotch gripped tightly in his hand. His eyes ran lazily over her burgeoning figure as he stepped away from the window and held one large, comforting hand out to her. Stepping forward, she took it, placing her small one in its welcoming warmth.

"I've been waiting for you," he said softly, love radiating from his voice.

"Very long?" she asked, her voice becoming unsteady.

"All my life," he confirmed in a husky whisper.

"Well, I'm here now."

"It's where you should have been all along, you know."

"I know." Their eyes were hungrily devouring each other's features, only the crackling of the fire in the grate breaking the silence in the room.

"Did you remember what I told you that last night we spent together?" he asked urgently.

"Yes, I remembered." She smiled tenderly. "Though I *had* forgotten that night and what you told me," she admitted.

"I thought you had. Want to refresh my memory?"

"Have you forgotten?" she teased, her arms going up around his neck.

"Hardly. Since you're the only woman in the world I've ever said that to, I don't think I would forget a thing like that." He leaned down and feather-brushed her lips. "I want to hear you say it."

"You said . . . you loved me. You said that no matter what happened, you wanted me to remember that you loved me."

"Do you believe that? If you don't, step into that room down the hall that has that big old four-poster bed you wanted, and I'll be more than happy to prove how much I meant those words," he offered huskily, his mouth touching hers again lightly.

"I plan on spending a lot of time in that big old four-poster bed," she assured him, "but I would kind of like to hear you say those wonderful words again."

"What? That I love you?"

"Yes," she returned shyly, her breathing quickening as his hand made its way up under her blouse and unsnapped her bra.

"You are really filling out," he teased, his hands closing over the voluptuous treasures he had uncovered. "Now, let's see, what were we talking about before you took my mind off our conversation?" He groaned as he kissed down the side of her neck, his hands roaming over her breasts lovingly. "Oh, yes, you want to hear me say, I love you."

"Do you mind?" she murmured happily.

"Not at all. I planned on telling you every day for the next fifty years anyway. I love you, Kayla," he said simply. "I will love you for the rest of our lives."

Kayla pulled away and surveyed his nose critically.

"What's the matter?"

"I was just checking to see if it grew any." She grinned, wrapping her arms around his neck once more.

"My nose hasn't grown, but I wouldn't make any bets about any other part of my body if I were you." He grinned back just before capturing her mouth with a smoldering kiss.

When they broke apart minutes later, Nick reached down and scooped her up in his arms hurriedly.

"One other thing I want to know before I start proving that everything I've tried to tell you for the last seven months was true," he said as he started carrying her toward the bedroom. "Are you *sure* we're going to have just *one* baby?"

"Positive," she replied happily, laying her head against his shoulder contentedly. "But maybe next time we won't be so lucky!"

"I want five or six, you know. Considering how mean and cantankerous you get when you're pregnant, maybe it *would* be better to have them two at a time," he reasoned worriedly.

Kayla shrugged her shoulders, her mouth searching sweetly for his. "It's the hormones. Remember?"

Laying her down gently on the bed, he stood above her and began to slowly unbutton his shirt, the sight of the broad expanse of his hairy chest making her turn weak and trembly.

"There's one more thing I have to assure you of, and then I .don't want it ever brought up again. I will always regret that we had to start our relationship with a lie, but I promise you there will never be another moment of deceit between us, Kayla. There's been a lot of long, lonely nights when I thought that one terrible mistake would destroy all the good things we had going for us. I know it will be hard for you not to remember that time in our life, but I'm going to work very hard to show you your trust in me will not be misplaced."

His shirt came off along with his trousers and then his briefs, and his smoldering gaze locked intimately with hers. Kayla ran her hands lovingly up his bare leg, marveling at how much love could fill her one small heart.

"I trust you," she replied with complete honesty. "Because if you *ever* lie to me again, I shall personally pinch your head off."

"Good. Now that we have that settled, come here, woman," he growled, crawling back onto the bed with her and enfolding her in his strong arms. "Oh, by the way." He stopped and propped himself up on his elbows and smiled angelically at her. "Did I mention we were getting married the day after tomorrow?"

Kayla smiled. "That's impossible. I couldn't plan a wedding that soon."

He cleared his throat nervously and picked up a lock of her hair to twirl around his finger absently. "Now, I don't want you to get upset, sweetheart, but I have something to tell you..."

Kayla's eyes narrowed. "What?"

"Well . . . now, look . . . you know I've always known you would eventually marry me... and time *is* running out. I didn't want to take the chance we'd have to hire a baby-sitter while we were on our honeymoon," he explained sheepishly, "so . . ."

"So?" Kayla sat up and glared at him distrustfully.

"So . . . Paula and I . . . well, now, honey, you can change *anything* you want except the color of the bridesmaids' dresses. They've already been ordered. The cake and the flowers have been ordered, and the church is reserved, but you can still select the music if you want to. Paula doesn't have to make a final selection on that until ten tomorrow morning."

Kayla gaped at him, her mouth dropping open wide. "You planned *our* wedding without even consulting me . . . without knowing whether I would accept ..."

"Now, don't get upset, sweetheart. I *knew* I was going to get you to marry me one way or another. You had exactly thirty- eight more hours to make up your mind, or I would have personally come over and hauled you to the church in that ridiculous circus tent you're hell-bent on wearing!" he said firmly. "Doug and Paula were going to help me."

"But what about a wedding dress?" she protested, amazed that he would go to such lengths to arrange their wedding.

"It's lovely. You're going to be crazy about it," he assured her quietly, kissing her into submission. "Don't fight it, Kayla. I love you, and we're getting married Saturday afternoon at two o'clock . . . period."

"You ... I can't believe you!" she sputtered lovingly.

"What's to believe? I told you, I can be pretty damn stubborn when it comes to something I want. And I've never wanted anything as badly as I wanted you," he whispered in a low, husky voice vibrating with emotion. "You're not really mad, are you?"

It took very little convincing to make Kayla agree to the forthcoming wedding, and minutes later Nick reached out and switched off the bedroom lamp, their passion overriding all else for the moment.

"Nick," she murmured against his plundering mouth. "Are those bridesmaids' dresses by any chance ... a mint green?"

"I think so," he breathed raggedly. "Why?"

"No reason," she muttered a trifle irritably, returning her attention to the exciting man who lay in her arms.

But at the back of her mind a tiny, little voice sang out at the top of its lungs, "Paula, you wonderful, glorious, marvelous . . . *ratfink!*"