



Scarlet Rose

# Yesterday's Desire

by

Darah Lace

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Yesterday's Desire

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Cover Art by *R.J.Morris*

First Digital Release: June 2006

The Wild Rose Press

P.O. Box 706

Adams Basin, NY 14410-0706

Visit our website at [www.thewildrosepress.com](http://www.thewildrosepress.com)

Created in the United States of America



As parties went, this one would be talked about for months to come. Guests packed the main floor of the sprawling country home. Standing shoulder to shoulder made it almost impossible to mingle, but the music was loud enough to make polite conversation unnecessary. And the food was incredible, only the best to celebrate the twenty-fifth birthday of the congressman's son.

But I had my own reason for never forgetting this night.

I'd become the focus of the birthday boy himself--the tall, tawny-headed prince of the manor. He'd noticed me before; I'd caught him looking at me on numerous other occasions. Brief though they were, I'd come to cherish those moments, even if he never actually acknowledged me. But then why would Bryce Donovan lower himself to speak to me, Kathleen Sullivan, daughter of the woman who once washed his laundry?

Still, I had his attention now.

Two things stood between me and the man I'd secretly loved for eight years, the first being his location. He congregated with his friends on the landing across the room, impossible to get to in this crowd. Not that I'd have the nerve to try. Even if I did, I'd have to get past the second obstacle, ever present at his side in various shapes and sizes since I'd joined his social circle three months ago. Tonight's hindrance was beautiful, leggy and blonde. I couldn't compete with beautiful, leggy or blonde. Well, maybe the blonde thing. After a peroxide rinse to my shoulder length, brown hair.

Being average in both looks and height, I found it difficult to believe that during the last half hour, when Goldilocks wasn't demanding his attention, Bryce and I had been taking turns giving

each other thoroughly heated once-overs. And it was his turn.

The warmth of his gorgeous blue gaze licked every inch of my stocking-clad legs. It paused at the juncture of my thighs where the silk material of my skirt outlined my pubic bone. As his eyes lingered a particularly long while on my size D breasts--so glad I wore the deep V-neck blouse--my nipples hardened, making him smile. I was hot and wet by the time he made it to my own hungry gaze.

Then I took my turn, surveying his Adonis-like physique. From the shaggy tips of his sun-kissed mane to the blunt-tipped toes of his Cowboy boots, he was pure perfection. His features had matured in the last few years, sharpening while retaining their boyish charm. All those masculine angles were softened by a sensuous mouth I longed to have against mine, or anywhere he chose to put it.

A baby blue T-shirt that matched his eyes stretched over broad shoulders and washboard abs. It tucked into the narrow waist of faded jeans. And oh, did those jeans fit well, accentuating the length of his long, lean legs and cupping one heck of an impressive package. I licked my lips, and damn if it didn't grow even more impressive.

I was definitely content in my little nook, exchanging distant but heated looks with Bryce Donovan. It was the closest I'd ever been to him, the closest I'd ever get.

Unfortunately, the blonde wasn't so content. She tugged on his arm, obviously wanting him to follow her. He seemed irritated by the interruption of our little game, yet with a quirky smile of apology, he let her lure him up the stairs...where the party was sure to become private...where I was sure to be forgotten.

Disappointed that I'd let my hopes rise, that I had deluded myself into believing I stood a chance with Bryce, I pressed through the throng of writhing dancers and slipped out the French doors into the sultry night air. The party had spilled outdoors onto the

patio, but I recognized the stone path I'd taken as a child when visiting the Donovan family manor.

Eight years had passed since I last saw the gazebo, but the comfort of its familiarity beckoned. The vacant structure had borne witness to my heartache on more than one occasion so it seemed only fitting to go there now.

Climbing the steps, I peered inside to make sure I didn't intrude on a lovers' tryst. Finding it empty, I sought the innermost corner and slumped against the lattice wall. I had to get over Bryce Donovan and move on with my life. There were other men out there, plenty of them interested in me. Handsome Dr. Will Camden had helped me through a rough time and made it known he'd be waiting in the wings when I was ready. But the good doctor didn't make me feel the way Bryce did.

The scuff of boots on stone alerted me to someone's approach. Moonlight filtered through the wall behind me to outline the tall frame that filled the doorway. My heart jumped to my throat.

"I knew you'd be here." Bryce's bourbon-rich voice spilled into the night, intoxicating me.

"You did--but how would--"

"You always came here when your mom brought you to work with her."

He remembered that? I hadn't thought he knew I was alive back then. In fact, I hadn't been sure he even knew who I was tonight. Yeah, he'd noticed me at other events lately, but that didn't mean he knew me. "I didn't want her to get in trouble so I tried to stay out of the way."

"I figured that. My mother can be...difficult."

Grace Donovan could be more than difficult. She could be manipulative and cruel. I'd felt the sharp edge of her tongue more than once, the last time at seventeen. She'd caught me mooning over Bryce as he practiced jumps in the back paddock. The woman had accused me of trying to seduce her son so I could trap him into

marriage. She reminded me of my place, that Bryce had been groomed to continue in his father's footsteps in politics, and that trash like me... well, I'd only ruin his chances and drag him down. She also threatened to accuse my mom of stealing and have her arrested if I ever went near him again.

I could say one thing for the bitch--she was the driving force behind my determination to make something of myself. One more year of law school and I'd be as good as any of their kind. And my mom had died almost a year ago. Grace Donovan could go straight to hell.

"Where is your mother? I didn't see her tonight." If she'd seen me, she'd have run me off.

"In D.C. with my father."

"She couldn't get away for the party?"

"She wasn't invited." He rested a shoulder against the doorway, arms folded, hip cocked. "But I'm glad you came."

I hoped he didn't think I crashed his party. "I was surprised by the invitation. Don't know how that happened."

"I made it happen. I wanted you here."

My heart began to race, but I willed it to slow, trying not to let my imagination or wishful thinking take control again. "Why?"

One golden brow rose suggestively. "Ah, Katie, haven't you figured that out by now."

A hot rush of awareness threaded through my breasts at the way he said my name but more so at the implication of his words. He wanted me. Yes, I'd known that earlier in the house, but now I knew he wanted *me*, Katie Sullivan, and not just a girl across the room. Still, I couldn't read too much into the simple statement. "I heard you left your father's firm."

"We both agreed practicing law just wasn't in my blood. I sure as hell wasn't cut out for politics."

"I'll bet your mother doesn't agree."

"She doesn't have a say in my life anymore."



"What about your girlfriend? Does she have a say?" Even to me, the question sounded rife with jealousy. But I had to know what she meant to him.

He cocked his head to one side and frowned. "What girlfriend?"

"The blonde you were with all evening."

"Are you saying you thought I'd come onto you with a girlfriend standing next to me?"

"Are you telling me she isn't your girlfriend?" I shook my head. "Never mind. It's none of my business." What did it matter? He might believe the difference between a girlfriend and a warm body to share the night significant, but I didn't. In the long run, they both shared the intimacy of his body.

"You don't think much of me, do you?"

If he only knew how well I thought of him. Or how often. "You probably think I'm terrible, flirting with you when I thought you were with your girlfriend?"

"I could never think badly of you."

I searched his face for hidden meaning but found none. More than likely, he was being polite.

"She's my cousin, by the way."

I lifted a skeptical brow. "Kissing cousins maybe?"

"You didn't recognize Lisa? She remembered you."

"*That* was Lisa?" The last time I'd seen his cousin, she'd been ten years old, wearing braces and pigtails and wanting me to help her catch fire flies. The girl couldn't be more than seventeen now, but she certainly looked older, more grown up.

"She's still in boarding school--flew in from New York for my birthday. I couldn't just dump her with a bunch of strangers. I was waiting for Brit to show up."

Ah, Brit, the other cousin, the one I'd dubbed Grace 2. Poor Lisa.

Then the rest of his words registered. He'd been waiting. Waiting to do what, be with me? Not possible. No way. *Oh, please*

*let it be true.* “I wondered what they were waiting for, why the cake hadn’t been served. Brittney would have thrown a fit if she’d missed it. You’d better get back so you can blow out the candles.”

I bit down hard on my bottom lip to keep from making a bigger fool of myself. I was rambling--always did when I was nervous--and it sounded like I was fishing. Or did I sound like I was trying to get rid of him, that I didn’t want him? I wished I knew what was going on in that head of his.

“I was waiting to get you alone.”

Alone. He wanted me alone. And we were alone now. I gripped the beam behind me to keep from throwing myself at him. I’d played the visual game with him earlier, thrilled with the attention yet knowing nothing could come of it. Except more heartache.

A smile dissolved the lines of his frown as he pushed away from the arched entryway. “Glad we got that out of the way.”

He crossed the distance between us, stopping right in front of me, so close I could feel the heat radiating from his body, smell the musky scent of his cologne. I trembled as the back of his thumb drew my lower lip from between my teeth and caressed the indentation they created. “Because I’m going to kiss you now.”

I couldn’t have moved if I’d wanted to. And I certainly didn’t want to. Hands on either side of my face, Bryce dipped his head, slowly, slowly, until I thought I’d die if he didn’t hurry up and kiss me. I felt his breath first, then the brush of his lips on the spot his thumb had vacated. My belly quivered in anticipation, and I couldn’t help the whimper that escaped.

Answering with a growl, his mouth slanted over mine, his tongue plunging inside. The kiss was slow, provocative and hot. It drew me in, pulled me under, and just when I thought I’d drown in ecstasy, he ended it.

Forehead pressed to mine, he said, “I’ve wanted to do that all night. Hell, I’ve wanted to do that since the first time I saw you.

You came into the barn, wearing a tight pink T-shirt and white cut offs. I wanted to drag you into the nearest stall, strip them off and kiss you all over.”

I remembered that day with as much clarity as he seemed to. He'd returned after a year's absence at school. At seventeen, he balanced on the edge of manhood. Gone was the gangly awkward boy, replaced by the sinewy self-assured teen. Watching him clean the stalls, I fell head over heels in lust with him right then and there. Love had come later, growing a little each day, every time he carried the heavy laundry basket for my mom or fixed a flat on the old clunker she drove.

Emboldened, I released my death grip on the ledge and reached between his arms to glide my hands up his chest. “Nothing we can do about then, but I'm here now. You can kiss me again, wherever you want...if you want.”

“Oh, yeah. I want.” Sliding his fingers into my hair, he cradled my head and made love to my mouth. This time the current that dragged me under was stronger, swifter. I would have melted into a puddle on the floor if he hadn't chosen that moment to sandwich me between the length of his hard body and the wall. His weight was welcome, the bulge pressing into my hip, assuring me he was just as turned on as I was.

Circling my arms around his neck, I went for his hair. It was as I'd imagined, cool and soft in my hands, like silk. I tugged slightly, not really knowing why.

He pulled back slightly. “It's okay, baby, I know what you need.”

The tip of his finger trailed along the neckline of my blouse to the center of the V, and with a flick of his wrist, the top button popped free. I should have stopped him, but if this was all I ever had with Bryce, I wanted whatever he was willing to give.

One by one he undid them. My breath came faster and faster, until at last he opened my blouse. My chest was heaving so hard

my breasts threatened to spill from my black satin bra. Another flick of those competent fingers and the clasp gave, the cups parted. He thumbed the straps at my shoulders, dragging both the bra and the blouse down and off. He tossed them aside and leaned back to look at me.

Heavy and tight with excitement, nipples hard and jutting upward, my breasts waited impatiently for his touch, nodding their permission with every breath. He lifted a reverent hand. "Beautiful."

I almost cried when he finally touched me. His big hand palmed one breast, lifting it, testing its weight. His thumb grazed my nipple, making me squirm. I wanted more. I wanted his mouth on me.

Hands diving into his hair again, I urged him forward. He came eagerly, hungrily. His tongue lapped at my nipple. His teeth nipped. I arched, and he took me in his mouth. He sucked, and a jolt of heat streaked from my breast to my womb, causing the muscles surrounding my clitoris to contract. I gasped.

Pausing to look up at me, he smiled in masculine satisfaction, then continued to feast-nipping, tonguing, sucking. His hand slipped under the hem of my skirt and up my thigh. I shivered when the tips of his fingers traced the edge of my panties from crotch to waistband. His thumb hooked the elastic at my hip and drew it down, down, until my underwear fell in a whisper around my ankles.

Palming my mound, he straightened and kissed me lightly on the mouth. "I'm going to watch you come now."

Before I could react, he pressed a finger between the moist folds and slid it along my clit to the edge of my weeping entrance. "Oh, yeah, you're hot for me, aren't you, sweetheart?"

Gripping his shoulders, I moaned at the sensation slicing through me and whispered, "Since you walked into the room tonight."

With a grunt of approval, he inserted a denim-clad knee between my thighs. "Open for me. Yes, that's it," he said as I widened my stance. His finger pushed deeper, and my body stretched to accept it. "Damn, you're tight."

Pulling out, a second finger joined the first to fill me again. In and out. In and out. The slick friction sent sparks down my thighs. Hot pressure began to build. I was close, and if I only had this one time with Bryce, I wanted him inside me. I wanted to feel his cock pumping in and out of me as his finger did.

I reached for his belt, but he stopped me with his free hand. "We'll get there, Katie, baby. Believe me, we'll get there. But first..." His thumb circled my clit, and I couldn't hold back a sob. The pleasure was unbearable. "Is this what you wanted when you were teasing me from across the room?"

"I didn't--oh!" I exploded, waves of fire pulsing from the center of my core outward, throbbing through every nerve of my body. "Yes, oh, yes."

"Ride it, baby," he rasped. "Katie, Katie, you're so beautiful when you come, so free."

The waves crested, reaching a height I'd never achieved. As they began to ebb I opened my eyes to find him regarding me with barely restrained passion. In that moment, my heart still hammering, I wanted more than anything to give him the same pleasure he'd given me. "What did you think about during our little game tonight?"

His gaze dropped to my mouth, and I remembered how his cock had grown when I licked my lips. I knew what he wanted. Just thinking about taking him in my mouth made me hot again. I slid my tongue over my lips. His eyes flared and shifted to mine.

Frantically, I reached for his belt again, but he was there first, ripping the buckle open. While he was busy unfastening his jeans, I wanted to feel his skin against mine. I gathered the bottom of his shirt, raising it. He paused to yank it over his head. Except for the

downy soft hair between his coppery nipples and feathering down his belly, his bronzed skin was smooth. And hot to the touch.

His jeans dropped to his knees, and I dropped to mine, his engorged cock an inch from my mouth. I wrapped my fingers around it but was immediately jerked to my feet and pressed against the wall. "As much as I'd love to fuck that pretty mouth of yours," he ripped open a condom package with his teeth, "I want to be inside you when I come."

Sheathed, he gripped the underside of my butt and hauled me up against him. I clung to his broad shoulders as he guided me onto the thick head of his erection. He readjusted his hold, grasping my hips to withdraw then ease forward again. He went slightly deeper, but it wasn't enough, his progress too slow for the fever that spread like wildfire within me. I wanted all of him. "Now."

"Easy, baby. I don't want to hurt you. You're so damn tight." He rolled his hips again.

"Can't--wait." I wrapped my legs around his waist and arched to take him deeper. His hips bucked, driving his cock deeper still, and my muscles contracted around him.

"Ah, fuck." His mouth came down on mine, his tongue demanding entrance as he began to pump faster, harder. Every slamming thrust took me higher and closer to the pinnacle I craved. Then suddenly I was there, freefalling over the edge, spiraling through a cloud of white hot energy.

Bryce tore his mouth from mine and with a deep guttural groan, threw back his head. Cum spewed against the latex wall of the condom as his cock pulsed through his orgasm, my own spasms milking him without mercy.

Finally spent, his head dropped to my shoulder, his breath hot and heavy fanned my breast. "I don't think I can stand up much longer."

"You can let me down."

"No, I'm not ready to let you go."

I laughed. "I'm not going anywhere. I don't think my legs will work any time soon."

"I'm not talking about now." He brushed my hair from my eyes. "Stay with me tonight. The weekend. Forever."

My heart stopped. "What are you talking about?"

"I love you, Katie."

I heard the words, had ached to hear them for so long, and for him to throw them at me so carelessly, so casually, hurt. I lowered my legs. "Let me down, please."

"Did you hear what I said?"

"I heard you."

After a moment's hesitation, Bryce lifted me off him and set me on my feet then backed away. I snatched my bra from where it hung on the lattice and quickly put it on, aware of him watching me as he pulled up his jeans and tucked in his shirt.

I bent to swipe my blouse off the floor and shoved my arms into the sleeves. "You should get back to your other guests. I have to go."

"Is that it then?" he asked quietly. "I tell you I love you and you brush me off?"

I looked up from buttoning my blouse and stilled. His eyes blazed like blue flames, but not with passion as before. He was pissed. I'd obviously injured his pride. My own anger ignited. His wounded ego would be a hell of a lot easier to get over than my broken heart. "Don't feel like you have to say things you don't mean. I don't expect them."

I turned to leave, but his hand snaked out to grab my arm. "Why are you doing this?"

I shrugged. "Situations like this can be awkward. I'm trying to make it easier for you." *And less painful for me.*

His sharp laugh held a bitter edge. "Nothing about us has been easy. And the only thing I expect is for you to be honest with me."

“Me? You’re the one who needs to be honest. You don’t love me.”

“The hell I don’t.” He yanked me roughly against him, both hands gripping my upper arms. “I’ve waited a long time to be with you. Eight goddamn years. I’ll be damned if I’ll let you walk away now.”

His mouth came down on mine, hard and punishing. His tongue speared between my lips. In as little time as it took me to recover from the shock of his anger or even think about struggling, his anger turned to passion. My own flared instantly, and I met his demand with a desire I hadn’t thought possible so soon after what we’d just shared.

Loosening his hold, his hands slid around me, one to the small of my back where it seared the bare flesh under my blouse, the other to angle my head for deeper penetration. Tongues sparring, lips devouring, breaths harsh and shallow. Crushed against him, I could only cling to his shirt, trying to get closer. I wanted to climb inside him.

He ripped his lips from mine. “God, Katie, I love you so much. Please don’t tell me it’s too late, that you don’t love me. How can you not and respond to me like that?”

The anguish in his voice tore at my heart. I pushed at him, and he eased his hold enough for me to look at him. Pain as raw and deep as my own reflected in his eyes. Tears blurred my vision. Could it be true? Could he have felt the same as me all these years? But if that were true, why hadn’t he told me?

I swallowed hard. “You never said a word, never even tried. Why wait until now?”

“I wanted to.” His expression softened as he wiped a tear from my cheek. “But I was young and stupid and-- Come here.” He led me to the bench a few feet away, pulled me down beside him and angled to face me. “The day I first saw you, that day in the barn, I couldn’t get past my twisted tongue to speak to you. You were so



pretty, it scared me to death. And I wanted to kiss you so bad it hurt. But I was filthy from mucking out the stalls. I wasn't sure if you were looking at me because I smelled so bad or if you thought I was an idiot for staring at you or because you liked what you saw. So I tried to play it cool, like I didn't notice you."

He'd done a good job. I'd never thought of him as anything but confident, self-assured and maybe a bit aloof--never shy or insecure.

With a weary sigh, he leaned against the wall and closed his eyes. "I thought about you a lot while I was away at school and couldn't wait for summer so I could come home. I found a hundred different ways to be near you when you came to help your mom. I busted the lock on the laundry room door just so I could fix it while you were in there folding towels."

My chest tightened at the memory of that day. I'd been so sure I was invisible to him, that he would never see me as anything but a servant's daughter. As soon as he'd left, I ran to the gazebo to hide my misery.

"When I was home from my first year of college, I'd just about worked up the nerve to talk to you. You stood by the fence and watched me put Jasper through his paces. I thought, 'This is it. I'm going to ask her out. I'll tell her how I feel.' But my last turn around the paddock, I looked up and you were gone."

The day his mother had called me into the barn to set me straight.

"I looked for you, but you were gone. I even came here. A week later I learned from your mom that you'd taken a job at the Food Mart in town and wouldn't be around much anymore. I went to grab my keys, determined to talk to you--I didn't care if I had to buy everything in the store. But my mother caught me at the door. She told me she heard my conversation with your mom. She said you weren't the kind of girl I needed to get involved with, that I should keep to my own, for the sake of my father's career if not for my own future. Then she threatened to fire your mom if I pursued

my interest in you. I knew how hard things were for you already. God, I never like my mother much, but I hated her then.”

Tears ran unchecked down my face now. So much wasted time, so many heartaches. I couldn’t and wouldn’t add to his by telling him Grace had threatened me as well. My mother and I had been all there was to our family. We depended on each other, cared about the other’s happiness more than our own. I couldn’t imagine not having her support and love.

Sitting forward, he rested his elbows on his knees. “I went through the motions after that. Got my law degree, dated all the right women, helped my dad with his campaign. But I never stopped thinking about you. Oh, I would for a while. Then something or someone would remind me of you, and I’d wonder where you were, if you’d married some lucky guy and were having his kids. I could have asked your mom, but I didn’t want to know, not really. It was easier that way because even though I wanted you to be happy, I hated the thought of another man touching you.”

I wanted to reach for him, to tell him I’d never stopped thinking of him either, that I’d loved him all those years ago and still did. But I’d asked him the question and opened a well of emotion he seemed to need to work through as much as I needed to understand what had kept us apart.

“A little over a year ago, I came home from a business trip and caught my mother with the pool boy. She never so much as blinked when I confronted her. Just said she and my father had an agreement. It was then I realized how stupid I’d been. I’d lived my whole life the way my parents wanted me to, doing everything they expected. Along the way, I’d given up my own dreams. And you. I decided right then I’d find you. And if you were still free... But before I could even put that thought into motion, your mom died.”

He reached for my hand and squeezed it gently. “I knew she’d been sick for a while, I’m sorry.”

Unable to form words for the knot in my throat, I nodded.

"I went to her funeral," he went on. "I wanted to be there for you, but I sat in the back and watched another man hold you."

Dr. Will Camden. "He was my mother's doctor. A nice man but nothing more."

"I should have asked." He sucked in a resigned breath and exhaled slowly. "Anyway, I just sort of drifted along after that, taking fewer and fewer clients, spending more time at my grandfather's horse farm. Then I saw you at Riley's party. I couldn't believe it when I found out you were still single and actually going to law school right here in town. I watched you all that night."

I remembered Mason Riley's party well. I'd become friends with his sister through school and decided at the last minute to accept her invitation. There were times afterward I wished I hadn't. Bryce had worn Lindsey Reynolds all evening, killing me as every second passed. I left early. "Why didn't you talk to me?"

"And say what, 'Hey, you don't know me, but I want to jump your bones, and by the way, I've been in love with you forever.' You'd have told me to get lost."

"I'd have thrown myself at you in a heartbeat."

He smiled, lightening the ache in my chest. "But I didn't know that. So I started going to more parties, making sure you were invited. I continued to watch you, to gauge your response to the attention. At first I couldn't tell if you were interested or not."

"You'd have known a lot sooner if you hadn't had a new woman on your arm every time I saw you."

"Some were for cover. Some I couldn't shake."

I sniffed. "I wanted to shake a few."

"Why?"

The question jarred me. So far I hadn't admitted my feelings, and I'd guarded them so well for so long. I stared at the floor and revealed a chink in my armor. "It hurt to see you with them. I couldn't sleep on those nights for imagining what you were doing to

them while I slept alone. I would have stopped going out altogether, but that meant not seeing you at all.”

His finger lifted my chin, forcing me to look at him. “Those women never made it to my bed, Katie.”

“I have a hard time believing you lived like a monk all these years. I certainly didn--”

He moved his finger to cover my mouth. “I don’t want to know. But if it makes a difference to you, no, I wasn’t celibate before I saw you at Riley’s. Once I began to hope again, though, I slept every night alone.”

Laughing at my surprise, he pulled me onto his lap. “That didn’t mean I wasn’t getting any action. As often as I thought of you, I probably have carpal tunnel.”

Imagining Bryce naked in bed, thinking of me and jacking off, turned me on. I rocked against the growing bulge behind his fly and made a confession of my own. “I gave Doc a pretty good work out myself.”

He tensed. “I thought you said he didn’t mean anything to you.”

Grinning at his jealous frown, I shook my head. “Doc is what I call my vibrator--short for device of choice.”

“Ah, baby, you’re killing me.” He ground himself against my bottom then abruptly moved me off his lap. “Not yet. I made a mistake earlier, but I couldn’t wait another second to have you. Next time I make love to you, I plan to take my time. And I want everything settled. That’s why I arranged this party. I wanted you here, where it all began.”

“I know as much as I need to, Bryce. You love me. Nothing else matters.”

He stood abruptly and paced to the other side of the gazebo and back again. When he stopped in front of me, rubbing a hand over his face, I reached for the one on his hip. “What is it?”

“I thought I had you figured out a couple of weeks ago. You

were starting to let your feelings show when you thought I wasn't looking. But then tonight after..." he waved a hand to the spot where they'd made love and let it fall to his side. "I still don't know how you feel."

Looking up at him, I realized the time had come. I had to step out from behind the wall I'd built and expose myself. He'd done as much and now it was my turn.

I tried to pull him toward me, but he refused to budge. Instead, his fingers slipped from my grasp. My heart ached at the loss of his touch. "So what it'll be, Katie. You haven't told me yet. Do you love me or is it too late?"

Every doubt vanished as I rose to place a hand on either side of his face and took that first step. "It's not too late. You could have waited another fifty years and I'd still love you."

Before I knew it, I was in his arms, his face buried in my hair. "Ah, Katie, Katie, Katie. I thought I'd never hear you say it."

"And now that I have, what next?" My feet flew off the ground as he scooped me up and headed down the steps. His long stride, swift and sure, ate up the ground between the gazebo and house. "Where are we going?"

"To my bed. Where you belong."

I didn't argue. I'd be right where I'd always dreamed of being. In his bed. In his arms. In his heart.