

RECIPE FOR MAGIC

by

Kristen Painter

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Chapter One

Kelly pounded his fist against the door for the third time. "I know you're in there, Shelby. Open up." If she'd done anything foolish...his blood chilled at the thought, and he raised his hand again.

Across the hall, a door opened and a wizened face peered out. "She hasn't been out in days."

He nodded. "I know, Mrs. Rubenstein." He lifted the plastic sacks stuffed with food containers from his restaurant. "That's why I came. She's got to eat."

The old woman clucked her tongue. Her fingers strayed to a strand of graduated pearls at her throat. "When my Milton died, I lost twenty pounds."

He smiled. "You must have been nearly invisible then."

She smiled back and touched her gray curls. "If I were thirty years younger, you'd be in trouble, young man." Her smile faded. "You take care of that sister of yours. Poor thing is taking this so hard. She's got a lot of life left to live."

"Will do, ma'am." He knocked on the door a fourth time. If he had to, he'd go get Mick and they'd take the door off the hinges. "Shel, let me in or I'll call the super and tell him I smell gas."

"That'll do it." Mrs. Rubenstein gave him a wave and shut her door. A few seconds later, the sound of a deadbolt unlocking came from inside Shelby's apartment.

His sister opened the door, but left the chain lock on. "What?"

He could barely see her in the dark interior. It was 10 A.M. Every blind must be nailed down. "I brought you some food."

“I’m not hungry.” She started to close the door, but he jammed his boot in.

“You’ve got to eat.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Let me in or I will pole-axe this door, so help me.”

“You’re a bully.”

“I can live with that.”

She exhaled like the act of breathing was a chore, her eyes blank and dull as the dark circles beneath them. “Move your foot so I can undo the chain.”

“You swear you’ll let me in?”

Her mouth bunched to one side and she tugged at her t-shirt – one of Kevin’s old ones. Judging by the length of her sweatpants, they’d been Kevin’s too. “Yes. Fine. Whatever.”

He moved his foot. “Love you too.”

She undid the chain, opened the door and walked back into the cave of her apartment without waiting for him to enter. Her honey blonde hair was knotted up in a greasy ponytail. She flopped onto the couch, her gaze going to the bags in his hand. “If you think I’m eating something you made...”

“I didn’t use the book.” He wouldn’t either, not directly. Shelby had to get through this for real, without the use of the magic his family’s mystical cookbook could provide. He set the sacks on the litter-covered coffee table.

“Prove it.”

He grabbed the box on top, opened it, took out a piece of cornbread and bit into it. He swallowed and stuffed the rest of the piece back in. “There. No spell. And even if there was, it would be gone now.”

“Fine. I’m not hungry. Stick the food in the fridge. I’m going back to bed.”

“Shel, you can’t spend the rest of your life in bed. Or in this apartment.”

“Sure I can.” She disappeared into the master bedroom, shutting the door hard enough to tell him she hadn’t gotten past anger yet.

Sighing, he flipped on the kitchen light and put the food in the fridge beside a gallon of milk that had expired a week after Kevin’s sudden heart attack. He added it to the overflowing trash, then changed the bag and set it by the door.

The apartment smelled stale and slightly rancid. Dirty dishes spilled out of the sink. Unread mail covered the counter. He walked into the living room to let in some light, wondering if he could get away with opening the windows for some fresh air. He yanked up the blinds and a shower of papery leaves rained off the ivy that had once thrived on the sill.

Kevin had been in the ground nearly five months. Shelby should be functioning better than this. Kelly shook his head. He hadn't felt so helpless or useless since they'd been kids. He'd vowed to protect her and he had, up until now, but this was different. Shelby was shutting down and he was powerless to stop it. Nothing he'd said or done had made any difference. Hope drained out of him like he'd been shot full of holes.

He kneeled and scooped the leaves into an old newspaper. They crumbled into dust under his touch. Losing his brother-in-law had been painful enough. He would not lose Shelby too.

She'd refused the counseling offered by the hospital, said she wasn't about to be put through that machine just so they could feel better about not being able to save Kevin, but there had to be someone she'd listen to. Someone who understood what she'd been through. Who knew how to free his beautiful baby sister from the grief turning her into a ghost.

He stared at the ceiling. Dust motes turned the sunlight coming through the windows into foggy streaks. Cobwebs draped the room's corners. The leaves and newspaper crumpled in his fist. He'd find someone who could help her. That much he could do.

* * *

Fifteen minutes until opening and the chain bookstore hummed with activity. In the employee break room, Kelly arranged some chocolates on a small wooden tray. What woman could resist a man who made his own chocolates? Hopefully, not the one he was about to meet today. After all he'd read about Dr. Meredith Black, she seemed like the right person to fix Shelby. She'd been on Oprah. That was like the female stamp of approval. And fate, in the form of his publicist, his editor and numerous phone calls, had gotten him a seat at this multi-author book signing. Charming Dr. Black into helping Shelby should be the easy part, so long as he got some of these chocolates into her.

The manager sidled up. "She's here." He bumped his chin toward the tables reserved for the signing. "Just settled in."

"Thanks." Kelly turned, his heart thumping with new hope. She arranged the books at her table, visible through the door. Her dark brown hair was twisted up, sleek and smooth, and her

conservative tan suit, white blouse, and low heels were just what he'd hoped for. She was perfect. Exactly the kind of woman Shel would respect. Professional. Serious. Killer legs. He grinned. Shel wouldn't care about those, but they were a nice bonus.

Leaning against the fridge, the manager snorted. "Don't know how she got one man to marry her, let alone two. She looks like a dull fish."

Kelly stiffened and glared at him. "She's buried both those husbands. Might take a toll on a person, don't you think?"

"Yeah, I suppose." He mumbled something about work to do and took off.

Kelly returned his gaze to Dr. Black. Any woman who could survive being twice widowed and then make a career of helping others through their grief deserved some respect. So she looked a little reserved. So what. She could help Shelby.

Dr. Black sat in her chair and folded her hands in her lap, back straight, face serene. He palmed the tray and stepped out to see better. She studied the other author tables.

Dog biscuits and fuzzy neon mice covered the table opposite hers. An easel displayed the book *Sit, Speak, Feel*. Some sort of pet psychic. He glanced back at Dr. Black. She smirked and rolled her eyes.

He chuckled. No surprise a practical woman like that didn't buy the psychic thing. He moved closer, following her sightline to the next table. A romance author. That was probably more her speed. But her jaw tensed as she surveyed the stack of books titled *Second Chances*. She frowned, her fingers worrying a ring on her right hand. Odd. That whole fairy tale ideal seemed to fall in line with the "getting on with your life thing" she preached.

She adjusted a wayward hairpin, her gaze turning downright disapproving. Damn. Maybe this wasn't going to be so easy. Well, standing around thinking about it wouldn't get the job done.

He headed over, took a deep breath and extended his tray and his brightest smile.

"Hi there. Chocolate-covered pepita cluster?"

She looked up, startling him with unexpected green eyes. She knit her brows at the tray of chocolates he held out. "No, thank you."

"Aw, c'mon. Try one. I made them special for the book signing." He amped up his grin. "They won't kill you."

The twitch at the corner of her mouth disappeared too quick to be called a smile.
“Everything kills you sooner or later.”

“Guess that’s what keeps you in business, huh?”

“You might say that, yes.” She took one of the bumpy chocolates, stripped off the star-patterned paper cup and inspected the candy before popping it in her mouth and chewing.

With her dark hair pulled up, the exposed length of her pale neck seemed as wicked as a glimpse of cleavage. Every movement of her taut jaw was precise, measured.

Her eyes closed and she leaned back, nodding. He swallowed. She didn’t look quite so reserved at the moment. Her blissful expression was one he wouldn’t mind seeing again—especially if he could take credit for it.

He tipped his head to sneak a peek beneath the table. One point for great legs, one point for not mentioning the word diet when he’d offered the chocolate.

Her hand went to her mouth and she exhaled a quiet, “Mmmm”. Color spread across her cheeks as she swallowed, opening her eyes. “The spiciness was unexpected. But nice. I’m impressed.”

Me, too. He exhaled a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. She licked her lips and his groin took notice. Okay, that wasn’t supposed to happen. “Glad you liked it. The habanero’s a kicker, ain’t it?”

“Indeed.” Her green gaze narrowed in on him, darting from his face to his chest to his Texas-shaped belt buckle then back to his face. Cattle at auction didn’t get inspected this hard. “What exactly is a pepita? Please don’t tell me it’s chef speak for toasted cricket.”

“Pepitas are pumpkin seeds.” He extended the tray again. “Want another?”

She paused, her clenched hand hovering over the tray. *C’mon, take one.* Chocolate released all kinds of good endorphins and he needed her in a willing mood. He brought the tray closer.

Her hand unclenched. Relief swept him.

“Thank you.” She took another. “I’ll save it for later.” She set the candy in its little paper cup beside her pen.

He put the tray down, then jerked his thumb toward the table beside hers. “I’m right here next to you.” *Thanks to promising that fool manager a deuce at seven next Friday night.* “Kelly Spicer, author of *Grill Of My Dreams*.”

She glanced over at the stacks of cookbooks on his table. “So I see. How wonderful to be so successful at such a young age.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Young? There couldn’t be more than ten, fifteen years between them. He held his tongue. She could say and do whatever she liked, so long as she agreed to see Shelby. He stuck out his hand.

Her gaze met his again and she shook his hand. “Dr. Meredith Black.” Her eyes returned to the uneaten pepita cluster.

Good. She liked his sweets. He could work with a woman who dug his cooking. Plus a woman who appreciated good food couldn’t be that bad. “You’re the grief doctor, right?”

“I’m sorry, what?” she asked, looking up.

“You help folks with—”

The manager clapped his hands. “All right people, I’m about to unlock the doors. Let’s sell some books!”

They’d have to talk later. “Time to paint my butt white and run with the antelope.”

“Paint your what?” She shook her head, her brow crinkling.

He laughed. “I mean it’s time to get this signing underway.” He leaned in, catching a whiff of her clean, soapy scent. “Maybe we can talk some more, after the signing?”

She ran her tongue over her teeth before smiling pensively. “I suppose. Nice meeting you, Chef Spicer.”

He grinned again, and new color brightened her cheeks. “You can call me Kelly. Nice meeting you too, Dr. Black.”

“Meredith is...okay.” She bit her lip like she regretted offering that bit of intimacy.

She was warming up to him, whether she liked it or not. “Meredith, then. Much obliged.” He slid between the two tables to get to his seat.

The next two hours raced by. The female population of New York City had shown up in force. And God bless them, they’d bought nearly every copy of his cookbook the store had ordered.

He was in the midst of signing one when Meredith’s cell rang. He faked a cough, held up a hand to beg a moment and took a long, slow drink from his bottled water while he watched her.

She checked the caller ID and shook her head, a wry smile on her lips. She punched a button on her blackberry. “Hi there.”

Whoever was on the other end said something that pulled a light, breezy laugh out of her. He took a better look at her table. No sign of the second pepita cluster. Maybe she'd eaten it. Even better. Relaxing a bit, he recapped the bottle and dragged the back of his hand across his mouth.

Meredith leaned forward. "Completely sold out, if you can believe it." She glanced in his direction. He ducked his head down over the book he was supposed to be signing and finished his signature with a flourish. Had she caught him eavesdropping?

He stole a sideways glance. She nodded into space, eyes straight ahead. "Sounds lovely. See you then."

She hung up and tucked the phone back into her purse.

"You're sold out?" He peered around one of her stand-up displays like he was seeing her table for the first time.

She nodded and gave him a look that said she knew better. She *had* seen him. "How astute of you to notice. You too?"

"About to be." He tipped his head toward the giggling pair of blondes at his table. They clutched the last unsigned copies of his cookbook to their chests, their eyes big and moony.

She slipped her pen into her bag.

"You fixing to head out?"

"Preparing to, yes."

He needed her to stay. He swiveled around. The waiting women whined. He smiled in their direction. "Would y'all just excuse me for a sec?"

They pouted. He winked, which set them to giggling again. Stomping down an eye roll, he directed his attention back to Meredith. "Can you hang out? Just 'til I'm done?"

She stared at his lips. Well, now. Maybe his boyish good looks were getting to her after all. No woman was an island.

She pointed at his mouth. "I don't think that's your color."

"Huh?"

The twitchy little almost-smile made a second appearance. She pointed again. "You have lipstick on the corner of your mouth."

Sometimes overeager fans were a pain in the rump. He rubbed the heel of his palm on the spot she'd pointed to. "So will you stay?"

She cleared her throat. Or stifled a laugh, he couldn't tell. "I can stay for a minute."

"Thanks." He flashed what he hoped she thought was a brilliant smile. Maybe he was out of his league. Dr. Black was no bobble-headed Barbie looking for a good time and a chance to get her picture in the paper because she was on his arm.

He signed the last book and stood to pose for one final picture. Finished, he sat back down and faced her. "I shoulda snagged one of your books earlier. I want one for my sister. Her husband died six months ago and she's having a real rough time."

"Ah." She nodded, crossed her legs and lightly strummed her fingertips on the table. "I see."

He had to say the right things, make the doctor understand. "She hardly leaves her apartment. She used to love shopping and getting her hair done and going to the spa. You know, girl stuff. Now, nothing makes her smile." He picked at the seam on the inside leg of his jeans, emotion tightening his throat. "It's killing me."

"I understand." She sighed, her gaze distant. "Look, I've got extra books at home. I'd be happy to mail her a signed one."

He shook his head. That wasn't enough. This wasn't working. He should have gotten her to eat another chocolate. "Couldn't you maybe give it to her in person? Talk to her for a few minutes?" Or every day until Shelby was better.

Her mouth tightened into a thin line. She dipped her head the way Gram used to when he'd gotten out of line. "I appreciate your concern for your sister, but I no longer see patients."

"That's not what I meant." He brushed her rejection away with a wave of his hand. "I was hoping by meeting you, she'd see that life goes on even after..." He paused, unsure if he should finish the sentence.

"Even after burying two husbands?" Her response was so quick it sounded rehearsed. She uncrossed her legs and tugged down her skirt before looking at him.

Cursing himself for stuffing his foot in his mouth, he gave her a half-smile. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

"Life does go on. I promise." She smiled but it didn't reach her eyes. After seeing what Shelby was going through, he understood.

She grabbed her purse and hooked the strap over her shoulder. “Give me an address and I’ll send her an autographed copy, but seeing me isn’t going to lessen the amount of grieving she needs to do. That’s a very personal thing.”

He slid to the edge of his seat, his hands itching to grab her and make her listen. She couldn’t leave. Not yet. “I’m not asking you to see her as a patient, just meet her. Give her a few encouraging words. That’s all.” This had gone so much easier in his head. “Please.”

He dug into the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out a business card. “We’re having a private shindig at my restaurant Sedona tomorrow night to celebrate the cookbook coming out. Shelby promised she’d come.” He snagged a pen off the table and signed his name on the back before offering it to her. “Just say a few words to her and then enjoy the party. That’s all I’m asking.”

She took the card and turned it slowly in her fingers as if doing some serious thinking. “That’s all?”

Bingo. He nodded. Maybe the chocolate was working after all.

She sliced the air with the card, twin diamonds winking from the band on her right hand. “I’ll come on two conditions.”

He slapped his thigh. Gram would be so proud. Good ole Texas charm never failed. Well, that and the power of the book’s recipes. “Anything. Just name it.”

“I’d like to bring two friends with me.”

“Sure thing. And?”

She fixed him with a look that said she meant to get what she wanted. Little did she know how eager he was to please. “Make another batch of those chocolates.”

“You got it.” He’d planned to anyway, just to make sure she kept seeing Shelby.

“Saturday night then.” Meredith gave him a nod and stood to leave. He stood too, watching her on her way out. She stopped only long enough to have a word with the owner. Kelly heaved out a sigh of relief and fell back into his chair. Mission accomplished. The urge to whoop was overwhelming.

So what if the good doctor looked like fun was a foreign word - she’d buried two husbands. That had to change a person. Shame, though. A woman with legs like that should get out two-stepping once in while.

He leaned back and propped his booted feet on the table. What kind of men had the doctor married? Had they died with smiles on their faces? There was a certain something about her—like that tied-up hair and all-business outfit was trying to corral a wild woman. He pictured her in cutoffs and cowboy boots, t-shirt tied at the waist, hair down over her shoulders. He grinned at the image. Highly unlikely the good doctor had ever dressed that way in her life.

He shook his head to clear the thought. Whatever Meredith was hiding was her business. He wouldn't deny the good doctor got his curiosity up, but truth was, besides Gram, Shelby was the only woman who mattered in his life. He'd do whatever it took to make sure Meredith helped her.

Chapter Two

Meredith ate a bite of croissant. Brunch at Viv's was an exercise in excess, just like everything else in Viv's life. The woman didn't do things any other way.

Swan, Viv's amazing housekeeper and all around girl Friday, filled the china cups with fresh coffee. "Eggs coming right up, Miss Vivian."

"Thank you, Swan," Viv said.

Across the table, beyond the fragrant centerpiece of lilies, Vivian dropped a single cube of sugar into her coffee. The granddame of fundraising took a sip, set her cup back down then spread blood-orange marmalade on half a toasted English muffin.

Seated between Meredith and Vivian, Celia Barstow Wentworth added two packets of Splenda and enough heavy cream to muddy her coffee.

"Don't tell me you're back on the low carb thing?" Meredith asked. Celia was perpetually trying to lose five pounds.

Celia stirred her coffee then pushed her honey-blond bangs out of her eyes. "Yes. I've given up spinning. All that pedaling and you never move. I'm over it."

Viv laughed. "You look lovely the way you are."

"Says the size two," Celia added, rolling her eyes. "Daddy says I look fine, but mother says no Barstow woman has ever worn a wedding dress larger than a four."

"Maybe you should remind your mother no Barstow woman has ever had your net worth either," Viv said.

“Or been married without actually having a fiancé,” Meredith added. Poor Celia. She’d yet to date a man who saw past her prodigious trust fund or social standing, qualities that seemed to suit her mother just fine.

Viv tapped her spoon against her water goblet. “Enough chit-chat. Out with this important news, Meredith. Waiting gives me wrinkles.”

“Botox not working?” Meredith asked sweetly.

Viv faked a laugh. Meredith sipped her coffee then set her cup on its saucer. Taking her friends to this party should finally shut them up about her lack of social life. “We have a date this evening.”

Celia clapped. “How wonderful! It’s about time you went out again.”

Meredith grimaced at the younger woman’s insinuation. “I meant we as in us.” She swirled her fingers in a circle to indicate the assembled trio.

“Not a date?” Celia’s disappointed tone mirrored Viv’s expression.

“Men aren’t poison, you know,” Viv said.

But I am. “I’m not interested in dating.” *Especially not a man younger than me.* Meredith gave her head a half-shake but Celia interrupted before she could continue.

“Please tell me this isn’t another lecture on the stages of grief. I love you, Mer, but I can’t sit through that a third time.”

“I agree,” Viv added. “I’d rather have tea with those old biddies from the Theater Guild.”

Meredith refrained from reminding Viv she was the same age as those old biddies. “No lecture. It’s a party.” She stabbed a bite of salmon and feigned disinterest. “A big party, from what I understand.”

Viv straightened in her chair. “A party or a social event worthy of new shoes?”

“Hah,” Meredith scoffed. “Like you need a reason to buy shoes.” Years ago when Viv had come to Meredith looking for solace in dealing with her first husband’s death, Meredith had assumed Viv’s voracious shopping was her way of subjugating the pain. Meredith had been wrong.

Viv held up a hand. “Don’t say another word.” She tapped one manicured nail on the table and narrowed her eyes. “Only two events going on tonight are worth being seen at. The Christian Louboutin trunk show at Bar Nine and that darling Chef Spicer’s book launch party at Sedona.” She lifted the linen tablecloth and stared in the direction of Meredith’s classic black

loafers. “I think the odds are good you’re not shopping for a new pair of stilettos, so it can’t be either of those.”

“Flats are healthier.” Meredith crossed her ankles, tucking her shoes out of view. “How do you always know what’s going on in this town?”

“It’s my cross to bear.”

Celia’s eyes held a far away, dreamy look. “Have you seen those billboards? That man is gorgeous. He can cook for me anytime.” Celia fanned herself. “Tell me you got invites to that party at Sedona and I’ll be your best friend for life.”

Viv raised a brow in Celia’s direction. “A handsome man like that and you’re still thinking of food?” She sighed. “He is quite a dish, isn’t he? Wouldn’t mind a taste of that myself.” She smoothed her sleek ice-blonde bob.

Meredith shook her head. Chef Spicer’s looks were beside the point. “I can’t believe the two of you, going on like a bunch of teenage girls. Not to mention one of you is married.” She glared at Viv. “He’s young enough to be your son, you know.”

“Bite your tongue. I’m not that old,” Viv said. “What does age matter anyway? Jack is thirteen years my senior. You’ve never made a fuss about that.”

Meredith shrugged. “Why would I? Men mature at different rates. An older man works well with a younger woman. Besides, your husband never acts his age.”

Viv dismissed the comment with one heavily jeweled hand. “Back to the hot young cowboy. I approve. It’s high time you had a man in your life.”

Here we go again. Meredith smacked the table top with her palm, rattling the crystal. “Chef Spicer is at least ten years younger than me. And I don’t need a man. You know how I feel about that.” She glanced at Celia. Her smirk put her firmly in Viv’s camp. Traitor.

Viv pursed her lips. “So how exactly did you get these invitations, my dear?”

Meredith ground her teeth together. “He sat next to me at the signing.”

Swan returned pushing a silver teacart. She placed a plate of poached eggs with caviar cream sauce and a petite filet of dilled salmon in front of each of them. Dishes of melon slices and fresh strawberries went onto the table as well as a crystal bowl of crème fraiche. “Enjoy your breakfast, ladies.”

“Thank you, Swan.” Viv gestured to Meredith with her fork. “I knew that signing was more successful than you let on. There was something in your voice when I talked to you.”

“There was nothing in my voice. Your hearing is going.”

After brunch, they moved to the sitting room. Walls of deep coral made the room glow with its own light. They relaxed on the embroidered silk chaises, Celia on one, Viv and Meredith on another, while Swan poured mimosas.

“What exactly *do* you plan on wearing to impress your new cowboy admirer at this event?” Viv asked. “Boots and a Stetson?”

Celia laughed until Meredith shot her a look. “I’m not trying to impress him and he’s not my admirer. I told you he just wants me to give his sister a book.” There was no way a handsome, young—she swallowed. Pointless thoughts. Chef Spicer wanted a book for his sister, nothing more. The feeling was mutual. She would hand over the book, then show her friends she could be as social as the next woman.

Viv wiggled her French-tipped finger in Meredith’s direction. “If that’s how you went to the book signing, you’re probably right.”

“Of course not.” Meredith’s hand strayed to her low ponytail. “I always look professional.”

“Professional or repressed librarian?” Celia chimed in, barely suppressed laughter lightening her voice.

“Let me guess,” Viv said. “You wore the tan suit and sensible heels.”

“What’s wrong with that outfit? It’s very nice.” Viv’s accurate guess rankled. Predictability was a perfectly respectable trait. And one that made the bad days easier. Who could think about what to wear when you were trying to find a reason to get out of bed?

“Nice? Oh, sweetheart, that outfit doesn’t let the real you shine through. It’s completely blah,” Viv said.

“Blah?” Chef Spicer hadn’t thought her blah, had he? He’d seemed...well, at least somewhat interested. In getting help for his sister.

“Bet your hair was up, too.” Celia took a long sip of her mimosa.

“The twist is a classic French hairstyle.” Meredith felt her defenses rising, but couldn’t help it. Hair was hair. Wasn’t it?

“The twist *is* a classic, you have to give her that,” Celia said, giving Meredith new affection for the young heiress.

Viv shot a glance at Celia before arrowing her gaze at Meredith. “Lovey, you’re Irish-Polish. Time to say *au revoir* to the twist. Men like hair they can run their fingers through.” She grinned like the devil with a new soul. “Grab hold of when they’re in the throes of—”

“Enough.” Meredith pressed her palms to her forehead. “Again, let me state for the record, I am not looking for a man. I have Jason and he’s the only man I need. And can I remind you that I’ve been married twice? Meeting men was never a problem for me.” She closed her eyes for a brief second against the nearly omnipresent ache in her soul. “It was just keeping them alive.”

“Honey, your son is a lovely boy, but he doesn’t exactly qualify as proper male companionship.” Viv polished off her mimosa. “How’s he doing at Tulane, by the way?”

The change in subject was a relief. “Fine. I think he has a girlfriend but he won’t give me any details.”

“Everyone needs someone to love,” Celia said, her blue eyes sparkling.

And we’re back. Meredith blew out a soft breath. She appreciated that her friends didn’t see her for the husband-burying jinx that she was. And granted, there were nights when she missed the companionship of a good man. Not that Chef Spicer was in any way that man. No one was. She simply refused to put another husband in the ground.

Viv set her empty glass down and slipped her arm around Meredith’s shoulder. “Your books talk about moving on after the death of a loved one, but you look like a woman stuck in the past. What’s the cowboy’s sister going to think when she sees you? Maybe it’s time to take your own advice. You know, that bit about ‘investing in your new reality?’”

Meredith studied her short, unpolished nails. The last time she’d had her hair done was right before Michael’s wake.

“What do you say we have an afternoon of beauty and make you look like the successful psychologist and best-selling author that you are?” Viv gave her shoulders another squeeze. “Looking good never hurt anyone.”

Having no desire to be worn down by Viv, Meredith held her hands up in submission. And maybe her pride didn’t mind a little primping for the handsome chef’s sake. She may have sworn off men, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t touch up the exterior a bit. “Nothing crazy.”

Viv smiled. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

Celia clapped, her face a shining beacon of happiness.

Feeling suddenly afraid, Meredith groaned. No one did personal maintenance like Viv. The woman was a beauty commando. “I’m serious, Vivian. Nothing drastic—”

“Swan!”

The housekeeper stuck her head around the corner. “Yes, Miss Vivian?”

“Ask Marcus to bring the car around.”

“Yes, Miss Vivian.” Swan disappeared.

Viv punched a number into the cordless. “This is Vivian. Tell Timothee I have a beauty emergency.”

* * *

Meredith stared at her reflection in the salon mirror. “I look ridiculous.”

“Timothee does not make women look ridiculous.” The man standing behind her chair made jazz hands around her new hairdo, his multitude of silver rings glinting in the salon’s halogen lights. “Timothee makes them divine.”

He raised a hopeful brow. “Why don’t we show Vivian and see what she thinks?”

Meredith pursed her lips. She already knew what Viv would think. Timothee could do no wrong. “Fine. Whatever.”

He flounced out of the room, returning moments later with Viv and Celia trailing behind. Celia squealed. “Mer, you look twenty years younger!”

Meredith frowned.

“Okay, maybe not twenty years but still,” Celia corrected.

“It’s to die for,” Viv agreed.

“That’s not funny,” Meredith said.

Viv ignored the comment. “The cut is fabulous. Who knew you had such marvelous cheekbones?”

Celia nodded. “That color is delish. What’s it called?”

“Venetian Cognac.” Timothee preened. “With honey highlights.”

Meredith took a closer look. Maybe it wasn’t *that* bad. A littler brighter than what she was used to, but it almost matched the color she’d had as a kid. She sighed. The maintenance was going to be a pain. She’d forgotten how much work it was to be girly. “I guess it’s okay.”

“On to eyebrows and nails. Time’s wasting,” Viv announced before kissing Timothee on each cheek. “Wonderful job, darling. Thanks a million.”

“For you, Vivian, Timothee does anything.” The stylist fluttered himself with an imaginary fan as they left.

After Meredith’s manicure and pedicure, Viv corralled them back into the limo and they headed for Barney’s. Viv’s personal shopper, Lizza Bouchon, meet them in the VIP reception area of the upscale department store. Great pots of forced hyacinths wafted their perfume through the walnut-paneled, ivory-carpeted room.

Lizza and Viv exchanged air kisses. “Hello, Vivian. So good to see you. I understand we have an event?”

With her cropped bangs and jet-black hair done in a high ponytail, her cat-eye makeup and dark red lips, Lizza resembled a cross between Mortica Adams and Audrey Hepburn with a little Bettie Page thrown in for kicks. Meredith glanced back toward the elevator but the doors had already closed.

“Yes, we do.” Viv grabbed Meredith’s hand as though sensing her urge to run.

“Party at Sedona this evening, correct?” Lizza smiled in a sort of this-is-going-to-hurt-me-worse-than-it’s-going-to-hurt-you kind of way.

“Yes.” Meredith had never seen Lizza in an outfit that didn’t contain the color black. Today’s corset top and leather pants were no exception. “Nothing too wild,” she added, unable to look away from the rhinestone skull belt buckle winking beneath Lizza’s belly button.

Lizza winked. “Not to worry. We’ll steer clear of the rock star section.”

Meredith relaxed her shoulders. Maybe this wouldn’t be too bad. Lizza dressed Viv without turning her into a Goth.

“Right this way, ladies.” Lizza circled her hand through the air like she was ushering them into Willy Wonka’s chocolate factory. “I have a selection of things set aside.”

An assistant passed flutes of champagne as Meredith was whisked into the dressing room. Lizza gestured to the rolling racks of clothes against the wall. “Start anywhere you like.”

Lizza shut the door and Meredith eyed the racks. Lots of color, including alarming amounts of red, but not a speck of tan or gray, her standards. She rifled through the selections, mostly things she wouldn’t have looked twice at on the hanger. She stuck her head out of the room. “Why am I doing this again?”

Lizza was showing Viv some shoes. Celia set her glass down and walked over. Her voice was low as she spoke. “I know Viv can be a bit pushy at times but—”

“At times?”

Celia grinned. “Okay, all the time, but listen, once Viv sees that your new coif and designer outfit don’t sway the chef’s attention from the little blonde chickies he seems to adore, she’ll leave you alone. You can go back to looking however you want to.”

Meredith leaned against the doorframe. Celia had a point. And a much better shot at dating the chef. “I could probably go to that party naked and he wouldn’t look twice.” She nodded, a slight smile forming on her lips. “And the next time Viv gets a wild hair, I can remind her how wrong she was.”

“There is that.”

“Maybe he’ll ask you out. You’re definitely his type.”

Celia laughed. “Really? Have you seen him date any heiresses lately?”

“Point taken.” Chef Spicer seemed more interested in quantity over quality. Another folly of youth.

“Try something on already, will you? Unless you’d rather Viv came in there...”

“Changing right now.”

Celia gave her a wink and returned to the discussion of kitten heels versus ballet flats.

Numerous unacceptable outfits later, Meredith’s energy sagged. She faced her small audience, hands on her hips. “There has to be something I’ve tried on that will work.”

Viv shook her head and crossed her arms. Celia pointed to the foofy black number Meredith wore. “You keep trying on the black ones. What’s wrong with a little color?”

Lizza’s eyes lit up. “There is one you haven’t tried yet. And with that figure, you should. Let me find it.” She minced into the dressing room and searched through the racks, her hands a blur of ruby polish and pale skin. “Here!” She pulled out a sleeveless sheath of crimson matte satin. She shoved the dress into Meredith’s hands and shut the door before Meredith could say it was too red.

Alone in the cubicle, Meredith held the dress out. Very red. And very low cut.

“I don’t hear fabric rustling.” Lizza’s voice rang from the other side of the door. “Just try it on. It won’t hurt, I promise.”

Meredith reluctantly stepped into the dress. The cool satin slid over her skin like a spring breeze. She hoisted the zipper up, then tugged the dress down over her hips before taking a look in the mirror. Cleavage city. The scoop neckline and body-hugging fit made her B-cups look

more like high C's. The swingy skirt flowed out from her hips to just above her knees. Her legs were good; she'd give herself credit for that.

But the bust line...she didn't want Chef Spicer to look at her and think she was trying to get his attention. Not that he'd look anyway. She probably didn't even register with his libido as being female. Did the girls he dated even appreciate what an amazing specimen of manhood he was?

She put a hand against the wall. *Amazing specimen of manhood?* Where had that come from?

Viv's voice derailed her thoughts. "Let's see it, lovey."

"It's too low," she said stepping out of the suddenly warm dressing room.

"Nonsense," Viv replied. "You've got divine ta-ta's."

"Hooters galore in that dress." Celia winked.

Viv turned to Celia. "Wasn't Hooters Galore one of the Bond girls?"

Lizza nodded approvingly. "That's the one. Makes your skin glow. And the fit! Dead sexy. It's like it was made for you."

Meredith planted her fists on her hips. "You seriously expect me to go out in this?" She cupped her hands in the air beneath her chest. "With my breasts hanging out?"

Viv laughed. "Darling, they aren't hanging out. They're getting some well-deserved fresh air. Let them breathe." She tipped her head toward Lizza. "We need shoes."

Lizza's heavily-lined eyes twinkled. "I have just the ones. They incite envy in women and lust in men."

Meredith's head snapped up. "What? Why would I want—"

"Wonderful!" Viv raised her champagne flute. "Bring us all a pair."

Chapter Three

Meredith wasn't sure if she was more worried about falling out of her dress or off her heels. Tex-mex and stilettos seemed like a weird mix, but her captors had insisted the four-inch strappy bronze sandals were the only way to go. Part of her secretly agreed. The shoes were beautiful. Like wearable works of art. That were impossible to walk in.

When they arrived at Sedona, the party was half an hour underway. Viv's driver, Marcus, held the door for them as they filed out of the limo. "Looking good, ladies."

They regrouped on the sidewalk and headed for the restaurant en masse. A beefy gentleman in a black suit, bolo tie and black cowboy hat stopped them at the door with a stern look. "I'll need your invitation or the name on the list." He tapped the clipboard in his hand.

"I think it's under Meredith Black?" Meredith hoped that was right. The guy's body language said he took his job seriously.

He flipped through the pages on the clipboard. "I don't see that name." His eyes narrowed down to slits, and she got the distinct feeling he thought they were party-crashing groupies. What kind of groupies wore four hundred dollar shoes?

She straightened her shoulders and held up the book she'd brought for Kelly's sister so the mouth breather could get a good look at it. "*Dr. Meredith Black.*"

Barely glancing at the book, he checked his list again. "Sorry, don't see it."

A slow, angry fuse lit inside her. If the chef had wanted her to come, why hadn't he put her name on the guest list? If she'd gone through all this torturous primping for nothing, she would find a way to give him a piece of her mind.

Viv leaned over and whispered in Meredith's ear. "Didn't the cowboy give you a card?"

"Oh. Yes. Just a moment." She dug through the matching bronze bag Viv insisted she buy and pulled out the card Kelly had written on. "Here." She handed it to the doorman.

He looked at the back of it. Tipping his hat, he stepped aside and opened the door. "Sorry for the inconvenience, ladies. Enjoy your evening."

Celia raised her brows so high they disappeared beneath her bangs. "What was on that card?"

"Just his signature." Meredith shrugged. "He probably hands those out to lots of women." *Younger, perkier women but undoubtedly shod in much cheaper footwear.*

Celia nodded. "Based on what I've read about him in the About Town sections of the paper, I'd say you're right. He's never photographed with the same girl twice." Celia's social status often put her in those columns, too, so she read them daily to keep up with the gossip.

Inside, a server offered them glasses of sangria. Meredith passed, but the other girls helped themselves as they looked around. Tiny twinkling lights set in the indigo ceiling gave the impression of a vast night sky. Huge wrought iron stands held flickering tapers, washing the

dusky purple and warm red walls with a soft glow. A sultry Spanish guitar softened the clink of glasses and buzz of voices. A warm, spicy scent promised delicious food not far away.

“Something smells good,” Celia said, her gaze darting around the room. “This place is gorgeous.”

“Celia, why don’t we mingle while Meredith delivers her book? Maybe we can find something to nibble on.” Viv said.

“Great idea.” Celia headed for the crowd, but Viv held back. “Be sure to introduce me to Chef Spicer, won’t you? I feel a benefit coming on.”

“Will do. Go have fun, I’ll find you.” Meredith waved as Viv went after Celia. Time to find the chef and his sister and get this over with.

She wandered in search of the pair, but when things started to look familiar and she still hadn’t found them, she waved down a bartender. “Excuse me, could you tell me where Chef Spicer is? I’m supposed to give this book to his sister.”

The man finished wiping out a glass. “He’s probably upstairs. Let me find out.”

“Thank you.” A second floor? The place was bigger than it looked.

The bartender hung up the phone. “Yep. He’s upstairs, in the VIP dining room.” The man pointed toward the way she’d come in. “Go back that way and take a right. Follow the hall to the end. There’s an elevator there. Tell the VIP hostess ‘tortilla’ and she’ll let you up.”

“Tortilla?”

The bartender gave her a lazy grin and shrugged. “I just work here.”

She pushed back through the crowd, aware of the occasional male glance that raked over her low-cut neckline. The attention caught her off guard, jangling her nerves.

The girl at the hostess stand greeted her with guarded smile. “Can I help you, ma’am?”

“I think so,” she said, feeling a little silly. “I’m supposed to tell you tortilla.”

Like magic, the girl’s grin turned genuine. “Let me call the elevator for you, ma’am.” She slid a key card through a black box on the wall. A few seconds later, the doors opened. Meredith walked in.

“Have a great evening,” the girl called as the doors closed.

“Yes, ma’am,” Meredith mimicked softly. She smirked, overcome with the cloak and dagger silliness of a password-protected elevator. Heaven forbid some of the unwashed masses sneak into the VIP dining room. Or worse, party-crashing groupies.

The doors opened and she stepped out beneath another twinkling night sky ceiling.

In one corner, a man perched on a stool playing the Spanish guitar she'd heard downstairs. Small groups of people stood around chatting beneath sparkling glass stars dangling on invisible line. More silver stars decorated the indigo walls, and cranberry glass votives lined the bar, flickering like tiny beating hearts. The place was beautiful but oozed seduction.

"Impressive," she breathed. No wonder Chef Spicer did so well with the ladies. He had his own personal lair.

"Glad you like it."

She turned, recognizing the twang, and stared up into infinitely blue eyes and a dazzling smile. His crisp white shirt opened at the neck to give a glimpse of tanned skin. Faded blue jeans with a large silver and turquoise belt buckle and well-loved cowboy boots accentuated his lanky lower half. A lesser woman wouldn't have stood a chance.

He stuck out his hand. "Kelly Spicer. Welcome to the party." His brow furrowed. "You look familiar. Are you press? I'd be happy to do an interview."

So much for great first impressions. He didn't even remember her. Viv's description of blah rang in her head. Meredith held up the book instead of shaking his hand. "I'm a guest. Your guest. You invited me."

The smile faded. He looked at the cover, then her, back at the cover then at her again. "Meredith?"

"Yes." Wasn't this a fun evening.

"Man, you look a whole lot different. Don't I feel the fool?" He ran a hand through his sandy blond waves. "I guess I was expecting the suit and the hair and—anyway, I'm really sorry. Forgive me?"

She inwardly cringed at the mention of what she'd worn that day. She hated when Viv was right. "You're forgiven."

He looked her up and down again, adding a whistle. "Damn, you fix up good."

To her utter dismay, her face warmed. Annoyance crawled up her spine. Had she looked that bad before? He'd definitely noticed her this time. She fussed with the book jacket, anything to buy a moment to compose herself. "Where's your sister?"

"Running late." His mouth quirked. "Can I get you a drink?"

What was he smiling at? “I guess.” Maybe a drink would take the edge off these weird nerves.

“Have you ever had champagne sangria? It’s amazing. We make it with apricots, peaches and raspberries.”

“Sounds fine.” She held out the book. “Can you hold this behind the bar? I don’t want to get anything on it.”

“Sure.” He took the book and motioned toward the bar, waiting for her to go first. As she walked by, his fingers brushed the small of her back. The unexpected sensation wobbled her knees. She bobbed on her stilettos like a marionette and reached for the nearest support. His arm.

“Whoa there!” Kelly slid his arm around her back, forcing her hand to lose its grip and coast to his chest. The scent of rosemary tickled her nose as his warmth seeped through the fabric of her dress. The body beneath her fingers was granite hard.

She pulled her hand away, got her balance and found her head. “I guess it’s my turn to feel like a fool. That wasn’t exactly graceful, was it?” Screw Jimmy Choo. A woman could break her neck in these stupid shoes.

He leaned closer. “Between you and me, those shoes are damn sexy, but if you wanna go barefoot, I got nothing against that either.”

The heat of his whisper against her ear shivered down her back. “I think I’ll keep them on.”

He released her, removing the comfortable strength of his arm, and smiled. “I’ll be sure to stay close by then.”

“Why’s that?”

He winked. “In case you need catching again.”

She inhaled hard, in need of more air. He pulled out a seat at the bar for her, waited until she’d sat, then took the one beside her. He nodded to the bartender. “Charlie, two champagne sangrias.”

“Sure thing, Chef.”

“I’m really more of a beer man but champagne seems better for celebrating...” Kelly shrugged.

“I don’t drink much,” Meredith said. “But you should have a glass at your own party.”

The bartender set the flutes in front of them. Kelly picked his up and held it in the air until she'd raised hers as well. "To you for agreeing to meet my sister. Means a lot to me." He clinked his glass to hers.

She took a sip. The cold, fruity bubbles tickled her throat. "Mmm, that's good. And you're welcome. This is a beautiful place. I'm impressed for the second time." She smiled a little. "Speaking of which, don't you owe me something?"

After a second sip of sangria, he nodded. "Yes, ma'am, I do. Charlie, get me that plate from the walk-in, will you?"

"Sure thing, Chef." Charlie disappeared around the corner.

Kelly leaned in. "I made a box for you to take home, too. I'll give them to you when you're ready to leave."

"That was very kind of you." *Now I'm impressed a third time.* "So you're from Texas?"

He laughed. "Accent gives it away, huh?"

She glanced at the walls, her mouth curving. "That, the Texas belt buckle, the boots, the stars..."

Charlie slid a small platter of chocolate pepita clusters between them. "There you go."

Meredith reached for one but before she made contact Kelly picked up the plate and his drink. He gave her a spine-melting grin. "Grab your glass and follow me."

With careful steps, she followed him to a roped off alcove. A server moved the rope out of the way as they approached. Kelly stepped aside and motioned with his glass to the velvet banquette. "Much comfier over here."

A new heat spread across her skin. Was he flirting? Or was it just a southern hospitality thing? He's a bed-hopping playboy. Probably flirts with every woman he meets. Wines them and dines them until they melt into puddles of willingness. Meredith stiffened her spine.

Time for Kelly the Cowboy to meet Meredith the Unmeltable.

Chapter Four

Kelly set the chocolates on the table then slid onto the banquet. He couldn't believe he was sitting next to the same woman he'd met at the book signing. Had that twisted hair really

held those whiskey-colored strands? Had her eyes been that big? He'd thought the suit had been hiding a wild woman but damn if that dress and those shoes didn't beat all.

He forced himself not to stare at her cleavage, but her pale skin made him think of mounds of freshly whipped cream. His mouth watered. He pinched his leg, hoping a little pain would refocus his thoughts. "You look real nice. Red is definitely your color."

"Thank you." She stared at her drink, now almost half gone.

He got the attention of one of the cocktail girls and pointed to their glasses. The girl nodded and headed for the bar.

Meredith's cheeks looked flushed, but in the muted lighting it was hard to tell. "Am I embarrassing you?" he asked.

She looked up then. "No, of course not." She sipped her drink. "This is really good. I don't drink very much, but I like this." Her flush deepened. "I mentioned that already, didn't I?"

"Thanks. It's my own personal concoction." He tried not to laugh but her sudden loss of cool tickled him. He scooted closer. "Hey, have you eaten? There's tons of food." The sangria was strong stuff. Wouldn't do to have her tipsy before Shelby got here.

She wet her lips with her tongue and shook her head. "The only thing I want is right in front of me."

Her words sent a warm jolt through him until she reached for the chocolates and he realized she hadn't meant him. *Damn*. She put one in her mouth and tipped her head back as she chewed. The move exposed the same sexy expanse of skin he'd noticed at the bookstore, except this time, there was a hell of a lot more of it.

The temperature in the room shot up. He shifted in his seat, thoughts of nibbling on the pale column of her neck making him squirm. She was here for Shelby, not him. Still, the idea of an older woman turned him on. He downed the last of his sangria. Maybe she could teach him something. An image of her smacking a ruler against one hand and looking at him sternly while dressed in red lace underthings made him choke on the wine. Gram always said he had an active imagination.

"You okay?" Meredith asked around a mouthful of chocolate.

"Yeah, just um, went down the wrong pipe is all." He cleared this throat for effect. *Pull it together. You're not gonna impress her sporting wood like some pimple-faced boy.*

“I love these things.” She licked a smudge of chocolate off the corner of her mouth and leveled her gaze at him. “Don’t you want one?”

“Nah, I’m okay.” One bite and the spell of persuasion would lose its power. He couldn’t take that chance. If Shelby didn’t show, he’d need more of Meredith’s time.

“You’re pretty good in the kitchen, I take it.” She giggled, then looked surprised at her own reaction. He suppressed the urge to join her. The sangria must be kicking in. “That was a dumb thing to say. It’s your job to be good in the kitchen.”

He rested his arms on the table. “I’m good at everything I do.”

She raised one brow and her lips curved. “Everything?”

The cocktail server returned before he could answer. She replaced their empty glasses with fresh ones. Kelly asked for a plate of hors d’ourves on her next visit. Couldn’t have the doc drunk. The girl nodded and left.

Meredith lifted her glass. “Congratulations on your book.”

“Thanks.” Kelly gulped the cold liquid, then checked his watch while Meredith sipped her new sangria. Shelby should be here soon. He leaned back and rested one arm along the banquet. “You usually go by Meredith? Seems like an awful big name for such a petite woman.”

She screwed her face up. “I’m not that petite.”

Not everywhere you’re not. His gaze skimmed her chest and when he looked up, he realized he’d been caught. He started to apologize when she burst out laughing.

Her laughter faded as she shook her head. “I knew this dress was trouble.”

The kind of trouble I want to get into. “I think that dress looks mighty nice on you.” He had to behave himself if she was going to help his sister but a little flirting never killed anyone. “You sure look different than the day I met you. Different in a good way.”

A curious and slightly perturbed expression crossed her face. “Do you really have a sister or were you trying to lure me here and get me drunk?”

He nodded, reminded of the evening’s purpose. “I have a sister.” He sighed. “I better ring her and see what’s up.” He swung his legs out of the booth, then stopped and twisted around. “Weren’t you bringing friends with you?”

She adjusted one of her straps. “They’re downstairs mingling.”

“Which is what I should to be doing. Let me make this call then we can head down together. You can introduce them to me.”

He went back into the hall by his office and called Shelby's apartment, but she didn't answer. He sent a quick text, not that she'd probably answer that either. He tucked his phone away and returned to Meredith, who was happily eating the hors d'ouvres that had been delivered. She still had half a glass of sangria left. He was glad to see she'd slowed down. She'd probably blame him if she got drunk, and he needed to be on her good side.

He held out his hand. "Let's go meet these friends of yours."

Meredith placed her hand in his as she slid out of the alcove. "What about your sister?"

"No answer. Hopefully she's on her way." He sighed and helped Meredith to her feet. She wobbled slightly, squeezing his hand, so he cupped her elbow. "You okay?"

She flattened her palm against his chest. The lightness of her touch surprised him. "I don't know if it's the shoes or the sangria." She glanced at her feet before looking up at him.

The drowsy sparkle of her green eyes made him smile. Warmth spread through his shirt where her hand rested. She smelled sweet and spicy, just like the chocolates. "I'm thinking a little of both."

She moved her hand from his chest and tugged at her skirt. "I guess I should switch to club soda."

He offered her his arm and she took it as they started for the elevator. "You're quite the gentleman for someone your age."

"My age? Just exactly how young do you think I am?"

She shrugged. "Thirty-ish."

"So we're right around the same age then," he teased. He knew better but a gentleman never guessed high.

"Hah! I don't think so. I'm forty-fo—" She snapped her mouth shut. "I'm forty-ish."

Forty-four, huh? Damn. Forty-four was looking good. He laughed softly as he pushed the button for the elevator. "I'm thirty-two." No point in lying. Every bit of press he got mentioned his age like it mattered.

"You're just a boy," she said.

"Oh really? Just a boy?" He let go of her arm, planted a hand on the wall behind her and angled closer. Every ounce of Texas male in him itched to prove otherwise. He'd love to show her just how wrong she was.

The doors opened and they got in.

She backed up against the elevator wall. "It's a scientific fact that women mature faster than men. They've done studies that prove it."

As soon as the doors closed, he tagged the stop button with the side of his fist. A man could only take so much. "That so?"

"Whoa." She lurched sideways as the elevator stopped. "Yes, it's so."

"Well, if I'm so immature, you'll forgive what I'm about to do." He laced his fingers into her hair and tipped her face to his before capturing her mouth for a kiss. Something clunked to the floor. He sucked her bottom lip between his, gently opening her mouth. She tasted of chocolate and spice and a hint of the forbidden. He teased his tongue across hers, just the slightest touch, then broke the kiss. Let her tell him he was just a boy now.

She opened her eyes, blinked twice, swayed slightly, then looked at the floor. "I dropped my purse."

A slap across the face would have been a better response. "You dropped your purse? Damn it, I just kissed you and that's all you have to say?"

"It was nice." She shrugged. "I've had two husbands. I'm hard to impress."

He nodded, realized his mistake. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

She was halfway through another shrug when he slipped his hands around her waist, snugged her body against his and kissed her hard. He sucked and nibbled, teased and tortured, savoring the lingering sweetness of the chocolates she'd eaten and the champagne she'd drunk. Thoughts of long, hot nights filled his head and he let them fuel his movements. Relentlessly, he put every wicked thought he'd had about her since he'd seen her into the kiss. Heat swept his body like he'd just opened an oven door. Her hands gripped his biceps, and she moaned, the same moan he'd heard when she'd had a mouthful of chocolate.

Satisfied by the sound, he released her. "I should have done that."

This time her eyes stayed closed, her lips parted. Her chest rose and fell as she breathed little panting breaths. "That was better," she whispered. Her eyes flew open and her hand rushed to her mouth. Heat glittered dangerously in her gaze. "Do that again and your sister's on her own."

A laugh died in his throat. Still, he'd proven his point. He bent down and retrieved her purse. "My lips are sealed."

She grabbed her purse out of his hands, clutching it to her chest for a moment, before tucking it under one arm and moving to the corner. “Good. Let’s keep it that way. Can you restart the elevator now?”

He cursed himself for being such an impulsive idiot. “Look being called a boy ticks me off. I get called that a lot in this business. People think I haven’t worked hard enough to get where I am. I’m sorry if I was outa line.” He couldn’t believe he’d already apologized to this woman twice in one night. Especially since he wasn’t one bit sorry about the kiss.

The hard set of her mouth softened but she didn’t meet his eyes. “It’s okay. It was just a kiss. No big deal.”

He grimaced. “No big deal? Kick a man when he’s down why don’t you?” He pushed the button and the elevator continued toward the first floor.

“Don’t worry.” Meredith turned to face the doors. “You’ll get better as you mature.”

* * *

‘80’s tunes had replaced the Spanish guitar in the downstairs bar and Viv and Celia were dancing with three men in suits when Meredith found them. She pointed them out to Kelly.

“Those are my friends. The crazy ones.”

A huge smile lit Kelly’s face. “Those guys they’re dancing with are my investors. I didn’t think those guys knew how to dance.”

“My friends have that effect on people.”

“They sound like my kinda people.” He watched for a moment before speaking again. “I’m going to go shake some hands, see if I can find Shelby. I’ll be back in a few.”

“Good. My friends will shoot me if I don’t introduce them to you.” She watched him walk away. There was no denying he filled out a pair of jeans like nobody’s business. As soon as he was out of sight, she dropped into the nearest chair. Her lips still buzzed from his kiss. Just thinking about it threatened to knock her off her heels. And she wanted to think about it. Wanted to relive the way he tasted, the way little sparks of heat shot down to her belly when he’d held her, the way her knees went liquid and her head filled with fireworks. That hadn’t happened in a long time, even with Michael, may he rest in peace. Maybe it was just the sangria.

Part of her felt bad for snapping at Kelly for what he’d done but she knew it was for the best. He was too young. And no man needed to be involved with her. It wasn’t healthy. For them or her. Love led to heartache and she’d traveled that road too many times in her life.

But my, oh my, the boy could kiss.

“I said what are you doing sitting here all by yourself?”

Meredith looked up. Viv waited for an answer. “Sorry, I guess I was daydreaming.”

“You?” Celia asked.

Meredith stood up. “What? I can’t daydream?”

Celia laughed. “Did it involve a cowboy in the kitchen?”

Thankfully, Viv spoke before Meredith had to answer. “Why are you sitting by yourself?”

“I had a little too much sangria.” And a little too much kissing. Her pulse sped up again.

“Daydreaming and drinking?” Celia tsked. “Someone mark this day on the calendar.”

“Oh hush. I drink.” Teasing about drinking she could handle. If they found out about the kiss...

Celia rolled her eyes. “Yes, you have that half glass of champagne at New Year’s.”

“Where’s the cowboy?” Viv glanced around.

Saved by the queen bee again. “He’s mingling.”

“Did you talk to his sister?”

“No, she hasn’t shown up yet.”

Celia grabbed her hand. “Then let’s go dance. Those suits are cute.”

Meredith followed without protest. Must be the alcohol making her so agreeable.

An hour later, they headed for the bar in desperate need of something cold. Kelly showed up as their drinks arrived. “Having fun?”

“Tons,” Celia volunteered. Her face lit up. “You’re the cowboy. Kelly. The chef.”

“Guilty of all three. I take it y’all are friends of the good doctor?”

Meredith swallowed her club soda. “This is Celia and Vivian.”

Viv held out her hand. “Viv to you, darling boy.”

At the word boy, Meredith and Kelly’s gazes collided. She willed him to keep his mouth shut. He winked and pressed a kiss to the back of Viv’s hand. “Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Viv.”

Celia laughed. “You just made a regular customer out of her.”

“I try to please.” He shot Meredith a look that made her tingle. “It’s the least a *boy* can do.” He shook Celia’s hand before turning back to Meredith. “Can I talk to you about my sister for a minute?”

“Sure. Be right back.” She followed Kelly to an uninhabited corner where they could be seen but not heard.

“Shelby’s a no-show again.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t know what to do.”

Meredith opened her purse and took out a card, reminding herself to be happy the night was coming to a close. “Do you have a pen?”

He pulled one from his shirt pocket. “Been signing books all night.”

“I wouldn’t say you’ve been signing books *all* night.” She took the pen without making eye contact and jotted her number on the back.

“Thanks,” he said.

She paused and looked up. “For what?”

“For not being too sore at me for kissing you.” He grinned sheepishly.

“If you can even call it a kiss.”

The grin lessened. He crossed his arms. “Damn, woman. Throw a dog a bone.”

Dog was certainly appropriate. She shook her head as she handed him the card. “My private number is on the back. Give Shelby the book and tell her to call me.”

He didn’t take the card. “And if she doesn’t?”

“You call me and we’ll figure something out.”

Arms still crossed, he tipped his head. “Can I call you anyway?”

“I think it’s best if we keep this professional.” She slipped the card into his shirt pocket, careful not to touch him. “So, no.”

The remainder of his smile faded to a thin line and the sparkle in his eyes disappeared. “Whatever you think is best, Dr. Black.”

She wanted to tell him not to call her that, but held her tongue. His pride was wounded. He needed to come out on top.

Without another word, he twisted on his boot heel and headed back into the crowd, giving her one last glimpse of the most amazing backside she’d seen in years. As she rejoined the girls she wondered if keeping things professional was the best decision after all.

Celia giggled like a schoolgirl. “I think the cowboy has the hots for you. Did you see the way he looked at you?”

“He doesn’t have the hots for me,” Meredith assured her.

Viv nodded. “Celia might be right. He did wink at you.”

“He winks at everyone. It doesn’t mean anything.”

Celia nudged Meredith with her elbow. “Maybe you’ll get to ride his—”

“Celia!” Meredith glared at her friend.

“What?” Celia giggled. “I was going to say horse.”

Meredith rolled her eyes. “Crudeness does not become you. And he doesn’t like me, trust me on that, okay?”

Viv shook her head. “I don’t know. You two looked awfully chummy over there.”

A server interrupted, presenting Meredith with a small indigo box tied with gold-starred ribbon. She lifted the box to her nose and sniffed. Sweet and spicy chocolates.

Celia smiled at the beautiful little package. “What’s that?”

“Proof he doesn’t like me,” Meredith said, tamping down a twinge of hurt. “I’ve just been asked to leave.”

Chapter Five

Meredith tossed her keys and the box of chocolates on the entryway table. Her stilettos followed, sailing down the hall toward her bedroom, and landing with a dull thunk on the hardwood. Men. Bah. Such simple creatures with such fragile egos. The girls were wrong. She did *not* need a new one in her life. Ever.

She plopped down in her desk chair and fired up her laptop. What did Chef Spicer think? Just because he was handsome and sexy and young that she should fall at his feet? His attitude proved her point about the maturity levels in men. Or rather the lack of maturity levels. Really.

No email from Jason. Not even a text. Not that her son would be sitting in front of his computer on a Saturday night or even thinking of his mother. With a huff, she tapped the touch pad and surfed the web aimlessly, her thoughts churning.

Somebody ought to straighten the men of the world out. Well, at least one man in particular. Women weren’t toys for Chef Spicer’s amusement. Or any man’s, for that matter.

Playboys like Chef Spicer were just the worst of the lot. Jason had better not end up like that. He'd been raised better.

Suddenly inspired, she clicked to her blog and opened up a new post. Her fingers flew over the keyboard, a satisfied smile spreading over her face.

* * *

Right after her personal Pilates instructor left on Monday morning, Meredith's cell rang. Grabbing the phone, she settled in at her desk and checked the caller ID.

"Hi, Jill—"

"Are you insane?"

Good publicists were so hard to find. "Good morning to you, too, Jillian."

"Do you know which magazine just called to cancel their interview with you?"

Meredith turned on her laptop. "Is this a trick question?"

"This isn't funny." Jillian huffed, fuzzing up the line. "*Bacall's* no longer thinks your platform is appropriate for their readers." She paused for breath. "And do you know why the number one woman's magazine in the United States no longer think it's appropriate, Meredith? Do you know?"

"I bet you're going to tell me." Jillian was such an alarmist. Meredith brought up her inbox.

"I'm glad making my job so difficult amuses you. Maybe that can be your next blog post," Jillian screeched.

"What does my blog—"

"*The Merry Widow* is due out in less than four months. You keep posting diatribes like that and they're going to rename it *The Man-Hating Harpy*."

"Diatribes? I hardly think you can call that post a diatribe. More of discussion, really."

"A discussion? Let me read you a few lines to refresh your memory. I've printed it out because my eyes glaze over every time I try to focus on the screen."

"Now, Jillian..." The woman certainly had a flair for the dramatic.

"Men are vile, single-celled organisms requiring exhaustive amounts of energy to sustain them. What do they think we are? Energizer Playboy bunnies? Womenkind is better off without them. We live longer, are capable of handling our emotions with maturity and aren't controlled by our baser physical urges. We are superior creatures in every aspect of our being. Beyond

reproduction, what is man's purpose? I don't know and I no longer care to find out. I suggest staying single is the only sane solution and one I now firmly encourage." She paused for a breath. "Shall I continue or is it coming back to you?"

Oh my. Four hundred seventeen emails. "Yes, well...in my defense, I did have a few drinks last night." Meredith cleared her throat. It had sounded so logical at 11:55 PM.

"What were you drinking? Grain alcohol?"

"I'll rewrite it, tone it down a bit." That should do the trick. Most of those emails were probably spam.

"Tone it down?" Jillian sounded as though she was hyperventilating.

"I'll delete it." Meredith rolled her eyes. So much for the truth setting you free.

"Too late. After the call from *Bacall's* and reading your post, I googled you. By nine AM, you'd been quoted by at least eight different bloggers, linked to by a dozen others and don't get me started on the women's forums and online communities. This needs serious damage control or *The Merry Widow's* sales are going fall apart in a million little pieces, if you get my drift."

A beep on the line saved her from replying. "Just a moment, I have another call coming through."

She switched over. "Hello?"

"Tell me someone hijacked your blog. Tell me you got hacked. That's what happened, right? You got hacked?" She could hear Phillip, her agent, taking a hard drag off a cigarette. He only smoked when he was stressed.

"No, I didn't get hacked. Look can I call you back? I have Jillian on the other line and—"

"We have a problem, Meredith."

"I'm aware." She couldn't recall a time she'd been interrupted more. "I'm working on a plan. With Jillian."

"Good. I'll expect a call when you know what it is." He hung up.

She switched back to Jillian. "That was Phillip. He and I are going to work on a plan. I'll call you back when we figure it out."

An exasperated sigh answered her. "Fine, but it better be good, it better be big and it better be public. I'll staunch the bleeding as best I can until you get back to me. If your editor calls, don't answer. And don't respond to any emails. Or discuss this with anybody else."

“Will do. Anything else?” Like move to Siberia?

“Just lay low.”

Meredith hung up, made a beeline for her blog dashboard and hit the delete key. Her intercom buzzed. Now what?

“Yes?”

“Good afternoon, Dr. Black. I have a delivery for you. Should I bring it up?”

“Is it ticking?”

“What?”

“Never mind, Lou. Yes, bring it up. Thank you.” Probably just the trousers she’d ordered from Talbot’s arriving a little early. Or maybe the ink cartridges for her printer.

She opened the door on the first knock. The huge bouquet of yellow roses greeted her like a personal sunrise.

“Lou?” She tipped her head to see around the blooms. “Are you behind there somewhere?”

The doorman peeked around the edge of the bush. “Back here, Dr. Black. Where should I set them?”

“On the coffee table, I guess.” She went ahead of him and cleared the magazines. He set them down gently.

“You wouldn’t think flowers could weigh so much but that’s a lotta flowers. You could cover a float with those.” He went back to the door, pausing before he shut it behind him. “Oh, yeah, there’s no card. They didn’t come with one. Guess you have a secret admirer.”

She shook her head at the flowers. “One can only hope.”

“Have a good day.” Lou laughed as he shut the door.

It took her a minute to count them all. Sixty beautiful butter-colored roses. She had a good idea which Texas native had sent them but she didn’t know quite what to do about it. Did this mean he’d read her blog? No, why would he? Was he saying he was sorry? Trying to smooth things over?

Her phone rang, and she jumped. She checked the display. Her editor.

A dull ache pulsated in her left temple. She turned the ringer off, sank down onto the ivory chenille couch and stared at the massive yellow cloud hovering above her coffee table. No

card. So he had nothing to say? Or was he waiting for a response? He couldn't honestly think she wouldn't know who'd sent them, could he?

She told him not to call. Did he think this didn't count?

Her fingers strayed to her lips before she knew what she was doing. She yanked her hand down but the memory of his kiss already replayed in her head. And what a kiss it had been.

She had to keep the bouquet. Flowers weren't returnable like some tacky sweater or hideous piece of jewelry. Well, maybe they were but the hassle didn't seem worth it.

They *were* beautiful. It had been a long time since a man had sent her roses. But if she let Kelly chase her, he would take that as validation. Maybe she should ignore them. She shook her head. Sixty roses demanded some sort of response.

She slumped down and tipped her head against the cushions to stare at the ceiling. Why did men have to complicate things? Especially today of all days. She needed a solution, not a confrontation with the man responsible for her problem in the first place. He probably thought the flowers fixed everything. If only it were that easy.

She sat up. Maybe it was. A few scenarios played through her mind. It could work.

She took a quick shower, fixed her hair and make-up with more care than usual. Habit made her reach for gray wool gabardine trousers and a sweater set, but he'd seen her in that red dress. And loved it.

Instead, she donned one of the two pairs of jeans she owned and a pale aqua cashmere sweater Viv had given her for her last birthday. She'd yet to wear it. The V-neck descended past her comfort level.

Standing in front of the mirror, she fluffed her hair. The color of the sweater made her mossy green eyes a little brighter.

This would work, wouldn't it? She'd have to choreograph it just right. Subtle. Charming but not so charming as to arouse his suspicions. Nerves twisted her stomach. She hadn't played this game in a long time. Hadn't wanted to.

Hadn't needed to.

She grabbed her purse and keys off the entryway table. The indigo box stared up at her.

Two minutes later she sauntered out the door, her mouth full of chocolate and her head full of schemes.

Chapter Six

Daylight washed some of Sedona's romance away. Still pretty but not quite as magical. She walked through the dining room toward the sounds of conversation in the bar. A pretty blonde with dark smudges under her eyes sat at a table doing paperwork. A young man worked behind the bar restocking beer.

The woman glanced up then back to the figures she was calculating. "I'm sorry, we don't open for dinner until six."

"I'm looking for Kelly. Is he around?"

The blonde looked up again and squinted at Meredith as if studying her. "Are you a friend of my brother's? You look familiar."

"You must be Shelby." Meredith stuck out her hand. "Dr. Meredith Black."

Recognition flickered in Shelby's eyes as she shook Meredith's hand. "The grief doctor."

"That's me." Shelby's grip was limp, lifeless. Meredith understood completely.

"Kelly gave me your book. I haven't started it yet but thanks."

"Mind if I sit?" Meredith pointed to the chair beside her.

Shelby gave a listless shrug, pushed some hair behind her ear. "Sure."

"Thanks." Meredith sat. "Kelly told me about your husband."

Shelby stared blankly at the papers on the table.

Meredith softened her voice. "I know how much that hurts. How hard it is to find a reason to get out of bed in the morning. How often you look at yourself in the mirror and think 'why am I still here?' I understand all of that. I've been there. I've been there twice."

At that Shelby looked up, tears glistening in her eyes. "Twice? You've had two husbands...die?"

Meredith nodded.

Shelby's eyes widened a little. Her voice was shaky. "Did you really love them? Like, deep down in your heart love them?"

"Absolutely. As much as a person can love." It was the only way she knew how to love. All or nothing.

Shelby shook her head. “How are you still alive? I feel like this is going to kill me.” Her voice broke in a quiet sob. “And some days, that seems all right with me.” She scrubbed at her face. “I shouldn’t have come in. Kelly as wrong. This isn’t helping.”

Meredith moved to the chair beside Shelby, put her arm around the girl and let her cry. After a few minutes, Shelby wiped her eyes. “Does the hurt ever go away?”

“I could lie and tell you it does but the truth is, while it lessens, it never disappears completely.” Meredith handed her a tissue from her purse.

Shelby took it and wiped her face. “How do you get over it then? How do you move on?”

Meredith took a long breath. She’d been trying to answer those questions since Michael had died. “After a while the good memories have a way of taking over and when you think of your husband, those are the first things you’ll remember, not the hurt.”

Shelby folded the tissue into a small square. “I’m sorry for crying. I can’t help it.”

Meredith shook her head. “Don’t ever apologize for your tears. Crying is a part of grieving, there’s nothing wrong with it. Except it makes your eyes puffy and your nose all red.”

“Yeah, it does, doesn’t it?” Shelby sniffled and half-heartedly smiled. “Thanks. Kelly gave me your card but I felt funny calling.”

Meredith pulled out her date book and flipped through it. “I’m free on Wednesday. Let’s have lunch. Talk some more. It can’t hurt, right?”

“Okay, sure. There’s a deli around the corner that makes good chicken salad.” She sniffled again. “If you like chicken salad.”

“Love it. I’ll meet you here around 11:45 and we’ll walk over.” Meredith offered a smile that hid her reluctance. “Now, where’s that brother of yours?”

“Right here.” Kelly’s voice came from behind her.

Meredith twisted around.

Arms crossed, he lounged against the wall at the far end of the bar. His chambray shirt matched his eyes and set off his delectably tanned skin. Her insides felt like a swarm of bees.

“Meredith. Shel.” He nodded at his sister. “I’m glad you came in today. Missed you lately.”

Shelby smiled limply and Meredith cleared her throat. “Can I speak with you for a moment, Chef Spicer?”

He didn’t move. “Go ahead, Dr. Black.”

Brat. She wanted to roll her eyes but didn't. "Privately?"

"Sure. I was just fixing to go to my office. You're welcome to tag along." With that he peeled off the wall, and turned on his boot heel, his long strides putting quick space between them.

"See you Wednesday, Shelby." Meredith grabbed her purse and headed after him, very aware of the alpha-male, man-in-control game he was playing. Fine. She'd let him since it suited her purposes.

She caught up at the elevator. "We can talk in the hall."

He slid his key card through the reader. "Can't. Too much to do. Gotta get to my office."

She didn't want to be in the elevator with him again. Well, part of her did but that part needed to be ignored. "Fine. We'll talk in the office."

They stood without speaking, staring straight ahead. The elevator came. They got on, rode to the second floor and stepped out. Kelly turned to the left, and Meredith followed him through a swinging door. Two doors down the hall, he stopped and ran his key card through a second reader. There was a quiet snick as the door unlocked. He pushed the door open and held it. "After you."

The way he stood made it impossible for her to get past without rubbing against him. "You're taking up most of the doorway."

"Can't help it. I'm a big guy." His eyes gleamed with mischief.

Juvenile. She sighed and sidled past, touching as little of him as possible.

He leaned forward as she went by. "You smell good."

She took a few steps into the office and faced him. "I'm sure I reek of roses."

"Why's that?" He sat behind a massive pine desk, then leaned back in the worn leather chair and put his booted feet up. His fingernails suddenly became very interesting. "New perfume?"

"You know why." She sat in one of the chairs on the other side and watched him lie.

"Can't say I do."

She scrunched her face into a curious expression and played along. "So you didn't send me five dozen yellow roses?"

He continued to study his fingernails. "Nope."

“Hmm.” She slung her purse over her shoulder and stood. He wanted to play games? Fine. “I wish I could figure out who sent them. It was a nice gesture. Too bad they were dead when they showed up.” She turned to go.

Behind her, Kelly’s boots hit the floor with a thud. “What do you mean they were dead? I paid good money—“

She spun back to face him just as he scowled half-heartedly, realizing he’d been bested. He. “You don’t play fair.”

“You said you didn’t send them.”

“Technically, the *florist* sent them.” His

“Don’t pout.” She tried not to smile. The game wasn’t so hard to get back into after all.

“I’m not pouting.” A petulant scowl grooved lines around his mouth.

“Actually, you are.” She retook her seat.

He gave her a grin as fake as the purses sold on Canal Street. “See? No pouting.” He sighed and strummed his fingers on the desk. “Were they really wilted?”

“No.” Poor boy. He needed so much approval.

“Did I screw up by sending them?”

“I wouldn’t say you screwed up, but you could have saved yourself the money. I didn’t need them.”

“Nobody *needs* flowers. ‘Cept for bees, I guess.” He glanced up. “Did they make you smile?”

One corner of her mouth tipped up. “Yes, they did.”

He propped his feet back up on the desk. “They were worth it then.”

She shook her head at the silliness of youth. “And that’s why you sent them? To make me smile?”

“No. I sent them ‘cause I felt lower than dirt on a snake’s belly for the way I treated you Saturday night. It was disrespectful.”

“Ah. Well, apology accepted.” She twisted her purse strap in her hand. Why did he have to be sweet? Because it was part of his game. He was still a playboy.

He tapped a pen on the desk. “Thanks for coming to see Shelby. I can’t believe you got her to agree to lunch. I only got her to come into work because I threatened to stop paying her.”

A playboy who took care of his sister. “Lunch is no big deal. Everyone has to eat. And I didn’t come to see Shelby, I came to see yo—”

His laughter cut her off. “I know. I just wanted to hear you say it.” She rolled her eyes and he laughed some more. “Hey, turnabout is fair play.”

“Touché.”

He smoothed his hand down the muscled length of his thigh. “How *did* you get Shelby to agree to lunch?”

Meredith leaned one elbow on the arm of the chair and gestured with her hand. “I’m the first person she’s met who knows more about her situation than she does. I’m the gatekeeper.”

His forehead wrinkled. “The gatekeeper? What the heck does that mean?”

“I’ve been in her situation and not only did I live through it but I surpassed it. So for her, I hold the key to survival. In me she sees the possibility of life after death.”

“Just like your book title.”

“Yes.” She checked her watch. “I should go. You probably have things to do.”

“Have you eaten all those fireballs? I made another batch this morning. We’re going to start serving them with our after dinner coffees.”

She felt her cheeks heat and chastised herself for blushing. “I haven’t eaten all of them but I did have one this morning.” Why did confessing that make her feel like he was seeing her in her underwear?

“One?”

How did he know? “Maybe two.”

He laughed again, a deep throaty sound that vibrated into parts of her long ignored. “Well, that’s what they’re for. Be a shame for them to go to waste.” He dropped his feet off the desk. “Hey, you wanna go for a ride down to Gauchos with me?” He snatched a set of keys off the desk. “I need a unbiased taste tester to sample a few new dishes.”

“Gauchos?”

“Gauchos is my other restaurant. It’s a little more down home than Sedona.”

She didn’t really want to but it would be a good start to her plan. She hemmed a little, like it was a tough decision. “I guess so.”

Brilliant smile. “Great! You can leave your purse here if you want. I always lock the office.”

They rode the elevator downstairs. Kelly told Shelby where they were headed, then walked with Meredith out to the sidewalk.

She scanned the street. "Where's your car?"

He grinned and pointed. "Right there."

She stared at the shiny chrome beast parked on the sidewalk and shook her head. "That's a motorcycle. I'm not getting on that thing."

"That's not a motorcycle, that's a Harley Davidson Screamin' Eagle V-ROD. A very sweet ride. Ever ridden one?"

"No." Small tremors skipped down her spine. This was above and beyond.

He unlocked the helmet clipped to the machine. "Then you're in for a treat."

She backed away. "I am not getting on that thing. No way. They're dangerous. You could die."

He set the helmet on the seat, turned to face her and put his hands on her shoulders. "A smart woman once told me everything kills you sooner or later."

"I prefer later." The heavy warmth of his hands on her shoulders took the edge off her nerves.

His crystal blue gaze was impossible to look away from. "Mery, it's perfectly safe."

Mery. The shortening of her name seemed like a very intimate gesture. Like he'd kissed her gently or cupped her cheek in his palm. She realized she was nodding. She hadn't meant to agree.

"You'll love it, promise." He grabbed the helmet and handed it to her. "You wear the helmet. It's a short trip. Next time I'll bring an extra."

She stared at her reflection in the shiny black finish of the thing. Next time? What in the name of all that was holy made him think there would be a next time?

He checked a few things on the bike, then swung a leg over and positioned himself in the seat. "You gonna put that on or admire yourself all day?"

Stall. Play dumb. Call a taxi. She held the helmet out. "I don't know what to do with it."

He took it from her. "C'mere."

She stepped forward. He set the helmet on his lap and crooked his finger for her to come closer. "All the way. I can't reach you from here."

Another few steps and the side of his leg touched hers.

He reached up, tucked her hair behind her ears then lifted the helmet and eased it over her head. "How's that feel?"

She shook her head. The helmet twisted back and forth. "Should it be this loose? That can't be good. Loose can't be good."

"It's my helmet. It's gonna be big." He ducked his head and fiddled with the chinstrap. "That's as tight as I can get it."

The helmet muted the sounds of the city. She inhaled. It smelled like whatever he used on his hair. Sort of the outdoorsy scent of sheets dried in the sun. It suited him. Maybe this wasn't so bad. "Now what?"

He winked. "Hop on and hold on."

"Right now?" She swallowed. "This is a bad idea."

He wiggled his eyebrows. "Fraid putting your arms around me will be more than you can handle?"

"No." That hadn't actually occurred to her. New tremors traveled down her spine and into her thighs. "I just don't want my brains all over the street."

He knocked on the helmet, the dull thump-thump in rhythm with her rapidly beating heart. "This'll keep the mess to a minimum."

"That's reassuring." She gathered up her courage, rested her hand on his shoulder for support and swung a leg over the seat. As soon as she settled into the seat, she realized nothing separated her crotch from his backside but a few layers of denim. Her temperature started to climb.

"Put your arms around my waist," he said over his shoulder.

With as little grip as possible, she slid her arms beneath his elbows. She didn't know what to do with her hands so she interlaced her fingers and tried to relax. Two seconds later she noticed she'd just made a little tent over his crotch. She jerked her hands up and felt his sides shaking. He was laughing at her.

"Most girls wait until at least the second date to try that."

"This is *not* a date," she ground out. It was just supposed to look like one. Not that anyone would recognize her with a helmet covering her head.

"Yes ma'am, whatever you say." He reached forward and started the bike. The machine beneath her roared like an angry beast. She squeezed her arms tighter around him. He shifted in

the seat, pressing his backside further between her legs. He patted her hands, now safely positioned over his ribcage, checked the traffic and pulled out.

Every muscle in her body tensed as the bike moved. She pressed herself against him, not caring how much they touched. The steady vibration of the engine overrode her apprehensive tremors.

At the first stoplight, he rested a hand on her thigh and twisted to look at her. “You okay?”

She nodded, trying to regulate her breathing at the same time.

“You look about as okay as a treed ‘possum.” He gave her leg a little squeeze. “I promise you won’t get hurt. I’ve been riding bikes since I was nine. Haven’t had a serious wreck yet.”

Yet! She nodded again. “I’m okay.”

He turned back around, hooked his hands under her knees and pulled her a little closer. “Just a few more blocks.”

When they started up again, she tried to relax. After all, they weren’t going that fast. The view from the motorcycle was so different from a car. Everything looked closer. She glanced down. Including the street. *Don’t look down.* She concentrated on the people on the sidewalk. Nice handbag. Cute dog. Bad toupee.

She rested her helmeted head against his back. It was kind of nice, actually. The sun and the wind felt good on her skin and if she had to hold on to someone, Kelly wasn’t a bad choice. She smiled. If the girls could see her now.

Kelly maneuvered the bike down a side street and into an alley. He parked beside a door and turned the machine off. “We’re here.”

She took that as her cue to get off. Her legs shook even after she dismounted. He climbed off after her, then reached beneath her chin to unfasten the strap. She pulled the helmet off and shook her hair out.

“So? You survived, right?” He took the helmet from her and clipped it back onto the bike.

She made a show of feeling herself for broken bones. “Seems that way.” She gave him a half-grin. “I guess it wasn’t that bad.”

“Told you.”

Her skin tingled with the engine’s vibrations. “I feel like I’m still on the bike.”

“Hard to shake the feeling of something that powerful between your legs, isn’t it?”

She rolled her eyes. Lord, he thought he was funny.

“You get used to it after while.” He hit a button on his key chain and the bike beeped.

“Thanks. It was nice having you back there.”

Her cheeks warmed and she twisted the sole of her shoe on the ground. What did you say to that?

“Mery?”

“Yes?” She looked up.

He stuffed his keys in his pocket. “I really want to kiss you again.”

The husky tone of his voice made her stomach flutter almost as much as his words. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“We’ll just agree to disagree then.” He took a step closer so there wasn’t a foot between them. “‘Cause I think it is.”

She shook her head, ready to offer a new defense but he stepped into her space and laced his fingers into her hair just like he had that night in the elevator.

“How ‘bout you decide afterwards?” He brought his mouth to hers, his touch at once gentle and insistent. He drank her in like a man dying of thirst.

She leaned into him for support, her legs too shaky to hold her. A warm liquid need spread up from her toes as he deepened the kiss. She braced her hands against his hard chest as his tongue teased with subtle strokes, bringing her to life.

Her head told her this should stop but her body thrummed with pleasure. Deep in her core, beneath the hurt of burying two husbands and the fear of letting another man in, she wanted this. She wanted to feel something that mattered again. To know that she was wanted.

Kelly did that in spades.

But her head prevailed. She broke the kiss and smiled gently, like she might at a child in need of correction. “We can’t keep doing that.”

He dropped his hands from her hair. “Don’t you mean *I* can’t keep doing that? I’m kissing you, you aren’t kissing me.”

She waved her hand. “You know what I mean.”

His mouth twitched with a barely suppressed grin and he grabbed her hand. “C’mon, you’ve got some tasting to do.”

Through the door they'd parked by, he led her into the kitchen. Several young men in black and white checked pants and chef coats bustled around carrying big lexan tubs of food. When Kelly walked in, they all greeted him with "Hi, Chef." Kelly nodded and returned the greeting but didn't stop. Through a second door and they were into another part of the kitchen. Kelly paused and spoke to a short woman with spiky red hair, also in kitchen attire. "Where's JP?"

"He'll be right back, Chef. He just ran to the walk-in." The woman glanced at their intertwined hands before going back to the sauce she was making.

Aware of what their clenched hands must look like, Meredith pulled free. No need to give his employees any more to talk about than what they'd already seen. "Smells like a campfire in here. In a good way."

"It's the smokers." Kelly tipped his head toward another door. "The smell just sorta takes over."

A bald man in black-rimmed glasses came into the kitchen carrying two white tubs.

"Chevré for the chicken special?" Kelly asked.

The man nodded. "Yeah. It's from that new supplier."

"JP, this is Dr. Meredith Black. She's volunteered to be our guinea pig."

JP smiled. "Volunteered huh? I would've held out for at least minimum wage." He held out his hand. "Pleasure to meet you."

Meredith shook it and slanted a glance at Kelly. "Oh, he's going to pay, he just doesn't know it yet."

Chapter Seven

JP placed the last dish in front of Mery. "Amarillo Sunset cheesecake," he announced. Kelly grinned as she took the first bite. Still not a word about a diet. There was something undeniably sexy about a woman with an appetite.

She closed her eyes and sighed. "Amazing," she mumbled around the mouthful. She swallowed and forked up another bite. "What is this again?"

JP smiled. "Amarillo Sunset cheesecake."

She nodded. "But what's in it?"

“We poach dried apricots in a mix of brandy and agave syrup with a touch of honey. When they’re soft, we take them out, puree them, add them back in to the poaching liquid, then cook them down to the butter stage. Once cool, the apricot butter gets folded into the cream cheese mixture.”

She took another bite. Kelly wondered if she was always this receptive to food. Women who ate nothing but salads and broiled, skinless chicken breast bored him to tears. Mery looked thoughtful as she downed the third bite. “There’s more to it than that, though, isn’t there?”

JP glanced at Kelly. “She’s got a good palate.” He looked back at Mery and crossed his arms. “I can’t tell you the rest. That’s Chef’s secret.”

“Oh really?” she asked, a note of teasing in her voice. “So if you tell me you have to kill me?”

JP laughed. “Yeah, we stick you in the smoker and serve you as the blue plate special.”

Kelly jabbed him in the shoulder. “JP, we haven’t smoked anyone since Jimmy Hoffa.”

Mery smirked. “Aren’t you a little young to know who Jimmy Hoffa is?”

“Ouch,” JP said.

“Sorry,” Mery offered. “Just forget I said that. So you really can’t tell me what’s in this recipe?”

Kelly ignored the Hoffa comment for the time being. “Nope, gotta sign a confidentiality agreement before I can divulge those sorts of things.”

“Hah.” Mery took another bite. She closed her eyes and seemed to be in serious consideration. “Some sort of spice or combination of spices. Something else, too. Something very familiar.” She opened her eyes. “Anise maybe? Vanilla definitely.”

JP held his hands up. “I got no comment.”

Kelly grinned. “Not bad. We add cloves and anise to the poaching liquid. There’s Mexican vanilla in the cream cheese base.”

She took one more small bite. “There’s something else you’re not telling me.”

“What are you, in league with the devil?” He shook his head. She got sexier by the minute. “We use *piloncillo* as a sweetener in the crust.”

“I don’t even know what that is,” she said.

“It’s Mexican dark brown sugar. It has a really high molasses content, so that’s what you’re tasting.”

JP threw his hands up in the air. “So much for the chef’s secret. What’s next, the combination to the safe?”

“Don’t you have prep you could be doing?” Kelly asked, his gaze never leaving Mery. The sparkle in her eyes mesmerized him.

“I guess that’s my cue.” JP gave Kelly a salute. “Aye, aye, Chef.” He waved at Mery. “Nice meeting you.”

“Nice to meet you, too.”

Once JP was gone, Kelly leaned forward across the bar. “How did you figure out what was in there?”

Mery shrugged. “I worked at a bakery when I was in high school. Certain things stick with you. Besides, I didn’t really figure out what was in there, I just knew there was more than what JP was telling me.”

“You’re very perceptive.” Kelly wondered if she had any idea about the persuasive powers of the chocolates he’d fed her.

“I’m a psychologist, I get paid to be perceptive, to read people.”

He came around the bar and sat beside her, twisting the bar stool so their knees touched. “So you think you have me figured out?”

“You? You’re easy,” she said, scooting back in her seat.

“Really.” He had a powerful urge to kiss the smugness off her pretty face. “Let’s hear it then. C’m on.”

“Are you sure? Some people don’t like being analyzed.”

“Stalling ‘cause you haven’t got a clue, huh? It’s okay, I understand.” He winked at her. “I’m a very complicated man.”

She shook her head, a glint of satisfaction in her eyes. “Actually, you’re not. You’re an over-achiever, first-born or I’ll give up my license. You thrive on attention and need large amounts of approval. There is some evidence of abandonment, possibly early on so it wouldn’t surprise me to find someone raised you other than your biological mother. Your grandmother, if I had to guess. And although whoever raised you did a good job, you still crave acceptance from those around you. You need people to like you. No matter what level of success you achieve, you never feel like it’s enough. And deep down...well, never mind. I think that’s enough.” She raised her brows and leveled a slight smirk at him. “How was that?”

He sat there slightly numb, like someone had yanked the covers off him on a cold morning. How did she know all that? Maybe she'd talked to Shelby about more than just going to lunch. That had to be it. "I guess Shelby really gave you an earful, huh?"

Mery shook her head. "Not really, we only spoke for a few minutes before you arrived."

He narrowed his gaze. "So you just figured that out from the couple times we talked?"

"I told you, it's what I do. Or did. Since I don't see patients any more, I'm probably a little rusty." She laughed a little, a nervous, uncomfortable sound. "Look, there are a lot of other clues to what makes a person tick. You just have to know to look for them."

"Like what?" he asked.

"Sorry, chef's secret," she said, a Texas-sized grin on her face.

He slid forward and laced his fingers through hers. Her skin was as soft as sifted flour. "C'mon, now. I told you what was in the cheesecake."

She pulled her hand up, so that their interlaced fingers were right in front of his eyes. "Here's a perfect example. By touching me, you hope to gain my approval and sway me to your side. You want me to like you."

"Is that such a bad thing? That a man wants a beautiful woman to like him?" He drew her hand to his mouth and brushed his lips over her knuckles.

"You don't quit, do you?" She groaned lightly and shook her head but the faintest tint of pink colored her cheeks. "Of course not, quitting isn't in your make-up. You can't help yourself."

"Not when you're around," he said, struck by the truth of his own words. This woman was driving him crazy. So what if she had him pegged. Was that such a bad thing?

"So was I right?" she asked. "How close did I come with my assessment?"

He let her hand slip from his and stood to go back behind the bar. "Close enough."

He refilled her glass with fresh ice water then made one for himself and took a long drink. Keeping his private life private had been a constant struggle, especially now with the book out and all the press he'd been getting. His deep need to protect his sister he understood. The need to protect his mother, he didn't. You're not protecting her, you're protecting yourself and Shelby from her, he reminded himself.

Mery looked at him expectantly. "Well? What did I get right? I'm curious."

"I'll tell you on one condition," he bargained.

She toyed with the bar napkin, rolling the edge under her finger. “And that is?”

“Have dinner with me tomorrow night. It’s the least you could do after that Hoffa comment.” He wanted to pat himself on the back for his own brilliance.

“Since when does a chef have time for dinner?” She sipped her water. “Aren’t you the one *cooking* dinner?”

“Not every night. I’m still in the restaurant but I’m not in the kitchen. Tuesdays I do paperwork, make table visits, stuff like that. I can make time for dinner, though. Swing by Sedona Tuesday night around seven and I’ll satisfy your curiosity.” Hopefully, he’d get to satisfy more than just her curiosity.

She tapped her finger on the bar. “That sounds suspiciously like a date.”

He feigned innocence. “In a crowded restaurant?”

“Isn’t that where most dinner dates take place?”

“You got me there.” He grinned. “So Tuesday then?”

“I guess. Yes.” Her eyes closed briefly as she blew out a breath. “Why do I have such a hard time saying no to you?”

Arms resting on the bar, he leaned in until he was almost close enough to kiss her. “Are you telling me the great Dr. Black can’t figure herself out?”

To her credit, she didn’t pull back. “Just around you. I seem to do and say and think things I wouldn’t normally.”

He put his hands on the edges of her seat and moved a little closer. The scent of her, sweet and spicy, washed over him and he wondered if she wasn’t working some magic of her own.

“Like now?” he murmured. “Are you thinking about what it would be like to kiss me again?”

When she didn’t answer, he lifted a strand of her hair and twisted it around his finger. “Or maybe you’re thinking about the way our bodies fit together on the bike.” He held the strand to his nose and inhaled. “You smell like apricots and vanilla.”

“It’s...it’s the cheesecake,” she stuttered, not quite meeting his gaze.

The strand of hair fell from his hand as his fingers traced the line of her jaw, lifting her head. “I bet you taste like apricots and vanilla, too.”

He tipped her chin further so he could see her eyes. He wanted her to kiss him but he wasn't going to ask. If she kissed him because of the influence of the persuasion spell, it wouldn't be as sweet as if she kissed him because she wanted to. And he wanted her to. He wanted her to *need* to.

She blew out a soft breath and slipped off her barstool, out of his grasp. "You're very charming, I'll give you that but I should go. I have...work to do."

Her hands were shaking, he was sure of it. He slid off his seat and leaned against the bar, thumbs hooked in his belt loops. "Don't tell me you're scared of a little ole *boy*, Dr. Black."

The coolness he'd come to expect from her resurfaced. She straightened, brushed a stray piece of hair behind her ear and leveled her eyes at him. "I'm not afraid of you. This just isn't a good idea."

The mood shattered. "Yeah, I know. You keep telling me that. I just don't see what the big deal is. I like you. What's wrong with that?"

"A multitude of things." She shook her head, dismissing any further conversation. "I really do have to go. I have edits to do and...other things." she waved her hand in the air.

"C'mon, then." He pushed off the bar and started toward the kitchen.

"Where?" She didn't move.

"Back to the bike. So I can give you a lift home."

"No, thanks. I'll take a cab."

He wanted to push it, wanted to feel her wrapped around him again, her tight thighs cradling his backside, but let it drop. She'd be back tomorrow night. "Don't forget Tuesday." He wagged his brows. "You do want to know if you figured me right, doncha?"

She snorted out a soft breath. "Oh, I'm pretty sure I figured you right."

"I'll tell you tomorrow." He offered his arm. "Let me walk you out?"

"Okay." She slid her hand through the crook of his elbow. "You get points for being a gentleman. Very unusual for..."

If she knew his thoughts, she wouldn't think he was much of a gentleman. He patted her hand and finished her sentence. "A guy my age, huh, doc?"

"I was going to say 'for this day and age'."

"Sure, doc. Whatever you say."

She slanted a smile at him. "You're incorrigible, you know that?"

He glanced down and caught a glimpse of her scalloped pink lace bra beneath the vee of her sweater. His groin tightened. "And you're sexy as all get out. But I guess all the guys tell you that."

He reached to open the door but she stopped him. "Nobody's told me that in a long time." She smiled wistfully. "Thank you. You really are sweet." She went up on her tiptoes, her hands on his chest, and kissed his cheek. "See you Tuesday, Chef."

With his mouth hanging open, Kelly watched her push through the door and leave. As many times as he'd been called chef, never in his life had it made his heart gallop as when she said it.

The door swung shut and he slumped down onto the bench in the lobby. He drove his fingers through his hair and tipped his head back against the wall.

She made him plum crazy.

He whooped at the top of his lungs and stomped his boots on the rough wood floors. Damn if he wasn't loving every minute of it.

Chapter Eight

What had she been thinking? Regardless of her situation, she could not date that man. He was too...too...male. She'd find someone safer. Someone who didn't make her work so hard at keeping her head on straight.

She got a few steps away before she realized she had to go back.

Her hands pushed the door of Gauchos open just as a loud "yeehaw" rang through the air. Kelly sat on a bench just inside the door, stomping his feet on the floor. She raised her brows. "What was that all about?"

His feet stilled and his face went as red as a little boy caught stealing cookies. "Nothing," he mumbled. The embarrassment faded into a happy grin. "Miss me already?"

"Not exactly." She crossed her arms. "My purse is locked in your office at Sedona."

"Oh." The smile diminished slightly then brightened once again. He stood and offered her his arm again. "Your chariot awaits, my lady."

The motorcycle ride back was almost pleasant, now that she felt more confident about not becoming a stain on the macadam. Still, she was grateful to hand the helmet back and call the

ride over. Being so close to Kelly made her question her decision to dissuade him from chasing her. The man was flat out sexy. But he was also twelve years younger than her.

She followed him into the restaurant. The soft strains of new age Spanish guitar provided enough background noise to mute the conversations of the few tables of early lunch patrons. She hoped no one recognized her.

Once inside the elevator, Kelly spoke. "You liked the ride back better."

"What makes you say that?" Mercy, he was hot.

"Saw you smiling in my side mirror."

"Shouldn't you have been keeping your eyes on the street?"

He grinned. "We were parked at a red light."

The doors opened. She got off and headed for his office. "Doesn't matter. I won't be riding that accident waiting to happen again."

He slid his card through the security scanner and let her in first. "Do you avoid fun on purpose or is safe and predictable just how your life normally goes?"

"What is that supposed to mean?" She stepped into the office and snatched her purse off the chair she'd left it on.

"Well, you don't want to go out with me, which would definitely be fun." He strode past, threw his keys on the desk and settled his lanky form into the chair behind it. "You don't like motorcycle rides or roses—"

"I like roses," she interrupted.

"So you just don't like roses from me?"

"I like roses," she repeated.

"Ah," he said, kicking his feet up onto the desk. "So it is me. Well, that's different then, isn't it?"

Prickles of exasperation crept along her hairline. She shook her head. "That's not what I meant. I just don't think becoming involved with you is the appropriate path for me at this time." No matter what her publicist and agent thought.

"You wanna put that in layman's terms, doc? 'Cause that sounds like psychobabble to me."

The horrid word grated across her nerves like fork tines on a chalkboard. She put her hands on the edge of his desk and leaned toward him. “You know how you feel about being referred to as a boy?”

He nodded.

“That’s exactly how I feel about the term psychobabble. What I do is serious work.” She stabbed the desktop with her finger. “Your lack of understanding doesn’t invalidate it.”

He whistled. “Tender spot, huh? Didn’t mean to ruffle your feathers. Just can’t understand how getting involved with me would take your life down the wrong path. How do you know unless you try?” He clasped his hands behind his head. “You might even have fun.”

She took her hands off the desk and resettled her purse on her shoulder. “I doubt it.”

“You’re probably right. I mean, you’d have to learn to unclench before the fun could even begin.”

“Unclench?” she sputtered at his implication.

“Just saying you’re a little uptight, doc. Even though you don’t dress like it.” He nodded appreciatively at her sweater. “Except for the book signing.”

“I am not uptight.”

He raised a brow and smirked in a way that said he didn’t believe her.

“I’m not.”

Laughter greeted her ears. “You can tell me all about how not uptight you are at dinner tomorrow night.”

* * *

Not until she got home did Meredith realize she’d forgotten to ask Kelly how he’d gotten her address for the flowers. She tossed her purse and keys on the entry table and headed for the phone. *Uptight. Hah.* She itched to add a new post to her blog.

The scent of roses greeted her when she walked into the living room. She stared at the abundance of yellow blooms, her annoyance fading.

She grabbed the phone, plopped on the couch and punched in Viv’s number.

“Waltham-Chatsford residence.”

“Hi Swan, it’s Meredith. Can you put Viv on?”

“Right away, Dr. Black.”

Meredith stared at the roses. They were unforgivably beautiful.

“Meredith, darling! How are you today?”

“Fine. Viv, tell me the truth. Am I uptight?”

“Mercilessly, but I still love you.”

“I am?” Meredith tucked her knees up under her.

“Terribly.”

Meredith blew out a breath. “Have I always been that way?”

Viv stayed silent for a moment. “A little but you didn’t reach the uttermost heights of uptightness until after Michael died.”

“Oh.” That was interesting. “But I still have fun, don’t I?”

“What is this about?” Viv’s disapproving tone came through loud and clear. “Don’t tell me you did something foolish like refuse the flowers?”

“I didn’t refuse the--how do you know about the flowers?” Meredith asked.

“Where do you think he got your address?” Viv laughed, obviously pleased with herself.

Meredith groaned. “Why on earth did you do that?”

“Do you know how many women are dying to go out with that delectable specimen of manhood? What is wrong with you? For some freakish reason one of the hottest bachelors in the city has taken a liking to you, and you’re acting like the IRS wants to audit the last ten years of your tax returns. Snap out of it, woman.”

“He’s too young,” Meredith argued. “He needs a woman who can give him children.”

“I’m sorry,” Viv scoffed. “Did he propose?”

“No, of course not—”

“Then why can’t you just go out with him for fun? Have a little fling, for crying out loud? We’re not talking lifetime commitment here. Dinner and movie, a stroll in the park, a roll in the sheets, sure, but a walk down the aisle, no.”

“Viv!” Meredith gasped. The woman was so bold. “I am not sleeping with him.”

“Not yet but play your cards right and anything’s possible.” The older woman chuckled.

Meredith rubbed her temple. “There is so much wrong with you, you know that?”

“You’ve known that for years. Now when are you seeing him again?”

“Tomorrow night, for dinner.” If Viv only knew she’d just been on the back his motorcycle.

“Fabulous. What are you wearing?”

“He’s practically young enough to be my son.” That was a lie but Meredith was grasping at straws now.

“No, he isn’t. Chef Spicer’s got to be in his mid-thirties, at least. Your son is twenty. Can we refocus?”

“Oh Lord. Jason can’t know about this. This would not be setting a good example.” She shuddered to think what her son’s reaction might be.

“I think it would be a great example,” Viv said.

“You would.”

“Back to the outfit. What are you wearing for this hot date?”

“It’s not a hot date. It’s just an informal dinner. I don’t even know why I agreed to it.”

“Because you’re warm for him, you just won’t admit it.”

Meredith didn’t answer. Instead, she rolled her eyes at the phone.

“Don’t you think he’s deliciously handsome?” Viv prodded.

Meredith sank back against the cushions and splayed her fingers over her face. “He isn’t ugly.”

“A resounding endorsement if I’ve ever heard one.”

“Fine! He’s attractive. In a boyish sort of way.” She could almost hear Viv rolling her eyes right back. “And I haven’t picked out an outfit yet. Probably slacks and a sweater.”

Viv groaned. “Slacks and a sweater? Where are you going for dinner, a PTA meeting? Don’t make me call Lizza.”

Meredith growled softly in the back of her throat. “Why are we friends again?”

“Do you own a little black dress? Wait, scratch that. Your idea of a little black dress is probably knee-length and long-sleeved. I’m coming over.”

Meredith sat up. “Wait. I can pick out an outfit on my own.”

Viv had already hung up. Meredith slumped back and propped her feet up on the coffee table. She ought to call Kelly and cancel Tuesday night’s dinner. It was just a bad idea. She looked down at the phone, still in her hand. That’s exactly what she was going to do, call and cancel. Just as soon as she had another of those wonderful chocolate fireballs.

Then she’d call Jillian and explain that there was no plan.

When Viv showed up forty-five minutes later, Meredith hadn’t called anyone. She would, though, just as soon as Viv left.

“I brought a few things,” Viv said, shopping bags swinging from both hands. Behind her, Swan’s arms drooped under the weight of numerous garment bags.

“I have plenty of clothes.” Meredith shook her head. “I don’t need any of those.”

“You have plenty of business attire. I doubt the hot date section of your closet is as well-equipped.” Viv motioned Swan forward. “Down the hall, straight ahead to the bedroom.”

“Right away, Miss Vivian.” Swan hustled past. Meredith took off after her with Viv right behind.

Viv dropped the shopping bags and made a beeline for the walk-in. She thrust the doors open with theatrical flourish. “Let’s see what skeletons you’ve got in here.” She looked over her shoulder and smiled sweetly. “Ignore that choice of words.”

“I wasn’t even listening.” Meredith sat on the one spot on the bed not covered in garment bags and watched her friend rummage through her wardrobe. Swan went to work organizing and unzipping the bags.

“Boring, dull, too workaday, too...what is this?” Viv held out a lumpy gray oblong of yarn.

Meredith jumped up and snatched it away. “It’s a scarf. Jason knitted it for me in high school when he had to take Home Economics.” She stared lovingly at the gnarled mess. “He hated that class.”

“I can tell.” Viv went back to rummaging. She pulled out a simple black dress with cap sleeves. “This isn’t bad.”

“No.” Meredith took it out of her hand and hung it back up. “I wore that to Michael’s funeral, I will not wear that on a date.”

“I can’t believe you still have it.” Viv shook her head and continued. “This has possibilities.” A slinky purple wisp dangled from a hanger.

“That’s a nightgown, for Pete’s sake,” Meredith said.

“You actually sleep in this?” Viv’s botoxed forehead failed to furrow.

“No.”

Viv nodded. “I didn’t think so. Swan, give me that bag on top.”

Swan held up the first garment bag while Viv dug into it. She whipped out a champagne lace slip dress dusted with sparkling crystals.

“It’s lovely but this is an informal dinner, not an evening out at the Met,” Meredith said.

“How informal?”

“He’ll be at the restaurant working. I get the sense we’ll probably just sit at the bar or something like that.”

“Nothing I brought is appropriate for sitting at the bar.” Viv sighed. “Why didn’t you tell me that on the phone?”

“I would have if you hadn’t hung up before I had the chance.”

Swan reziped the dress into the garment bag and settled onto the edge of Meredith’s bed. “You mind I go watch TV? My story is on.”

Meredith nodded. “My house is yours. I’m sorry she dragged you into this.”

The petite woman shrugged on her way out. “Long as Miss Vivian pays me, I don’t care what we do.”

Viv snapped her fingers. “I’ve got it. You do own jeans, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Wunderbar. Where’s that sweater I gave you?” She started poking through boxes stacked on the top shelf.

Meredith steeled herself for what was coming next. “That won’t work.”

Viv kept digging. “Of course it will. It’s lovely. You’ve probably never even worn it.”

“Yes, I have and that’s why it won’t work.” She groaned. This was not something she’d wanted to share.

Viv stopped looking through the boxes and with an evil glint in her eye looked at Meredith instead. “Do tell, naughty girl.”

As soon as Meredith gave up the details of her afternoon jaunt, Viv glanced at the closet then back at Meredith. She crossed her arms and leaned against the door jam. “I guess you know what we’re doing tomorrow morning, don’t you?”

Meredith sighed and slumped down on the bed. She had a pretty good idea and she wasn’t looking forward to it.

Chapter Nine

Viv’s driver dropped them in front of Barney’s at 10 am. Celia hopped out first with Viv and Meredith right behind her.

Lizza greeted them with her usual perky smile. Beneath a long black velvet military jacket she wore an excessively ruffled white shirt and skintight burgundy pants tucked into knee high black boots. Meredith leaned over and whispered in Celia's ear. "Isn't that the puffy shirt from Seinfeld?"

With a snicker, Celia whispered back. "I think it's called Pirate Chic."

"You mean there's a name for that look?" Meredith raised a brow.

Celia snorted and Viv shot them both a dangerous glare. The woman took fashion way too seriously.

"Welcome back, Dr. Black. I understand you have a date—"

Viv wordlessly interrupted Lizza with a vigorous and not so subtle head shaking.

Lizza continued. "I mean, an informal dinner."

"I'm sure you've picked out just the right things." Viv nudged Meredith toward the dressing room. "Go on."

Lizza smiled brightly.

Meredith sighed and trudged into the changing room. The fashion pirate and the beauty commando had her outnumbered. She looked at the stuff awaiting her and stuck her head out. "There are jeans in here. I already have jeans."

"You have two pairs and they're both 'mom' jeans. Try those on," Viv commanded.

"Mom jeans?" Meredith said.

"Oh no," Lizza whispered through her fingers. "High-waisted, tapered-leg?"

Viv gave her a wide-eyed, horrified nod. Lizza gasped.

Meredith rolled her eyes. "They're *jeans*. You act like I've been wearing a coat made out of puppy skin." She shut the door. Were her jeans that bad? Kelly must think her hopelessly out of date. Maybe he was just being nice to her. Or worse. Maybe he thought she was desperate. But if she'd been desperate, she would have kissed him.

She should have. He was a great kisser.

"What are you putting on first?" Celia called out.

Meredith refocused. Then sighed. "Jeans and one of these slutty tops."

"They are not slutty," Lizza corrected her. "They're very *Sex And The City*."

“And *Sex And The City* was such a family show,” Meredith said. She fastened the jeans, slipped one of the tops over her head and took a look in the mirror. This was a mistake. She stepped out of the dressing room so her suspicions could be confirmed.

“Oh, Meredith...I wish I could wear sleeveless. How do you keep your arms from looking like wet noodles?” Celia asked.

“Pilates and thanks,” Meredith answered. “You like this top?”

“That shade is fabulous,” Lizza gushed. “Aubergine is just *the* color right now.”

Meredith took another look. Tiny jet beads accented the silver embroidery along the cami’s deep V. Pin tucks hugged the silky fabric to the curve of her bosom; from there, the top went soft and floaty into an asymmetrical hem. “It is a nice color.”

“You have a great tush for jeans, too.” Viv smiled. “I really hate you right now.”

“That’s very nice, but I can’t wear this.” Meredith shook her head.

“Why not?” Lizza asked.

“Because it’s sleeveless and it’s spring. It still gets chilly at night.”

“Ah.” Lizza held up one ruby-tipped finger and slipped into the dressing room. She came out with a fitted olive-green velvet jacket. “Here.”

Meredith shrugged the jacket on. “People wear these colors together?”

“Of course,” Lizza said.

The velvet was soft and snuggling. Meredith took a look in the mirror. Kelly had liked the red dress Lizza had selected so maybe he’d like this too. “Okay. I’m done shopping.”

Viv laughed. “Where’s your sense of optimism? Buy more than one outfit.”

“But that implies—”

“Yes,” Viv nodded, lips pursed in a knowing way. “It does.”

* * *

Meredith arrived at Sedona at quarter to seven. Being early gave her time to go over what she planned to say to Kelly. She’d eat dinner with him, thank him for a nice evening and then gently explain why she couldn’t see him anymore. As far as the blog incident, Jillian could arrange for some sort of mea culpa interview somewhere and that would have to do for penance.

“Welcome to Sedona.” The curvy redhead at the hostess stand looked like she was no stranger to the plastic surgeon’s office. “Do you have a reservation?”

Meredith straightened. “No, I’m meeting someone at the bar.”

“Very good.” The woman smiled. “That’s a lovely top. Great color.”

And those are ambitious implants, Meredith wanted to say, but held her tongue. “Thank you.”

She tucked herself into the only empty seat in the bar. The happy hour crowd was still there and judging from the laughs and back slapping, very happy. She ordered a club soda and studied the rows of bottles along the back wall. Who knew there were so many kinds of tequila? Maybe she should have the bartender call up and tell Kelly she was here.

The bartender set her drink down but walked away before she could make herself heard above the noisy businessmen next to her. She picked up her drink to take a sip. The suit beside her chose that moment to pantomime part of the story he’d been telling. His elbow connected with her hand and the glass went flying. The crash of glass got the bartender’s attention. He bent to pick up the pieces.

“Whoa...” The suit spun around to face her. “Sorry about that.” He loosened his already drooping tie and gave her a whiskey sour grin. “Lemme buy you another.”

“No, thank you. I’m fine.” *Just turn around and leave me alone.*

“I inshist,” he said.

The bartender put another club soda in front of her.

“Excuse me.” She held up a finger to get the man’s attention but he was already at the service bar. Had Kelly purposefully hired the fastest bartender in the city?

“You have pretty eyes,” the suit said, doing his drunken best not to seem obvious as he peered down her shirt.

She pulled her jacket closed and ignored him.

“What’s a matter? Doncha wanna talk to me?” The man rested his elbow on the bar in front of her, blocking her access to her drink. He reached for her arm but another hand grabbed his and jerked him out of his seat.

“You’re done. Let’s get you a cab.” Kelly hustled the protesting man out of the bar, returning solo a few minutes later. His face was grave, his tone worried. “I’m sorry. That should not have happened.”

“It’s okay,” she said and meant it. His pale yellow shirt was unbuttoned enough to show a tantalizing glimpse of tanned chest. A long-forgotten warmth spread through her thighs. Saying goodbye might be a little harder than anticipated. “Thank you for taking care of it.”

The sparkle returned to his eyes and soft smile curved his mouth. He held out his hand. “Wanna get out of here? I know a quiet spot one floor up.”

She slipped her hand into his. No reason not to be pleasant. “And the cynics say chivalry is dead.”

“Not in Texas, ma’am.” He tipped an imaginary hat as he escorted her to the elevator.

“You do realize you’re not in Texas, don’t you?” she joked.

“Don’t remind me.” He scuffed one boot on the floor. “You look...” He slanted a glance her way. “You look real nice.”

“Thank you.” She smiled. “My friends made me do some shopping.” Why had she said that? The doors opened and they got on. “How did you find me in the bar? Did you know I was here?”

“I didn’t know.” He shook his head. “But you seem like the kind to be early for things so I thought I’d come down and have a look. Good timing, I guess.”

She nodded. “Thanks again.”

The serious expression returned to his face. “Like I said, it shouldn’t have happened. The bartenders usually keep a better eye on the happy hour crowd.”

“I think that’s your problem, there was only one bartender.”

“I know. We usually have two but Tia called in sick, Shelby didn’t feel up to coming in and my other bartender is running late.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I’m really glad you came.”

The doors opened and her breath caught in her throat. The VIP dining room looked much the way it had the first night she’d seen it, all silver stars and flickering candles, but tonight the center of the room held a lavishly set table for two. White china and crystal glittered under the fairy lights. Soft jazz played in the background. For the centerpiece, a small silver bowl held a tight bouquet of white roses flanked by a scattering of tea lights. Snowy covers dressed the chairs.

In the room of burgundy and indigo, the all white table glowed like a pristine beacon. The effect was stunning. So much for the informal dinner.

“You did this for me?” Maybe there was more to the cowboy than she’d given him credit for. But she was right about him being an overachiever, not that that mattered at the moment.

“I had a little help from a few of the girls on the wait staff.” He grinned. “You like it?”

“Yes. It’s beautiful.” Not in a long time had a man gone to such trouble for her. Why was Kelly doing this? Seemed like a lot of effort just to get her into bed. Or whatever he was after.

“I’m glad.” He escorted her to the table and pulled out her chair. She sat, still slightly dazed by the whole thing.

“Why did you do all this?” She motioned to the table.

“For you.” His grin went lopsided as he sat. “Is there a better reason than that?” He shook his head, amused. “Don’t you remember?”

She draped the white linen napkin across her lap. “Remember what?”

“That first night. In the elevator.”

When he’d kissed her. Oh yes, she remembered that. Her face warmed. “What about it?”

“You told me you’d had two husbands and it took a lot more to impress you.” He swept his hand over the table. “I’m just upping my game.”

Eyes narrowed, she peered at him. *Good. You’re making it easier for me to tell you this is it.* “So this is a game?”

He groaned. “That’s just an expression.” He shook his napkin out and tucked it onto his lap. “You really need to get out more.” Big grin. “With me.”

“My friends think so, too,” she conceded. Not that she was convinced.

“Smart bunch of women.”

“More like conniving.”

“That Vivian seems like a sharp cookie. I bet she could talk a dog off a meat wagon.”

Meredith wrinkled her brow. “A meat wagon?”

“I’m just saying she knows what she wants and isn’t afraid to go after it.”

“That’s because whatever she goes after is usually more afraid of her.”

Kelly laughed.

“I know she gave you my address to send the roses.”

He nodded. “Let that out, did she?”

A server set plates of artfully arranged salad before them, then slipped away as quietly as he’d come in. Meredith shook her head. “She didn’t so much let it slip as she announced it with great pride. I think she considered it her good deed for the day.”

Kelly picked up his fork. “She’s a real trip, Vivian. I like her.”

“She likes you, too. She thinks I should just—never mind.” The words ‘have a fling with you’ had almost popped out.

“She thinks you should just never mind?”

“No. Never mind what I was going to say.”

“Which was?”

“Nothing.” She sipped her water.

“Lying on the first date. Not a positive sign.” He took a bite of his salad.

She set her fork down. “This is not a date.”

He swallowed. “Yes, it is.”

“You got me here under false pretenses.”

“Not hardly.”

“You said it was just going to be an informal dinner.” She waved her hands over the table. “There is nothing informal about this.”

He finished another bite. “You want to leave?”

“No. You went to all this trouble.” She ate some salad. The dressing was sweet and tangy and altogether delicious.

He set his fork down and leaned back in his chair, studying her. “Why are you so dead set against me? Have I done something to offend you? Do I smell bad? What is it?”

“You smell fine.” *Better than fine.* She spoke without looking at him. This was happening sooner than expected. “You’re just too young, for me anyway. You have a reputation as being a womanizer. I don’t know anything about you. And I’m not looking for another relationship. Not now, not ever. I’ve had my share and I’m done.” If that didn’t get rid of his attentions, she wasn’t sure what would.

“For a doctor of psychology, you’re plum nuts, you know that?” He shook his head. “We’re twelve years apart. Big deal. Age means nothing. And just because I date a lot of women, doesn’t make me a womanizer. I respect women.” He sighed. “Believe it or not, despite your low opinion of me, there are tons of women just dying to go out with me.”

“So date them,” she said, knowing he had probably already gone through most of the eligible women in the city.

“I have. They all wanna make themselves Mrs. Kelly Spicer. I’m not looking to get tethered. Not for a long time.”

“That makes two of us.” At least they had that in common. His confession put her at ease. A little.

He leaned forward. “If you want to get to know me, ask. That’s what this dinner was supposed to be about. You finding out just how close you’d come to figuring me out.”

She still didn’t get it. “Why me? Of all those women chasing you, surely there are a few who don’t have marriage on the brain.”

The sound of his chair scudding across the floor filled the room as he pushed back and crossed one leg. “Well, for one thing you’re complicated.”

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?” she asked.

“I’m serious. There’s a whole lot more to you than just a hot body and a pretty face.”

He thinks I have a hot body and a pretty face?

“You’ve got a brain. You don’t particularly like me, which,” he grinned sheepishly, “makes me want you even more. You also have your own success. That’s key. I don’t feel like you’re looking to hitch your wagon to mine in hopes of bright lights and seeing your name in the paper.”

His last few words made her insides queasy. Good thing she’d changed her mind about that.

“So if I tell you I like you, you’ll leave me alone?” She wanted him to say no. The idea of seeing more of him was getting better. A man who kissed like that couldn’t be so bad to spend time with, could he?

He smiled. “Do you? You do, don’t you?”

“You’re full of yourself, you know that?”

“I’ll take that as a yes.” He uncrossed his leg, scooted his chair back under the table and picked up his fork. “So where do you want to go for our second date?”

Meredith stared at him. What had just happened? She’d come here ready to put a stop to things and now she was contemplating seeing him again.

The server returned, cleared their salad plates, then set their entrees before them.

“I wasn’t sure what you liked but after the tasting you did at Gauchos, I figured you were pretty open,” Kelly said.

Food was a safe subject matter. “It looks wonderful. What is it?” The food smelled great, too. No wonder his restaurants did so well.

“Game hens stuffed with cornbread dressing roasted with a jalapeno, Jack Daniels and peach glaze on a bed of wild pecan rice with a side of greens.”

“Wow. That sounds amazing. Are those all your own recipes?”

“Yes, ma’am.” The wattage on his grin threatened to outshine the white tablecloth. She momentarily lost her train of thought. When it hopped back on the tracks, the destination sign had changed.

“If we’re going to see each other, and that really hasn’t been decided yet, you have to stop calling me ma’am.” She dug into her food, eager to see if it tasted as good as it looked.

His eyes twinkled like a kid at Christmas. “No promises. That’s just the way Gram raised me.”

“I was right then.” She took a bite of the game hen. The skin was crisp beneath the hot, sticky glaze and the explosion of flavor made her close her eyes. Images of Kelly filled her head as her mouth watered. She managed to swallow without embarrassing herself. “Oh...that is...really good.”

* * *

The expression of pure pleasure on her face gave Kelly wicked thoughts. Plain and simple, watching her eat made him hot. “Right about what?”

“Your grandmother raised you, not your mother.” She scooped up a big forkful of the wild rice next. “What happened to her?”

“She just wasn’t around.” He did the same, filling his mouth so he wouldn’t have to give more of an answer. His mother was not a subject for discussion. Not now. Not ever.

He chewed slowly, happy to watch her eat and enjoy the teasing glimpse of cleavage her top revealed. Tonight’s jeans really showed off her curves, a big improvement over the ones she’d worn the day before. Damn. One of her husbands must have died in bed. Not a bad way to go if the killer looked like her. Her silky purple top reminded him of lingerie, which sent his mind in a whole new direction. Still, he’d love to see her in a tank top, cut-offs and boots. That was Texas-style sexy.

Finishing her last bite, she opened her mouth to speak and her purse started to buzz. “That’s my phone. Sorry, that’s rude. I should have turned it off.”

“Go ahead and get it, it’s okay.” She’d barely touched her wine, but her water glass was nearly empty. Was she trying to keep a level head around him after the first night? He picked up

her glass and headed to the bar for a refill while she took the call. He tried not to listen but in the small room, it was impossible not to.

She pulled the phone from her purse and swiped her finger across the screen.

“Hi there,” she said, a smile he’d never seen before lighting her face. “I’m great, how are you? You are? When? That’s wonderful! What a nice surprise.”

Kelly tipped a scoop of ice into her glass. The sweetness in her voice made his gut ache. She obviously liked whoever she was talking to.

“I can’t wait to see you, honey.” Her voice practically purred. “I miss you.”

Honey? Kelly topped off their glasses with water. Who was she calling honey? A guy? That would explain why she wasn’t keen on going out with him. She was seeing someone else. Fine. Let her. He’d soon show her who the better man was. He picked up the drinks and headed back to the table.

“Okay, I’ll see you soon. Love you. Bye.”

That halted him in his tracks. *Love you*? What in the Sam Hill was going on? He set the water down and took his seat across from her.

As far as he was concerned, the good doctor had some explaining to do.

Chapter Ten

Meredith went back to eating like nothing had happened.

He cleared his throat. “Everything okay?”

“Yes, thank you. This is a great meal. I’m glad I came.” She sipped her water. “What were we talking about? Your mother, I think.”

He put his elbows on the table and leaned forward. “I’m glad you like the food but suddenly I’m not so sure I’m glad you came.”

She stopped eating and met his gaze. “Why?”

Nothing in her eyes but curiosity. No lying, no cheating, no deception. Damn, she was good at this. “I don’t think getting involved with a woman who’s already in love with another man is such a good idea, to use a phrase you’re so fond of.”

“In love with another man?” Her eyebrows pulled together. “What are you talking about?”

“I heard the phone call.”

She laughed, narrowing her eyes at him. Her emerald gaze glinted with mischief. “Did that make you jealous?”

“Well, not jealous exactl—“

“You’re dying to know who I was talking to, aren’t you?”

“I wouldn’t say dyin—“

“Oh please. It’s killing you. I can see it on your face. Are you like this with all the women you date?”

“So we’re dating now?” That was news.

She smiled sweetly and tapped her lower lip with one finger. “I don’t know yet. This jealous side worries me.”

Her teasing didn’t drive him half as crazy as that finger on her lip. He should kiss her, hard. Maybe he would. Just as soon as he found out about this other man she was in love with. He drove a hand through his hair and gave up. “Okay! Yes, I’m dying to know who you were talking to. There. Happy?”

She fussed with her water glass, rubbing the condensation off with her thumb. “I *am* in love with him. Deeply. Madly. Completely.”

He hadn’t figured her on the kind to play games. At least she was being up front about it. He sighed. “If that don’t beat all.” Women. They were all up to something. “Does he know?”

“That I love him? He’d better. I tell him every chance I get.” She smiled in a wistful, faraway kind of way.

“No, I mean that you’re here. With me.”

She shook her head and quirked her lips. “I don’t think a child needs to know everything their parent does.”

“What do you mean—you mean that was your kid on the phone?”

She nodded slowly, like she was afraid he wasn’t going to get it. “My son, yes. He’s away at college but coming up for the weekend for a visit.”

“Well...damn. If dumb was dirt I’d have an acre covered.” He grimaced. He’d been getting green over her kid. Idiot. No wonder she didn’t want to go out with him. “Sorry. That was just plain foolish.”

She laughed softly. "That's okay. You're human, aren't you? Jealousy is a perfectly normal human emotion. Even if it is a little premature in this case."

"Does that mean you're still willing to go out with me?"

"We can try one date, one real date, and see how it goes. No promises beyond that, though. Okay?"

He grinned. "Yes, ma'am."

* * *

Kelly punched the heavy bag so hard sweat flew off his arms. On the other side of the bag, Mick Bishop shook his head and grinned. "You got it bad, Tex."

Chest heaving, Kelly rested his gloved hands on his hips and eyed his friend. "What?"

"I'm just saying, you don't punish the bag like this unless you got bosoms on the brain." The Brooklyn native grinned but kept his grip on the bag.

"You're full of sh—"

"Mick! Phone call!" Zippo, the owner of the boxing gym, yelled louder than anyone Kelly had ever heard. But then he had to if he was going to be heard above the searing beat of the classic rock pounding through the club. Zippo'd earned his nickname after a childhood accident with a lighter left him with only one eyebrow.

"Hold that thought," Mick said. "I'll be right back."

Kelly jabbed a few hooks into the air. As friends went, Mick was top notch. They'd met right after Kelly had first gotten to the city. Back then, Mick had been a bouncer at the Rodeo Bar, the closest thing Manhattan had to a honky-tonk. It had felt like home to Kelly.

A fight outside the club had left Mick with a bullet hole in his shoulder and an out-of-court settlement that let the ex-Navy seal do what he'd always wanted to do.

Open an art gallery.

Kelly shook his head. Most people who went into Mick's gallery for the first time usually assumed the barrel-chested guy with the black goatee and gorilla arms was security. He loved the look on their faces when they found out Mick was the owner.

Mick walked back over. "That was Jada. She sold that Von Merker piece I just got in. \$150 G's." He grinned. "Man, I love this business. I gotta deliver it out to the Hamptons on Sunday. You wanna come?"

Kelly planned to take Mery to Central Park on Sunday for a picnic. “I can’t. I have plans.”

Mick smirked and scratched his head. “What’s her name again? Claire? Clara? I can’t keep track.”

“I’m not seeing Clarissa anymore.” Kelly swiped his arm across his forehead to keep the sweat out of his eyes.

Mick’s eyes widened. “You dumped that hot little blonde? This new one must be something. Who is she?”

“Just a woman I met.” For the first time in a long time, talking about the woman he was interested in seemed like a bad idea. He smiled. Since he’d met Mery, that phrase kept popping up.

“Great. You’re smiling and you won’t tell me her name.” Mick rolled his eyes. “You’re a goner.”

“She’s just...different than most of the women I’ve gone out with.”

“Different like how? She got a third eye? A hair lip? She walk with a limp? What aren’t you telling me, Tex?” Mick grabbed his towel from a nearby bench, tossed it around his neck and headed for the locker room. Kelly grabbed his, wiped the sweat from his face and went in the same direction.

“She’s...,” he kept an eye on Mick to see his reaction, “older.”

Mick’s brows jumped. “Like grandma-in-a-home older or horny divorcée older?”

Kelly’s scowl made Mick hold up his hands in surrender. “I’m just asking if this is a meals on wheels situation or a lady who lunches. Cut me some slack, will ya? Just answer the freakin’ question.”

“Twelve years older.”

Mick nodded, as if considering the information. “What are you, thirty-two right?”

“Yeah.”

Mick clapped him on the shoulder. “Congratulations, my friend. You have just hit the sexual jackpot. Women reach their peak at forty-five. I’m guessing she’s all over you like white on rice.” He wagged his dark brows. “Bet she’s got a few tricks up her sleeve, too.”

The man not only looked like the devil, he acted like one too. Kelly rolled his eyes. “Isn’t it time you settled down with a nice, respectable woman?”

“Why? She got friends I should meet?” He grinned wicked.

“You ever not think about sex?” Kelly pulled his locker open, grabbed his shampoo and headed for the shower.

“Is that a yes?” Mick called after him.

Kelly didn’t stop walking.

* * *

By the time Kelly got to Sedona, Shelby was at her usual table in the bar, paperwork spread before her. Relief filled him at the sight. Getting her out of her house had been nearly impossible these last few months and while he loved his sister dearly, picking up her slack at the restaurant had almost unbalanced his already full plate.

“You’re here early.”

She looked up but didn’t smile. “I have a lot to do to catch up and I’m supposed to go to lunch with Dr. Black today.” She exhaled softly. “I don’t know if I’m ready for this.”

He slipped behind the bar to get a coke. “Ready for what?”

“Talking about...Kurt.” She wiped at the corner of her eye but Kelly didn’t see tears.

He took his coke and went to sit beside her. “So don’t talk. Just listen. Maybe she’ll have some good advice.”

Shelby nodded. “Yeah. She’s a pretty smart woman. I’ve been reading her book.”

“Is that why you’ve been coming back to work?”

“She says you have to accept the reality of the loss.” She shrugged. “Coming back to work says I accept it, right?”

He didn’t have a clue but it seemed logical. “I’d think so, yeah.”

She sighed and offered a weak smile. “Well, I need to get these server reports done before she gets here.”

He wanted to hug her tight and tell her how proud of her he was but she looked so fragile he held back. “I have work to do, too. I’ll be in my office if you need me.”

“Okay,” she said, flipping over the paper in front of her.

He walked off, his heart aching for his kid sister. She’d taken the brunt of their mother’s bad choices. The need to protect her welled up in him so strong it cramped the muscles in his shoulders. He waited for the elevator and rolled his head, trying to focus on the work ahead of him.

The menu for the private party coming in on Friday still needed tweaking. They wanted seafood. That meant getting to the fish market Friday morning before sunup to see what looked good.

The doors opened and he got on. Maybe he'd get some shrimp and make ceviche for the picnic on Sunday. Feeding Mery was a joy. Mick was always talking about artists and their muses. Why couldn't a chef have one too? The woman loved everything he'd given her so far.

The picnic would be a surprise. She'd agreed to something Sunday afternoon but he hadn't told her what. Was a picnic too country for a woman like her? He hoped not. Maybe he'd get to meet her son. He doubted it. Something told him that wouldn't happen for a long time.

When he got into his office, the message light blinked on his phone. He dialed into his voicemail and listened to the message. His agent, sounding very excited. As Kelly listened, a smile crept across his face. He could understand why.

* * *

"Hi, I'm here to meet Shelby," Meredith told the girl at the hostess stand. She was glad it wasn't the busty redhead again. That girl made her feel old.

"Your name?"

"Meredith Black."

"I'll let her know you're here." The brunette hostess picked up the phone at her stand.

Meredith looked back into the restaurant. No sight of Kelly. Her gaze automatically went to the hall that led to the elevator.

"She'll be right out, ma'am."

Ma'am. Bah. Out of anyone's mouth but Kelly's it sounded so patronizing. When he said it, it sounded...naughty. "Thank you."

A few minutes later, Shelby rounded the corner, several file folders in one hand. "Hi, Dr. Black. I just need to run these up to Kelly and I'll be ready to go."

Meredith nodded. *I could take them up.* "I'll just wait right here."

Shelby disappeared down the hall. She returned in less than ten minutes. "Kelly says hi."

A small thrill tickled her insides. "That was nice of him. Ready to go?"

They walked down to the deli Shelby had spoken of. Nothing more than small talk about the promise of summer in the air passed between them. Meredith sensed Shelby's hesitation and

understood it. Opening yourself up to a stranger, no matter what their qualifications, was never an easy thing to do.

The busyness of the place disappointed Meredith. She'd hoped for something quieter, but Shelby had picked it, so there was nothing she could do.

They sat and ordered chicken salad sandwiches and iced tea. After the waitress took their menus, Meredith started a new conversation. "How do you like working with your brother?"

"It's good." Shelby dumped packet after packet of sugar into her tea. After the fifth one, she stirred. The cloud of white crystals in the bottom didn't look like it was going to dissolve any time soon.

"Do you always put that much sugar in your tea?"

Shelby laughed a little. "Yeah, it never seems sweet enough. I guess being raised in the South does that to you." She stuck a straw in the glass, sucked up a mouthful and wrinkled her nose. "Would it freak you out if I added more sugar?"

"Who am I to judge? Sweeten away," Meredith said. Two more packets went in. "How long have you worked for Kelly?"

"About three years, right after he opened Sedona. He needed help with paperwork, orders, stuff he didn't trust anybody else with. I've always been good with figures so I said sure. Living in New York City seemed like such a dream back then. It was exciting. Something new every day." She went quiet and stirred her tea some more.

"And it doesn't seem that way to you anymore?" Meredith prompted.

Shelby shook her head. "I think a lot about moving back home. Kelly needs me but he really could hire somebody to do what I do. Probably pay them less, too."

"What would you do if you moved back to Texas?" Meredith sipped her tea, sweetened with only one little pink packet.

Shelby's mouth scrunched to one side. "Waitress, maybe. Tend bar. I fill in sometimes now when Kelly needs a shift picked up. It would be good to be near my grandmother."

"She's the one who raised you, correct?"

Something flickered in Shelby's eyes, just for a moment. Something that looked an awful lot like bad memories to Meredith. "Yeah," Shelby said. "She raised us."

There was more there and Meredith wanted to know what it was. Whatever made Shelby tick wound Kelly up, too. "Why did your grandmother raise you?"

Shelby picked up her glass and took a long, slow draw from her straw. She sat the drink down and waved at the server. "I could use some more tea."

Meredith leaned forward. "You know, it's a lot easier for me to help if I know a little bit about your background."

"We don't talk about our mother."

"Why not?"

"Because we don't."

The server brought their sandwiches then and Meredith let the subject drop. Maybe Kelly would fill her in on Sunday. She couldn't believe she was actually going out with him. Thank God Jason's flight left at two. No way she wanted her son finding out about her "fling".

Meredith finished her first bite. "You were right. They do have great chicken salad. Probably not as good as your brother's but very tasty."

Shelby smiled at that. "He is a good cook, isn't he?"

After a sip of tea, Meredith answered. "Have you had one of those chocolate fireball things he makes? They are so good. He brought them to the book signing on Saturday and promised me some more if I came to the opening party. I hate to tell him this but I've almost finished the box he gave me. To quote a famous cereal icon, they're magically delicious."

Shelby choked on her sandwich. She grabbed her tea and sucked the glass dry.

Meredith leaned in. "Are you okay?"

Eyes watering, Shelby shook her head and managed to swallow. "I just remembered something I need to talk to my brother about."

Chapter Eleven

"Are you out of your ever-lovin' mind?" Shelby slammed Kelly's office door behind her as she stormed in.

The noise nearly knocked him off his chair. "What in the Sam Hill are you talking about?" He hadn't seen this much emotion out of his sister since the funeral.

"I know what you're up to and it better stop. Right now." She shook her finger at him, her eyes sparking.

"Calm down a damn minute and tell me what you're talking about."

“Dr. Black and the chocolates. You used the book, didn’t you?” Shelby paced as much as the small space would allow. “That’s how you got her to come talk to me, isn’t it?”

Kelly sighed and sank back into his chair. “Does it matter? I couldn’t stand to see you so down and I couldn’t do anything to help you. You’re all het up over nothing.”

She threw herself down in a chair. “It’s not nothing. There are consequences for using the book and you know it.”

“You worry too much.”

“Just stop, understand? Just. Stop.”

“Shel, it’s not going to come to that.”

She shook her head and looked away, her eyes big and liquid. He knew what she was thinking.

She pushed out the chair. “I love you, Kel. I just don’t want you to end up like...” Her hands fisted just for a moment and she exhaled hard. “Just don’t, okay? Just don’t.”

* * *

“Tell me all about it,” Viv said.

Meredith sighed into the phone. “It was just dinner.”

“So you ate at the bar?”

“Not exactly.” Meredith knew what Viv was after but enjoyed making her work for it.

“You slept with him?” Viv’s voice went up a happy octave.

“No! For heaven’s sake, is that all you think about?”

“Sex, shoes and socializing. That’s my life in a nutshell.”

“You ought to be in nutshell.” Meredith set down the pages she’d been editing. Talking to Viv took all her concentration.

“Why don’t you meet us for lunch at Market? I’m sure the girls would like to hear this too.”

“I can’t, I have work to do. Jason’s coming home this weekend.”

“That’s wonderful! What time does his flight get in?”

“Around seven.” *And then I have a date.*

“That’s perfect. Tell him if he comes to brunch on Sunday, I’ll have Marcus take him to the airport in the limo. That way we can ooh and aah over him and he gets to arrive in style.”

Meredith could almost hear Viv smiling. The woman was too clever for her own good.
“He might actually go for that.”

“Of course he will. Now then, the reservations at Market are for 12:30.”

“I just said I can’t,” Meredith reminded her.

“Don’t be silly. Your editor will understand if her best-selling author is a little late. Those deadlines aren’t really firm anyway, they just use them for incentive.”

Meredith rolled her eyes. Viv might be a genius when it came to fundraising but the woman knew nothing about publishing. “Really, I can’t—“

“See you there,” Viv interrupted.

The line went dead. With an exasperated sigh, Meredith hung up the phone and went to change. She’d yet to slip her shoes on when the phone rang again. Undoubtedly Viv calling to make sure she was coming. She snatched the receiver.

“Settle down, will you? I’m on my way.”

“To an appointment with a spin doctor I hope. Meredith, this is getting out of control.” Jillian sounded more tense than usual.

“Hello, Jillian. What’s getting out of control?” Meredith bit her lip.

“The press on that all-men-should-die blog rant you posted.”

“I never said all men should die.” That was patently incorrect.

“You might as well have. *Psychology Today* got a hold of the post—someone must have screen-captured it before you deleted it, you know anything you put on the internet is there forever—and they’ve printed it as part of an article titled ‘When Good Doctors Go Bad’. Let’s just say you’re number one on their hit list.”

Meredith’s fingers went numb. “What? Can they do that?”

“They’ve attributed you so it seems on the up and up. I’m looking into the possibility of suing.”

“Suing?” Meredith swallowed. “Wouldn’t that make a bigger mess out of this?”

“You have a better idea?” Jillian sighed. “I’m sorry but at this point it might be better to cut your losses and run.”

“What about the book I’m working on? Maybe we can get some press for that, show I haven’t lost my compassion.” Her book for children, *Healing The Hurt*, would let people see her heart was in the right place.

There was silence for a moment. “I take it you haven’t talked to Phillip.”

The numbness crept into Meredith’s chest. “Why?”

“It’s not my place—”

“Just tell me.”

“I’m sure he’s trying to negotiate something, but word is that contract’s a no-go.” Jillian softly cleared her throat. “I’m sure Phillip will work something out.”

It was Meredith’s turn to be silent. This wasn’t happening. Couldn’t be happening. The children’s book was important. “I have to go.” She choked the words out, desperate to hang up.

“Wait.” Jillian’s plea made Meredith pause. “I know that book means a lot to you. Are you sure you’re not willing to take some more public action to resolve this?”

“I...I don’t know.” Meredith closed her eyes. “I’ll think about it.” There was no reason not to go to lunch now, was there?

* * *

When Meredith got to the restaurant, Viv and Celia were already seated. Viv’s eyes lit up. “You came!”

“Not like I had anything better to do.” She shot Viv a dirty look. “You basically forced me into coming.” Better they think that than she have to explain the conversation she’d just had with Jillian.

“You’re a grown woman, darling. No one forces you to do anything.” Viv smiled. “Now sit down like a good girl and tell us all about Chef Spicer and what he looks like naked.”

Celia squealed and clapped a hand over her mouth. She removed it to whisper, “You didn’t.”

“No,” Meredith said, her voice stony. “I didn’t.” She tsked at Viv. “You’re a bad egg, Vivian.”

“I’ll be sure to add that to my résumé.”

Celia looked disappointed. “But you did have dinner with him, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” Meredith said.

“Do tell,” Celia pleaded. “And Viv, hush. Let her have her say.”

Viv sipped a glass of white wine and stayed quiet.

“So,” Celia said. “How was it?”

“It was...” Meredith searched for the words. “Nicer than I expected.” Much nicer.

“Details, please.” Celia smiled sweetly.

“You’re spending too much time with Viv,” Meredith told her.

“Inquiring minds want to know, lovey.” Viv smoothed the napkin on her lap. “Be a dear and tell us everything, won’t you?”

Meredith held up her hands. “I know when I’m beat.” Not to mention, Kelly was a wonderful distraction from the sudden downward spiral her life was on. She spent the rest of lunch answering questions and giving them details on everything from the beautiful white table setting to Kelly’s momentary jealousy over Jason’s phone call to the decadent vanilla rum cake Kelly had served for dessert. The breezy chatter was a welcome change from the depressing news she’d received earlier.

Viv wiped her mouth then tucked her napkin under the edge of her gold-rimmed plate. “What are you going to tell Jason?”

“Nothing for right now. There’s nothing to tell, really.” Meredith finished the last spoonful of leek bisque. “He doesn’t need to know. That means keep your mouths shut at brunch.”

Celia stuck her bottom lip out. “What will we talk about then?”

“Well,” Meredith answered, “I’m pretty sure he’s dating someone seriously but he won’t tell me. Feel free to interrogate him to the best of your abilities.” That ought to refocus their energy.

Viv’s eyes brightened. “Do you think there’s an engagement eminent? Oh, I haven’t planned a wedding in ages.” She clutched her throat, twining a finger in her pearls, as though the prospect might overwhelm her with happiness.

“Whoa! Just a minute now.” Meredith held up her hands. “Let’s not get crazy. He’s much too young to get engaged. Not until he finishes school. He knows that.”

“Relax, mommy dearest,” Viv teased. “Jason’s got a good head on his shoulders. He won’t do anything rash.”

Meredith searched for a way to derail the current topic. “We should go see a show. We haven’t been to a show in ages.” She tapped her fist on the table. “We should go this Saturday night, maybe see that new one with Kristin Chenoweth. I’m sure Jason will be out with his NYU friends.

“Sounds like fun. It’s not like I have a date.” Celia smiled a little too big.

Viv shook her head. "It's a marvelous idea, but not on Saturday. That's the Bryson-Louis Alzheimer's Benefit Dinner. Let's do a matinee on Sunday after brunch. I'll call Jack and have his secretary get us tickets."

Celia shrugged. "Sunday works for me." She looked at Meredith. "Matinee all right with you?"

"Not exactly."

Viv's brows rose. "Because?"

"I have a...meeting." Not quite a lie.

"A meeting? With your editor, perhaps?" Viv suggested.

At the word, Meredith laughed bitterly. "I think the days of meetings with my editor may be over."

"What?" Celia's eyes widened. Viv's brows shot up. Celia shook her head, her blonde shag danced at her cheekbones. "What happened?"

Reluctantly, Meredith summarized the whole sorted mess. With each detail, a sense of relief grew in her. Perhaps misery really did love company.

Viv pulled her napkin from beneath the edge of her plate and laid it over the top. "I think the answer is obvious."

The look on Celia face said she agreed.

"No." Meredith shook her head, already knowing where Viv was going. "I can't. That would be using him."

"He's not interested in marriage, you said so yourself," Celia said.

Viv tilted her head in thought. "Sounds like the perfect man for the job."

Meredith balled up her napkin. "It's not a job, it's a scam. I can't do it. I won't."

The tiniest of smiles tipped the corners of Viv's mouth. "It's not a scam. It's what would happen anyway in the scheme of things. His picture is in the paper every week with a different girl." She leaned forward, a devilish gleam in her eyes. "The hard part is keeping him interested longer than a week."

Meredith smirked. "Don't try to use reverse psychology on me. I know you want me to rise to the gauntlet you've just thrown but forget it. It's not happening."

Viv searched aimlessly through her Chanel clutch, a distraction tactic Meredith knew well. “Wasn’t a portion of the proceeds from that children’s book to go toward a new pediatric grief counseling center at Sinai? You wouldn’t want that deal to disappear, now would you?”

The numbness settled around Meredith’s heart. “You don’t play fair.”

Viv’s smile blossomed into one full of sympathy and friendship. “Neither does life, my dear. You of all people should know that.”

Celia reached over to squeeze Meredith’s hand. “I know how much that book means to you. This really does seem like a fab opportunity to make things right, don’t you think?”

Offering a little nod, Meredith conceded. “Unfortunately, it does. I’ll give it some thought, that’s all I’ll say.” She glanced at her watch. “I’d better run. I’ll see you all Sunday for brunch.”

She said her goodbyes, excused herself and grabbed a cab. On the ride home, the sucking sound of her career’s descent blocked out the Latino dance music pouring from the cabbie’s radio. Maybe her friends were right. Kelly wasn’t looking for anything serious and neither was she. He was already a known quantity to the local paparazzi. He wasn’t hard to spend time with, either.

Therein lay the problem. Spending time led to familiarity and familiarity could lead to...intimacy. Or worse. She shook her head. She would not fall in love again. Those days were over. She didn’t need it, didn’t want it, wouldn’t let it happen. The city passed by in a slow blur.

Lying to yourself was no way to live.

* * *

After an early morning at the fish market and a quick workout, Kelly sat in his office trying to get a jump on the day’s paperwork, but his mind kept wandering. To Mery.

Unable to think of a reason not to, he grabbed the phone and dialed. She picked up on the third ring.

“Hello?”

She sounded slightly breathless. Kelly shifted in his chair. “Hey, gorgeous. It’s Kelly.”

“Oh, hi. I saw the caller ID and thought it was Shelby. I told her she could call me any time. Can I call you back?”

“Yeah, sure.” Shelby could call any time but he couldn’t? So much for being missed. Or even thought of.

“Okay, thanks, bye.” She hung up.

Kelly stared at the receiver in disbelief. He felt like the cheese had just fallen off his cracker. Women were so damn hard to figure out. He hung up and sat there for a moment wondering what to do. Should he send more flowers? That might seem desperate. Besides, he’d done that already. No point in sending chocolates when the only ones he wanted her eating were the ones he made. He rapped his fingers on the desk trying to think, but the clock’s ticking drove him nuts.

He went downstairs and found Shelby in the bar, files and stacks of receipts surrounding her. Paper curled out of her adding machine and onto the floor. “You busy?”

“What’s it look like, I’m on vacation?” she snapped without glancing up.

“You’re about as sweet as an outhouse breeze this morning. You still mad at me about those chocolates?” He turned a chair around and straddled it at her table.

“No, sorry.” She sighed and tucked her hair behind her ear. “I’m in Stage Three and it’s making me cranky.”

“Stage three of what? Being ornery?” What was wrong with the women in his life? They were all losing it.

She rolled her eyes and smiled. “No, you goof. Dr. Black’s book. Stage Three is where you re-adjust to your environment without the person you lost.”

“Oh.” He wasn’t sure what else to say but seeing her smile made him feel better.

“Anything I can do to help?”

“Yeah, make some coffee, would you?” She tipped her cup to look inside. “I just finished the last pot.”

“Sure thing.” He got up and went behind the bar to brew a new one. “I need some advice.”

Her brows shot up. “On what, being sad and pitiful?”

He refused to answer that. “I need some advice on women.”

“You? From me? Are you feeling all right?” She looked at him like he’d sprouted a set of horns.

“Who else can I ask?” He dumped a bag of coffee in and added water.

“Thanks. That makes me feel special.” She stuck her tongue out through a smile.

“C’mon now, you know what I mean.” He flipped the switch on the coffee pot and came back to sit beside her. “I think I’m outa my league on this one.”

Her pencil stopped mid-scribble. “Who is this miracle worker?”

He swallowed and picked up a spare pencil. He bounced it against the table on its eraser. “Mery.”

“Mery?” She looked at him curiously. “Mery who?”

“You um, you don’t know her.” Great. Now he was lying to Shelby. He shoved a hand through his hair. “Actually, you do know her.”

“So? Who is she?”

He cleared his throat. “Dr. Black.”

Her jaw went slack. “What are you, crazy? There’s no way she’ll go out with you. She’s way out of your league. Plus, she’s not a bimbo.”

“That’s a nice thing to say about your brother.” He couldn’t help but smile. “For your information, she already has gone out with me. And we’re supposed to go out again on Sunday.”

“Are we talking about the same person? Dr. Black. The psychologist.”

“Yes, her and why is that such a big shock?”

She shrugged. “I’m surprised a woman like that would go out with you.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” He shoved off the chair and went back behind the bar. First Mery didn’t want to talk to him, now this. “Damn, Shel. What kind of guy do you think I am?”

“The same kind everybody else does. You’re kind of a man whore. You go through women like they’re disposable. I’ve chewed gum longer than some of your relationships last.”

“A man whore?” He planted his hands on the bar and shook his head. “That’s not true.”

“Really? How many women have you dated this month?”

Names and faces spun in his head. “Four?” Shelby’s smirk told him that wasn’t right. “Six?”

She leaned back in her chair. “You don’t even know, do you?” She tsked. “So sad. My advice to you? Leave Dr. Black alone and call up that little blonde you were seeing. She’s more your speed. Plus, it’s obvious she adores you.”

“Clarissa is not my speed. The last time we went out she took me to three different jewelry stores. Three! I don’t need a hint that big. Besides, she salts her food before she even tastes it. I’d rather be beat with a sack of wet catfish than date that girl again.”

“You have to get married some day.”

“No, I don’t. Marriage just wrecks things.”

Shelby sighed and went back to her work. “When you meet the right person you won’t feel that way.”

“Then Dr. Black is the right person because she has no intention of getting married again.” He grabbed Shelby’s cup, walked around the bar and refilled it, then poured one for himself. “Just help me, will you? I don’t know what to do with a woman like her.”

“I am not giving you the birds and the bees talk.” Shelby’s mouth twisted into a grin.

He pressed the heel of his hand against his forehead. “No, you’re not but you are giving me a splitting headache.”

Laughing, she pulled his hand away. “Okay, fine, what do you want to know?”

“How do I impress her? She makes me feel like I’m trying to rope cattle with dental floss.”

Shelby tipped her head in thought. “You could send her flowers. That’s sort of ordinary but—”

“Already did that.”

“You did? What did you send her?”

“Yellow roses. I thought red would be pushing it.”

“How many?”

“Five dozen.”

She punched him in the arm. “You’re a blame fool, you know that?”

“Ow, Shel.” Sore from his workout with Mick, he rubbed his arm. He’d never understand women. Not in two million years. “What’s wrong with that?”

“She probably thinks you’re desperate or loopy or headed for stalkerville. What would you do a thing like that for?” She shook her head. “Five dozen. Really. Lord, you’re dumb.”

“Well, that’s what I asked help for!” He frowned at her. “Damn, women are cantankerous creatures. Adam probably bit that apple just to shut Eve up.” He propped an elbow on the bar and leaned his head into his hand.

“Settle down.” She smooched an air kiss in his direction. “We’ll figure this out. Besides the flowers, is there anything else I should know about?”

He told her about the motorcycle ride, the dinner in the VIP dining room and the plans for the picnic Sunday afternoon.

“The picnic sounds good. It’s low key, you’re outside, there’s other people around. I think that’s the right way to go.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Do not, under any circumstances, take her a gift. You’ll creep her out, I swear.”

Kelly thought about the new box of chocolate fireballs he’d planned on giving Mery. “I won’t buy her anything, I promise.” That didn’t mean he couldn’t make her anything.

“Good.” She picked up her paperwork. “Where was I?”

“That’s it? Don’t buy her a gift?” So much for sisterly advice. “When you and Kurt started dating, he gave you stuff all the time. Teddy bears and chocolates and flowers and—“

“He also proposed on the second date.” She smiled wistfully, her gaze suddenly distant.

Kelly threw his hands up in the air. “And you married him!”

“But not because of that. Took a long while for me to figure out he wasn’t off his rocker. Men in love do crazy things. Now get. I have work to do.” She shooed him away with her hand.

“Well, I’m not in love,” he muttered. He tossed back the rest of his coffee and got up. “I’ll be in my office if you need me.”

The phone rang as he opened the office door. He grabbed the receiver from its cradle. “Sedona, Chef Spicer speaking.”

“Hi. I was returning your call.”

Mery. He smiled. “Hey there. I was starting to think you didn’t want to talk to me.”

“You called right in the middle of Pilates.”

“That’s like yoga, right?” She worked out. Good to know.

“No, it’s...yes, something like that. What did you call for earlier?”

What had he called for? Think, think, think. “I just wanted to confirm the time for Sunday and to remind you to wear something casual.” That sounded reasonable.

“How casual?”

What was she wearing right now? Asking was probably not a good idea. “Jeans are good.”

“We’re not doing anything that requires getting dirty are we? Do I need walking shoes? Is this an inside or outside thing?”

He laughed. “You don’t think much of surprises, do you?”

“I just like to be prepared,” she said.

“Sneakers will be fine. Or whatever comfortable shoes you like.”

“Okay. Three o’clock in front of the building.”

“That’s the plan.” He hesitated. “How are those chocolate fireballs holding up?”

She laughed, short and breathy. “Terribly. They’re gone.” Her tone sweetened. “Are you going to bring me some more?”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re only dating me for my culinary skills?” He grinned. He adored her appetite.

“They’re the best balls I’ve ever had.” Sudden, deathly silence crept through the line from her side. “I can’t believe I said that.”

He tried to suppress a laugh and ended up snorting. “I’ll take that as a compliment and we’ll leave it at that. See you Sunday.”

As soon as she stuttered out a goodbye and hung up, he burst into laughter. The good doctor certainly had a way with words.

Chapter Twelve

Meredith threw her arms around Jason as he stepped into the apartment and hugged him hard. She’d offered to meet him at the airport but he’d insisted on taking the train in. “It’s so good to see you.”

“You too, mom.” He kissed her cheek. “You look good. You change your hair or something?”

“A few highlights, a little trim.” She closed the door behind him and took stock of her boy. He might be half an inch taller. No, that wasn’t it. Maybe his shoulders had filled out. Whatever the change, he’d certainly become more handsome. He looked more like Garrett every time she saw him. His father would’ve been so proud. “You get better looking every time I see you. You must have girls all over you at school.”

He grinned and by the looks of his smile, he was wearing his retainer like he was supposed to. "Stop fishing." He dropped his duffel bag and nodded toward the coffee table. The bouquet of yellow roses was impossible to miss. "Did I miss your birthday or something?"

"No, you didn't miss my birthday." She should have done something with those but it was hard to hide five dozen roses. "You must be starved. Do you want to grab a bite out or get delivery?"

He crossed his arms and planted his feet, impishness dancing in his eyes. "What's up with the flowers?"

"They're from a friend. So what'll it be for dinner?"

"A *friend* sent you a like hundred roses?" Jason smirked. "I'm totally not buying that."

"Sixty. Not a hundred. And yes, he's just a friend. Now, I'll ask you one more time. What do you want for dinner?"

"He, huh?" The smirk broadened. "That's cool. So what's your boyfriend's name?"

She leaned against the counter and folded her arms across her chest. "Delivery it is."

"Make you a deal."

"And that is?" *This should be good.*

"You tell me yours, I'll tell you mine." He wiggled his brows.

"Tell you my what?" Perhaps college was not the best environment for her son. Seemed to be warping his mind.

"The name of the guy you're seeing."

Hah! So Jason *was* going out with someone. She smiled sweetly. "You first."

"I'm not dating a guy, sorry." He chuckled, obviously proud of himself.

"I'm not seeing anyone." *Lying to your son. Great. That should win you mother of the year. Maybe you can write a book about that.*

"That's cool." He snatched up his duffel bag and headed for his room. "Neither am I."

Rotten child. She moved the roses to the small dining table, then leafed through her collection of take-out menus. Jason loved pizza. The menu for Sylvo's had a coupon attached to it good for one free topping. Thoughts of anchovies and broccoli made her smile. That would fix his wagon.

Jason came back out mumbling something.

"What did you say?"

“What happened to my room?”

“You mean where are the posters of girls in bikinis and sports cars? I don’t particularly care to look at those and since you’re hardly here anymore—“

“Oh, I see. You’re kicking me out to make room for your boyfriend.” He added a sing-song tone to the last word as he plopped down on the couch, put his feet up on the table and reached for the remote. “That’s nice. That makes me want to come home more.”

“Brat. Shoes off the table.” She ruffled his chestnut locks as she walked past and picked up the phone. “I’m ordering pizza. Any special requests?”

He flipped through the channels at a mind-numbing rate. “Extra meat, extra cheese, nothing green.”

She knew her boy so well. “Anchovies then?”

“Mother.” He slanted his eyes at her. “Please.”

“Just teasing.” She dialed Sylvo’s and placed the order. After she hung up, she settled onto the couch beside him. “How are your classes?”

“Good.” He shrugged, his eyes still on the screen. “Not much to tell.”

“Getting along with your quadmates?”

“Yeah, except for this one guy.” Jason looked over. “He eats everybody’s food. He says he doesn’t, but we know he is.”

She nodded slowly. “I hate when you know someone’s doing something, but they won’t confess to it.”

“Yeah,” he said, giving her a pointed stare. “Me, too.”

I set myself up for that, didn’t I? Taking a deep breath, she answered his unspoken question. “He owns a couple of restaurants in town.”

“She’s a chem major.”

The smile in Jason’s eyes told her more than his words. He liked this girl. “A chem major, huh? Well, that’s encouraging. What’s she look like? I bet she’s a knock-out.”

He grinned and fussed at small hole near the hem of his t-shirt. “Yeah, she’s hot.” He glanced up, concern thinning his mouth. “But she’s totally smart, too.”

“I would hope so if she’s a chem major.” Despite his father’s death when he was four and his stepfather’s death when he was seventeen, Jason was incredibly well adjusted. She, Garrett

and Michael had definitely raised this child right. She wanted to weep with pride but decided to save that for later when it wouldn't embarrass her son. "What's her name?"

"Kristi. She's got freckles and she wears these little wire-rim glasses." He made circles with his fingers in front of his eyes.

Her son was smitten by a girl in glasses. Maybe the world wasn't going to hell in a hand basket after all. "So why don't you invite her to come for a weekend sometime? I'd love to meet her."

He gave her a sly smile. "Do we have to sleep in separate beds?"

"You would even ask me that question?" She poked him in the arm. "I knew I should have sent you to military school."

"Yeah, right." His eyes glazed over with the blue glow of broadcast television.

"Where's she from?"

"She's—hey," he stared at her expectantly. "Shouldn't you be giving up some info, too?"

Here we go. "What would you like to know?"

"I don't know. How 'bout a name?"

She could give up that much. "Kelly."

"Kelly? You're dating a guy with a girl's name? Sounds like a loser."

"Jason. He is not a loser. He owns two very popular restaurants in the city." Heaven help her, she was defending the cowboy to her son.

"Doesn't count. You told me that part already. Tell me something I don't know."

"He's from Texas."

He shook his head, but the mischief sparkling in his eyes gave away his true feelings.

"Doesn't sound good, mom. Only two things come from Texas, steers and quee—"

"That's enough, young man."

"I'm just saying..." He held his hands up and shrugged, smiling like he'd won something.

"So when do I get to meet The Lone Ranger?"

"You don't." She patted his arm. "There's really nothing going on so there's no reason for you to meet him."

"You mean he's not going to be my new step-dad? Because I could really use a male role-model in my life." He snickered.

“I’m glad you amuse yourself.” She tried to recall the sweet-natured five-year-old who had once crayoned daisies on her bedroom wall in an effort to cheer her up. He hadn’t really understood Garrett’s death but he’d known she was sad. “When did you get to be such a wise guy?”

“It’s okay,” he said in a patronizing tone. “If you don’t want to introduce me to your booty call, I completely understand.”

“Booty call? Does that mean what I think it means?” Shock rippled through her.

“Yeah, you know, a booty call is somebody you hook up with.”

Oh Lord. It did mean what she thought it did. “I am *not* sleeping with him and even if I was it isn’t any of your business.”

“Chill, would you? I don’t care if you’re sleeping with him or not. Personally, I say go for it but hey, it’s your life.” He shrugged and went back to watching T.V.

“Yes, it is my life, thank you very much.” Good heavens, college had morphed her sweet boy into a male version of Viv. “Let’s pretend, just for a moment, that we’re actually having this conversation. Why do you think I need to be sleeping with someone?”

He turned to face her. “I’m just saying you deserve some happiness in your life and if that happiness is...um, quality time with this guy, then I say have at it.” He dipped his head so she couldn’t see his expression as clearly. “You’re too young and too pretty to be alone.”

Despite the fact that her son was encouraging her to have sexual relations with a man she hardly knew, she grinned. It was an uncontrollable parental pride kind of thing. Her son thought she was young and pretty. She kissed his temple. “Thanks, honey. That’s a really sweet thing to say.”

“Well, you know, since you’re putting me through college and all that.”

She laughed, shaking her head. “Then that’s the most expensive compliment I’ve ever received. I’m going to finish up some work in my office but I’ll come back out when the pizza gets here and we’ll watch a movie. Pick something you want from Pay-Per-View and we’ll order it.”

“Cool,” he mumbled, lost in some sports commentary show.

She walked to her office. As if pressure from the girls wasn’t enough, now Jason thought she should have a fling with Kelly. Maybe she should take the chance, let things happen with Kelly, see where they went. If her career got a boost along the way, so be it.

A slow smile curved her lips as the idea bloomed like a fat, butter-colored rose. There were worse things in life than dating a hot, young chef with eyes so blue you could disappear into them for days.

And probably few better.

* * *

Kelly checked his watch. Nearly midnight. He had to hurry. The week was almost up. He slipped out of the VIP dining room and back to his office. After making sure the door was locked, he dialed the combination for the safe under his desk and opened it.

He took out Gram's cookbook, nudged the safe door shut with his foot then sat. Paging through to the recipe for the chocolate fireballs, he stopped and considered what he was about to do. If he didn't bind the recipe to the book, the spell's power would be lost. Without the spell, Mery might change her mind about helping Shelby.

And seeing me.

That couldn't factor in. Using the book for personal gain was not only wrong, it was dangerous. He knew that. His mother's life was proof enough. Still, Shelby needed the help.

Blowing out a breath, he rubbed the back of his neck. He knew what needed to be done.

He pricked his finger with his pocket knife and began to trace the words in blood, forever binding them to the page.

* * *

Saturday came and went in a blur of activity. Meredith took Jason shopping for some new clothes then out to lunch. They stopped by his favorite museum, the Cooper-Hewitt, to see an exhibition on engineering high performance textiles. By the time, they got home it was a little after five o'clock.

Jason called up a buddy of his at NYU and made plans for the rest of the night just as he thought she would. Spending the evening on the couch with a good book sounded just fine to her.

"Hey mom, I'm gonna grab a shower and then meet Ben for dinner, is that cool? I'll probably hang out with him so I don't know when I'll be home. Probably late."

She nodded. "Take your cell phone and be careful. You need some money?"

He grinned. "Do I ever say no to cash?"

Her laugh matched his. She dug in her wallet. "Here's a fifty. Don't go nuts."

“Please.” Reaching for the bill, he shook his head. “Fifty bucks hardly buys you a lap dance in this town any more.”

“Jason!”

“Kidding, mom. Kidding.” He disappeared down the hall. She heard the shower a few minutes later.

She kicked off her shoes and stretched out on the sofa. Maybe a quick nap, then she’d tackle that autobiography on Mamie Eisenhower she’d been meaning to read. She closed her eyes, her thoughts drifting from Mrs. Ike to Kelly and Sunday afternoon.

When she awoke, the silence told her she was alone. She sat up. A piece of paper fluttered to the floor. She caught it as it fell. A note from Jason. What a good kid.

She checked her watch, surprised to find she’d slept nearly an hour. Almost seven. Her stomach growled as she stretched. The nap had done her good. She felt re-energized but reading had lost its appeal.

Flipping on the light, she wandered into the kitchen to see what looked edible. Nothing jumped out at her, which wasn’t surprising because what she really craved was tex-mex.

Forty-five minutes later, she walked into Sedona hoping Kelly was there and ready to curse her impulsiveness if he wasn’t. She prayed her outfit looked sophisticatedly sexy and not like she was trying too hard. Black trousers paired with a deep coral top edged in seed beads seemed like a great choice at home but now she wondered if the top wasn’t too snug. Or low cut. Like she was trying too hard. Feeling unsure of yourself really sucked, to use a word Jason was fond of.

The hostess greeted her. Meredith pointed toward the back. “I’m going to the bar.”

The girl nodded. Meredith wondered if a lot of women came in here by themselves. *Please don’t let me look desperate.*

Groups of beautiful people crowded the bar area, laughing and chatting. Expensive perfume mingled with the spicy aroma of food. She wove her way between the people, looking for a spot to slip in and order a glass of wine. She didn’t need the courage so much as she wanted to warm her cold feet. *Chicken.*

Unable to reach the bar, she inched past a tall man blocking her way and tried to get the attention of one of the cocktail servers who’d just disappeared from sight. She looked around. Where had that server gone?

Her gaze slammed to a halt on a cozy couple at the far end of the bar. Chagrin numbed the air in her lungs. What she saw confirmed what she'd been thinking.

Coming to Sedona had been a very bad decision.

Chapter Thirteen

"Clarissa, please try to understand. You and I are on two different paths. It just isn't meant to be." Kelly shoved a hand through his hair and wished he'd used the book to conjure up a recipe for "go away and leave me alone" cookies. The woman clung tighter than stink to a skunk.

"But Kelly," she simpered, her big blue eyes threatening tears, "I thought we had something special." She wrung her hands together, squeezing her already exposed cleavage into a deeper vee. "Something real."

Damn it. He hated that line. "It was...really special, but now it's over. I think it's time we both move on." He put his hand on her shoulder. "You're a beautiful girl, Clarissa. You'll have a new guy faster than you know it."

"But I don't want a new guy," she sniffed, taking a step closer so they were almost embracing. "I want you." She gave him a naughty little smile. "Why don't we go up to your office and I'll show you just how much?"

He glanced up to see if they were drawing a crowd but no one seemed to be paying them much mind except for—

Mery. His heart skipped hard, then settled down. He didn't know what she was doing here but it didn't matter. She was here and she looked hotter than a two-dollar pistol. He grinned. "Excuse me, Clarissa. My date is here."

"Your date?" Sudden anger filled her voice.

He ignored her question and pushed through the crowd toward the one woman he did want to see. Ahead of him, Mery turned and started for the exit. He caught up with her just as she made it into the hall. "Hey, gorgeous, what are you doing here?"

"Leaving. This was stupid idea." She kept walking toward the door and didn't meet his eyes.

“I think it was a great idea.” He snagged her hand and tugged her back around the corner by the elevator. “I didn’t know you were going to drop in.”

“Obviously,” she said, ice coating her voice.

“Hey now, what’s that about?” He tried to tip her chin up with his knuckle but she pulled away.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt. You look *busy*.” She caught his gaze then and he saw the chill extended beyond her voice.

She’d seen Clarissa and she was jealous. He tried not to smile but failed. He grabbed her other hand and pulled her against him. “You didn’t interrupt anything.”

Her eyes flashed. “I’m not blind. I saw that little blonde you were talking to.” She put her hands on his chest and pushed away. “I need to go before I make a bigger fool of myself than I already have.”

The woman was as headstrong as a mule. He scooped her up in his arms so he could carry her back to the elevator. Her whole body went tense. “What the hell are you—”

“You need to stay right here.”

“Put me down. *Now*.”

He grinned. Fire melted the ice in her voice. “Sorry. Can’t.”

“Why not?” She ground the words out like she was chewing nails.

“Because if I put you down, you’re going to leave and I don’t want you to.” One handed, he slid his card through the scanner and called the elevator.

She relaxed a little bit. “Put me down. I won’t leave. Yet.”

“And if I don’t put you down?” He liked holding her. She was soft in all the right places and smelled like peaches.

“I’ll—”

“Her?” Clarissa screech echoed through the hall. “You’re dumping me for her?” With her face screwed up in a mask of anger, she pointed at Mery.

The elevator opened. Kelly eased Mery to her feet, reached in to hit the hold button then stepped between her and Clarissa. Who ever said blondes were more fun had never dated this woman. “Go home, Clarissa. It’s over. It’s been over.”

“Are you serious?” Clarissa’s tone went from shrill to haughty. “She’s got to be twice my age. Or is that what you’re into now?”

“Not that it’s any of your business but she’s not twice your age.” He smiled and glanced over his shoulder. Mery looked ready to spit. “She is, however, twice the woman you’ll ever be. Now if you’ll excuse us.”

A livid blush washed Clarissa’s face. “You’re a fool. You’ll never do better than me.”

“I already have.” He wrapped his arm around Mery’s waist, escorted her into the elevator and pushed the button for the second floor.

“This isn’t over...” Clarissa’s voice died away as the doors closed.

“Sorry ‘bout all that,” Kelly said.

Mery moved to the opposite wall, leaned against it and crossed her arms. “This is a bad idea.”

He groaned. From the shrieking banshee to the broken record. “From now on, whenever you say that, I’m going to kiss you.”

Her eyes widened. “I don’t think so.”

“I do.” Maybe she tasted like peaches too. The elevator stopped and he held the doors for her. “In fact, I think you owe me a kiss right now.”

“For what?” she asked as she scooted past.

As he exited behind her, Kelly smiled and waved to the group of businessmen who had reserved the VIP dining room for the entire evening. He kept his voice down as he ushered her to his office. “I did just save you from the evil Clarissa.”

“If it weren’t for you, she’d probably be a very sweet girl.” Mery’s mouth twisted and laughed. “Sorry, even I couldn’t keep a straight face for that one.”

“So you’re not mad at me?” He shut the door and turned the two chairs in front of his desk to face each other. He waited for Mery to sit before he did the same.

She shot him an amused look. “Is that what you thought, that I was mad at you? No.” She shook her head and clasped her hands together. “I was mad at myself for coming down here.”

“I’m surprised you did. Not that I’m not glad to see you, but I thought your son was visiting.” He wanted to pull her onto his lap but stifled the urge. That would probably be too much too soon.

“He’s out with a friend for the night.” The double diamond ring on her left hand glittered as she twisted it. “And I was...hungry.”

He scooted forward so their knees touched and he rested his elbows across his thighs. The move brought them eye to eye. "I'd be more than happy to take care of your appetite."

From beneath dark lashes, she looked up. "You're wicked."

"You have no idea." He hooked his hands behind her knees and pulled her closer so her legs were between his. "But stick around and I'll show you."

Just as she started to respond, he slanted his mouth across hers. She tipped her face up to meet him, her kiss eager and willing, nothing like the woman he'd kissed before. The sudden knowledge that she wanted him fired him to new heights. He broke the seal of her lips with his tongue.

She moaned softly and her fingers found their way into his hair.

Heat from her gentle exploration coursed through him. He kissed her deeper, sliding his hands from behind her knees onto her thighs. Beneath his touch, her muscles trembled.

She caught his bottom lip between her teeth and tugged it gently, taking command of his mouth.

Spikes of pleasure pierced his control. He'd never wanted Clarissa this way. Or any other woman he could think of. Not that he could think of anyone else at the moment but the wild woman sucking the breath out of him. She tangled her tongue with his, her fingers tightening in his hair. A low, quiet sound vibrated out of her. Not quite a moan. More of a purr. The vibration lit up every nerve in his body.

For the second time, he wondered if he was out of his league. He pulled back, breathing hard. "I'm in big trouble, aren't I?"

She laughed, then gave him a naughty grin he wouldn't have thought her capable of. "Don't worry, I'm willing to teach you what you don't know."

Heat flushed his face and shot through his groin as a soft groan escaped his lips. Gram had warned him about women like this. He never thought he'd be lucky enough to find one. "Yes ma'am."

She brushed a chaste kiss across his lips and pushed back in her chair. "I was serious about being hungry. Can I sit out there at the bar and get something to eat?"

He stood up, not surprised his knees felt like jam. "Can you wait a little longer? I was headed to Gauchos when Clarissa showed up. Come with me." He smiled. "I promise you won't leave hungry."

* * *

"I can wait." The buzz of female power coursed through Meredith with so much strength it almost overwhelmed the tingling on her lips. He was a great kisser, no, a phenomenal kisser. She looked forward to more of that. Giving herself over to the idea of dating him had been a smart move. She hadn't felt this young or this alive in ages. "Does that mean another ride on that wretched machine?"

He chuckled as he turned and pulled a denim chef's coat off a hanger on the back of the door and threw it on the chair he'd vacated. "Riding that bike is good for you. Reminds you you're alive."

I can think of other ways to do that. "So that's a yes?" She sighed and was about to complain when he unfastened the top button on the white chef's coat he wore. "What are you doing?"

"Changing. White for Sedona, denim for Gauchos. You don't mind, do you?" He winked and kept unbuttoning.

"No, go ahead." She crossed her legs and refused to let her mouth curve into more than a smirk. His ego was big enough already.

He shrugged the coat off and hung it where the denim one had been. The plain white tee he wore hid nothing. Not the thickness of his biceps or the hard curves of his chest or the deliciously flat plane of his stomach. No wonder Clarissa pitched a fit. A body like that was worth a good tantrum. Or three.

"Nice," she whispered. A drop of sweat snaked a hot line between her breasts.

"Thanks." He grinned and a slight pinkness colored his face. "I try to stay in shape."

Apparently she'd said that out loud. "Are you blushing?"

He stuck his arms through the denim sleeves and turned away so he faced the wall. "No."

"You are." She laughed. "Sorry, I'm not buying shy from you."

He tugged the coat down and turned to face her. "I'm not shy. I'm just not used to be looked at like...that."

She jiggled her foot. "Like what?"

"Like I'm a stick of butter and you're a fat man with a plate full of toast." He held his hand out. "C'mon, let's go."

“I never said I was going.” She slipped her hand into his and he helped her up. The strength of his grip made her feel oddly protected and curiously proud. She was dating *this* man. The thought made her warmer than she already was.

“Duly noted, but you are.”

She followed him out into the hall and down to the elevator. “If I die it’s your fault.”

“I don’t usually kill the women I’m dating until the fourth or fifth date.” He punched the call button.

“How is your little blonde friend still alive then?” She got on ahead of him but kept hold of his hand. Holding hands was a forgotten pleasure.

The doors slid shut. “Don’t worry about her. Big hat, no cattle.”

“And that means?”

“All talk, no action. You, on the other hand...” His mouth curled up in a naughty grin and he tipped his head to catch her eye. “I’m betting you have lots of cattle.”

* * *

Meredith returned home much later than anticipated. She eased the door open, feeling for all the world like a guilty teenager. Except for the flickering light of the television, the apartment was dark. Jason slept on the couch, remote still clutched in one hand.

She smiled to think her son had waited up. Then bad mother syndrome made her frown. Even though she’d known where he was going, he’d left her a note. She hadn’t given her son any clue about her night out.

The door snicked shut behind her. She slipped her shoes off and padded to Jason’s side. Lifting the remote from his grip, she turned off the set then covered him up with the throw on the back of the couch, kissed his forehead and snuck down the hall to her room.

She closed the door, turned on the nightstand lamp and flopped on the bed. *You’re a bad woman, Meredith Black.*

The thought made her giggle and she clamped her hand over her mouth. Being bad had never felt so good.

Chapter Fourteen

“Mom.”

“Hmmm...” Meredith snuggled deeper under the covers.

“Mom, you up?”

Jason’s voice. She opened her eyes. “What?” What time was it? She checked the clock on her nightstand. Was that right? A cold ripple of urgency flushed the sleep from her system. “I’m up! I’m up!”

Snapping the covers back, she hopped out of bed, shed her pajamas and jumped in the shower. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d overslept. They were going to be late for brunch. Jason would probably enjoy telling the girls how he’d come home to find his mother still out on the town. She groaned. That should be fun. Bah. Brunch was a stupid idea anyway. Who really wanted to combine breakfast and lunch? They were two different meals for a reason.

The only bright spot in the whole day was that she had a date with Kelly later. That cheered her up a bit. Okay, more than a bit.

When they were finally underway, she called Viv from the cab. “Sorry we’re running late. One of us overslept.” She glanced over at Jason. “You know how boys are.”

He glared back.

“See you in about ten minutes. Bye.” She hung up and looked at her son. “What?”

“I’m not the one that overslept.”

“Look, I was in labor with you for twenty-two hours. The least you can do is feel a little pain on my behalf.” She did *not* want the girls knowing about her impulsive but rewarding visit last night.

Jason shook his head. “Don’t you think making your child lie for you is bad parenting?”

“I’m not *making* you do anything. You’re doing this out of the goodness of your heart. Because you love your mother and she gave you fifty bucks last night.”

“I didn’t realize that was hush money.”

“Well, now you know, so hush.”

“I feel so dirty.” He faked a shiver. “Maybe you could recommend a good therapist?”

“Oh, shut up.”

He put his duffle bag on the floor of the cab and twisted to face her. “Fine, I’ll take the fall, but you have to tell me what you were doing out so late.”

“I was hungry.” She moved her purse to her lap and sat a little straighter. “I went down to one of his restaurants to have dinner and say hi.”

“So he owns one of those twenty-four hour diners or something?”

“No. Why?” She really wanted to talk about something else.

“I got home at 1am. When did you get home?” The smirk on his face was a good indication of where this line of questioning was headed.

Had she and Kelly really talked that long? “Jason, I’m your mother. I don’t have to explain myself to you.” Period. End of discussion.

He twisted back to face the front of the cab, a rotten grin on his face. “Booty call,” he coughed out.

“I heard you, and that’s not funny.” She narrowed her eyes at him but he refused to look at her. Instead, he planted his elbow on the armrest and covered the lingering smirk on his face.

“Bothersome child,” she muttered.

“I heard you, and that’s not funny,” he mimicked, his voice ripe with mock indignation.

“Maybe you could catch an earlier flight back to school,” she joked.

“You’re going to miss me when I’m gone.”

“Yes, I am.” She reached over and gave his leg a squeeze. “Despite your proclivity for nosiness.”

“Just promise me one thing?” he asked.

“What’s that?”

His lips quirked then evened out again. “Use protection.”

“Jason!” Her face warmed.

“What?” He threw his hands up. “You tell me that all the time!”

Save me from my progeny. “Oh good. We’re here.”

Swan opened the door for them when they arrived at the penthouse. “Hello, Miss Meredith and Mr. Jason. So good to see you.”

“Hey, Swan. What’s up?” Jason sauntered in.

“Good morning, Swan.” Meredith followed him. “Is Jack in?”

Swan nodded. “Mr. Jack is in his office.” She took Jason’s duffle bag and tucked it into the foyer closet.

“Good. Thank you.” Meredith turned to Jason. “Why don’t you go say hi to your Uncle Jack and then come find us. I’m sure he’d love to see you.”

“Yeah, I’ll catch up with you in a few.” He headed down the hall.

“Garden room?” she asked Swan.

“Yes, Miss Meredith. They’re waiting for you.”

“Don’t you mean laying in wait?” Meredith said before heading in the same direction Jason had just gone.

Beside her, Swan laughed and kept pace. “Mimosas again today.”

“Thanks for the warning.” Halfway to the garden room, Meredith heard laughter.

“Girls,” she greeted them as she walked in.

“Mer! How are you?” Celia smiled and gave her a little wave.

“More importantly, where’s our darling boy?” Viv looked behind Meredith.

“He’s coming. He went to say hi to Jack.”

“Ah. Good. Jack will enjoy that.” She motioned to one of two empty seats at the table.

Meredith sat and Swan filled her cup with coffee. Meredith gave silent thanks for that. Viv’s coffee was notoriously strong and at the moment, that’s exactly what she needed. Before she drank, she caught the attention of the girls. “Listen to me for a minute. Jason knows about Kelly—”

“You told him?” Celia’s eyes widened.

“Yes, but I didn’t go into details, especially not the age difference, and I want it to stay that way, understood?”

Viv nodded. “Mother knows best.”

Celia pulled an imaginary zipper across her lips. “Mum’s the word.”

“About what?” Jason asked as he walked in.

The girls erupted with enough fuss to diffuse the question. They both hugged him and kissed his cheeks and told him how handsome he was.

“I’m having a hot flash just looking at you,” Viv said.

Celia nodded. “You look good enough to eat.”

“Thanks, Aunt Viv, Aunt Celia.” A subtle blush spread across his face. He took the empty chair beside Meredith.

Viv laughed. “How do you keep the girls off him, Meredith?”

“Aunt Viv, please.” He gave her a stern look. “Don’t get her started.”

Viv reached over and playfully patted his hand. “Don’t worry. Your mother isn’t exactly lonely these days either.”

Meredith's head jerked up. Viv refused to look at her. Wicked, wicked woman. Time to save herself. "Jason has a girlfriend. Her name is Kristi." There. That ought to carry the conversation for the next half hour. Meredith watched the blush on his cheeks darken.

"Mom." Jason's tone was half warning, half plea.

Sorry, kid. It's you or me. She smiled sweetly. "Yes, my darling son?"

"Ooo," Celia cooed. "Tell us all about her."

Viv's eyes brightened. "And don't leave a single detail out."

Meredith sat back and sipped her coffee. Maybe brunch wasn't such a bad idea after all.

Twenty minutes later, she changed her mind.

Jason held his hands up in surrender. "Okay, no more. I can't take it. Pick a new topic."

"Are you sure we shouldn't reserve The Plaza? It's really the only sensible place to have a wedding," Viv said.

Meredith knew the look in Jason's eyes well. He had just entered panic mode. She pursed her lips to keep from snorting. Poor child. He really was no match for Viv.

"That's a lovely ring you're wearing, Aunt Viv." His voice squeaked so he cleared his throat. "Is it new?"

"Why? Do you need a jeweler?" Viv shot him a grin Meredith had only seen before on cartoon villains.

Jason shuddered. "Mom went to see her new boyfriend last night and didn't get home until after 1am." The words rushed, all run together and ragged.

A collective gasp rose above the table like air escaping a popped balloon.

Meredith whipped her head around to look at her traitorous offspring. Rotten, rotten child. "You owe me fifty big ones, buster," she whispered out of the side of her mouth.

Above Celia's giggling, which she didn't even have the decency to try to squelch, Viv tilted her head and tsked at Meredith. "Well, now. Isn't that an interesting tidbit? Would you like to comment on that, you wicked girl, or is it something best saved until Master Jason's plane departs?"

Meredith rolled her head around on her shoulders, crackling her vertebrae. Had the floors always been slate? She seemed to remember tile in here at one time.

"Mer, you have to tell us something."

She met Celia's blue-eyed gaze for a moment before looking at Jason again. He happily chewed a mouthful of food. Rotten, rotten child.

"I was hungry, Jason was out with a friend. What's the big deal? I went out for dinner. That's not against the law, you know."

Viv inclined her head. "And you got home at the hour you did because..."

"Maybe she fell asleep in her dessert," Celia offered with a wink. "Or the taxi driver got lost?"

Jason snorted.

"What I do in my personal life is none of your business. I'm a grown woman. I can do what I please, when I please, with whom I please."

"To whom you please," Jason added, elbowing Celia gently in the ribs.

"So," Viv said above Celia's giggling. "Who *did* you please last night?"

"Why am I friends with you people?" Meredith stared at the lot of them.

"Because we're saving you from yourself, lovey." Viv announced with a wink. "If it weren't for us, what fun would you have?"

"Besides the fun you had last night, of course." A new smile flickered on Celia's lips.

Last night had been fun. Even though Kelly had been busy, he'd never once made her feel like she was in the way. He'd persuaded her to stay until he closed the kitchen, then they'd sat in a secluded corner of the bar and talked and held hands. He'd only let her go home once he'd seen her to a cab. And kissed her.

Her fingers reached for the sensitive spot just behind her ear where he'd nibbled. Fresh pleasure weighted her lids and she sighed, remembering the raw heat of his mouth and the eagerness in his touch. A man like that was infinitely trainable.

"Are you all right? You look like you're having a hot flash."

At Celia's words, Meredith opened her eyes. A pair of concerned gazes returned hers. Jason continued to eat like he might never see food again.

"No, I was just...thinking." Hot flash was a good description. She laid her hand on Jason's arm. "Don't forget to breath."

He swallowed. "Sorry, but I promised Uncle Jack I'd come back and hang out with him when I was done. He's going to show me his new 3-D flat screen."

More like the boy wanted to escape while the inquisition focused on her. She checked her watch. “You need to leave in forty-five minutes or so.”

Viv waved her hand at him. “I’ll have Swan fix you a lunch fit to travel. You can take it on the plane with you.”

“Thanks, Aunt Viv.” He chugged the rest of his orange juice, wiped his mouth on the linen napkin then stood. “If you’ll excuse me, ladies. I need some male bonding time.”

As soon as he left, the questions began anew.

“All right, spill it. What were you doing with the cowboy so late?”

“Did you kiss him? Or did he kiss you? Was it good?”

“Where are you two love-birds off to this afternoon?”

Shaking her head, Meredith held her hands up in a call for silence. “You women are killing me, you know that?” The looks she got in return offered no reprieve.

“I really did go to Sedona to have dinner. I thought about it and well, I hate to say it but you’re right, all of you. There’s no reason why I can’t have some fun.”

Celia clapped and Viv opened her mouth to speak but Meredith silenced her with a raised finger. “That does not mean I’m jumping into bed with him the first chance I get. I don’t think I’m ready to be compared to the twenty-somethings he’s used to dating. The man’s probably never seen a real live stretch mark in his life.” And wasn’t that a terrifying thought? “Anyway, I made the decision to give it a go.”

“Well done,” Celia said. “Now tell us everything. And don’t censor it.”

“I was hungry, so I went to Sedona to eat and have a little chat with Kelly but he was headed to Gauchos so I ended up going down there with him—”

“Another ride on the motorcycle?” Viv asked.

Celia’s head swiveled back and forth between Viv and Meredith like a tennis spectator.

Meredith held Viv’s gaze. “Yes.” She glanced at Celia. “He has a Harley Davidson. Beastly machine.” One she was almost starting to enjoy.

“How exciting,” Celia said.

“No, it’s not exciting. It’s dangerous.” And exciting. She pinched her leg to quell the giggles.

“Did he kiss you?” Celia whispered the words and for a moment, she looked like she was sixteen.

The smile refused to be held back any longer. Meredith gripped the edges of the table, tipped her head back slightly and smiled.

“Yes. Oh yes. Oh my.”

Chapter Fifteen

Celia squealed and clapped a hand over her mouth. Viv nodded with approval and leaned forward. “American or European?”

“What?” Meredith knit her brow.

“She wants to know if there was any tongue.” Celia blushed.

“Celia! What kind of talk is that for a proper young heiress?” Meredith stared at her friends. They’d both gone nuts. Freaking, flipping nuts.

“As if,” Celia said. “You know I love gossip and this is first hand stuff, so spill it!”

“Yes, now that Jason’s gone, tell us all the juicy details.” Viv held up her cup as Swan came around with more coffee.

“You’re not going to let this drop, are you?” There was a hunger in their eyes that worried her. “Why are you so interested in my lov—my social life?”

“Well for starters, you haven’t had one in the last two and a half years,” Viv said.

“Excuse me for not joining Singles Anonymous right after Michael’s funeral.”

“You know what I mean.” Viv’s exasperated tone gave Meredith a little buzz of satisfaction.

“And, Mer, honestly for me it’s just so...so...exciting, I guess.” Celia shrugged. “Chef Spicer is an absolute studmuffin. There isn’t a single woman in the city who wouldn’t want to date him.”

Pleased by her friend’s assessment, Meredith smiled softly. “I think that’s a bit of an exaggeration.”

“I don’t.” Celia shook her head. “Every time he’s in the society pages they call him the city’s most eligible bachelor. And have you seen the posts on his Facebook fan page? Or the way his female followers flirt with him on Twitter?” Celia’s addiction to social media was no secret.

With a sigh, Meredith eyed her friends. If they wanted a little vicarious thrill, who was she to deny them?

“Yes, there was kissing and...” She cradled her forehead in one hand to shield her eyes.
“Yes, there was tongue.”

Celia squealed with laughter. Meredith looked up.

Viv’s expression wavered between proud mother and mother superior. “Anything else you’d like to tell us?”

“I didn’t want to tell you that much.” A wash of delight swirled through Meredith, a soft, lifting feeling. “He is the one of the most gorgeous men I’ve ever seen.” *And I’m dating him.* For a moment, she almost forgot she was using him for her own purposes.

“All your men have been lookers, Mer. I swear, you have the best luck finding husbands.” Celia snagged a grape from the fruit plate and popped it in her mouth.

“I’m not looking for another husband.” A subtle twinge of guilt took the edge off Meredith’s pleasure. She didn’t doubt her heart could hold more than her son and the two men she’d said “I do” to but she wasn’t willing to suffer losing another husband. The pain could almost kill you if you let it, and she worried that if she lost another love, it would.

* * *

Meredith came home from brunch via Viv’s limo. The ride back with Jason, now on his way to the airport, had been spent in companionable silence. She missed him already.

In an hour, Kelly would be downstairs waiting for her. She laid her clothes out on the bed. Her new jeans, white tank top, a butter yellow French terry tunic-style sweatshirt and sneakers. Even though the shoes were a few years old, they were blindingly white. She couldn’t remember when she’d worn them last.

She stared at the outfit. Maybe it was too casual. She grabbed a white collared shirt and threw it beside the terry sweatshirt. Now the sneakers looked out of place. Or did they?

Where was Lizza when Meredith needed her? She called Viv.

“Waltham-Chatsford residence.”

“Hi Swan, may I speak with Viv?”

“Sure thing, Miss Meredith.”

She heard Swan put the phone down then some muted conversation in the background.

“Miss me already?” Viv asked.

“Yes. My life feels so incomplete when you’re not around.”

“Sarcasm causes wrinkles, you know.”

Meredith laughed. "I'm having a clothing dilemma."

"For this afternoon?"

"Yes. I'm not sure what to wear."

"Where are you going again?"

"I don't know, remember? It's some big surprise." Ugh. She hated surprises, mostly because they usually came in the form of a phone call telling you your husband had just had a coronary embolism.

"Did he hint?"

"He said casual with comfortable shoes." Meredith heard cheering in the background. Jack must be watching sports of some kind.

"So what were you planning?"

"Jeans, a French terry tunic, polo shirt and sneakers?"

"Polo shirt?" Viv sighed. "You're going to look like someone's mother."

"I am someone's mother." Meredith rolled her eyes. "What's wrong with that?"

"The collared shirt under the tunic sounds too soccer mom. You don't want Kelly to look at you and think mini-van, you want him to think garage-kept European sports car."

"I don't even begin to know what you're talking about."

"What color is the top?"

"Pale yellow. It's that one I bought at Saks last year when you told me I needed some color in my life." She hadn't worn it, though. Yellow seemed too cheerful a color even after Michael had been gone a year.

"That cute one with the split sides and the deep vee neck?"

"Yes." How did the woman remember details like that? Meredith couldn't remember what she'd slept in.

"With your new jeans and sneakers, that's definitely casual. Just no collar underneath, okay? Wear something that shows off the girls."

"I had a tank picked out. I'll go with that. Talk to you later."

"With details, I hope."

"Hah. Bye." Meredith clicked off, hung up the polo and snagged the white tank. She tried it on and checked herself in the mirror. Once again, Viv was right.

She spent the next hour cleaning and straightening up. Not that Kelly would be seeing it. Far too early to invite him up here. If ever. He'd think she wanted to sleep with him. *Which you do.* No, she didn't. That was just her hormones talking.

Half an hour to go. She dressed and checked her outfit in the mirror. She looked sixteen. Not that looking younger was a bad thing when you were dating a man twelve years your junior.

She touched up her makeup and fluffed her hair. Timothee did good work, even if he did refer to himself in third person. The highlights made her eyes seem brighter. Or maybe it was...no. Kelly had nothing to do with that. She finger-combed the hair around her face. It was just a great color job, that's all.

Her intercom buzzed. She went over to answer it. "Yes?"

"Dr. Black, you have a visitor waiting for you in the lobby. Do you want me to send him up?"

Her pulse increased. He was here. She checked her watch. And he was early. "No, I'll be right down."

She threw her purse over her shoulder and took one last glance in the mirror. The black Coach bag looked out of place. Her hands trembled as she tugged her I.D., a credit card and some cash out of her wallet and tucked it in her back pocket.

Too much coffee, that's all. But that was a lie. Not enough Kelly is more like it. She smiled. Well, that was about to be remedied, wasn't it?

She stepped out of the elevator, into the lobby and into a knee-weakening grin.

"Hey beautiful." Kelly filled the entire space with his All-American good looks and lanky form.

Her mind buzzed around the word beautiful, amplifying her already zinging nerves. "Hi-hi."

"You look great." He glanced down at her feet. "I wasn't sure you owned sneakers."

She looked down at his shoes. "I could say the same thing about you."

He laughed and gave her a quick kiss. "I don't always wear boots."

The kiss caught her off-guard so much she couldn't even respond to it. She glanced at Lou. The doorman smiled as he read his paper.

"What's that?" She pointed to a large, lidded basket sitting at Kelly's feet.

“Part of the surprise.” He hoisted the basket with one hand and offered her his other arm.
“Shall we?”

She slipped her arm through his and they walked out onto the street. The day had warmed into one of those perfect spring afternoons that made the world seem newly born. She tipped her face into the sun.

“Great day, isn’t it?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said as she met his gaze. The sky seemed a shade lighter compared to his eyes.
“So what’s in the basket?”

“Sex toys,” he said without breaking stride.

Meredith stopped short. “What?”

He laughed hard and tugged her along. “You should see the look on your face.”

“You’re not funny.” She reached for the basket lid but he pulled it away.

“I’m hilarious and you know it.” He slipped his arm around her waist as they walked.
“We’re going to the park, finding a nice spot on the grass and having a picnic.”

“Really?”

“Why, would you rather the sex toys?”

“No.” Her cheeks heated. “The picnic sounds great.” It really did. She couldn’t think of anything else she’d rather do than sit in the sun with this gorgeous man beside her and eat his cooking. Well, at least not anything else that could be done in public.

Her nerves subsided a little and she reached for the basket again, trying to peek in. “What did you make?”

He held her tight so she couldn’t touch it. “Bad girls don’t get dessert.”

“That explains how Clarissa stays so thin.”

Chuckling, he shook his head. “I didn’t realize she’d made such a big impression on you.”

“Well, she’s younger and prettier and yet you’re dating me. She’s very good for my ego.”

“Younger yes, prettier no.”

Meredith smiled. “You’re very good for my ego, too.”

“Damn, I was hoping you’d say libido.”

She laughed. “I think I’ll refrain from commenting on that for right now.” If only he knew. She’d had thoughts about him that would make Dr. Ruth blush.

They crossed the street and headed into the park. A cluster of guys her son's age tossed a football. Nearby, a group of girls sat around on blankets reading and chatting--the girlfriends, judging by the occasional clapping and cheers for the ball players. Couples walked dogs and children ran by playing tag. A day this beautiful deserved to be enjoyed.

"Where should we sit?" He ducked to avoid a frisbee. "Somewhere out of the line of fire, preferably."

"How about over there?" She pointed opposite of the jogging path where the lawn narrowed beside the tree line.

"Looks good."

They stopped by a large rock, a spot far enough away from other people to be private. He opened the basket and unfurled a blue plaid tablecloth onto the grass beside the boulder.

"That's not very big." The rectangle didn't look large enough for two people and food.

He slanted his eyes up at her as he smoothed the corners. "Guess you'll have to sit on my lap."

The man was full of good ideas, but she wasn't about to tell him that. "You're right. You are hilarious."

He twisted himself around, sat down with his back against the rock and stretched his legs out. He held his hand up to her.

She took it and moved to sit beside him. Instead, he tugged her into his lap. "Hey!"

Wrapping his arms around her, he nuzzled his mouth against the tender skin of her neck. His warm breath teased goose bumps out on her arms.

Her protests died unspoken. She shuddered, purely out of pleasure. His mouth was wicked and wonderful. She parted her lips to sigh. "Bad boys don't get dessert."

Soft laughter tickled her ear. "Bad boys don't need dessert."

Chapter Sixteen

Kelly trailed kisses along her jaw until he found her mouth and claimed it. He loved kissing her. And since she'd started kissing him back, he'd come to understand just how sexy a confident woman could be. Her sureness stoked his blood with a heat that rivaled a summer day in Texas.

In her soft top and jeans, she looked closer to Shelby's age. Not that Mery's age mattered. It didn't. If any thing, it made her a little unpredictable to him, and damn, if he didn't find that sexy as all get out. She kept him on his toes, something no other woman had ever done.

His groin tightened and he shifted, hoping she wouldn't notice. He didn't want her to think he was unable to control himself even if she did make him feel like a horny teenager.

She broke the kiss and rested her hands on his chest. If she felt the quickened beat of his heart, she didn't show it. "So what else is in the basket?"

"Thanks. You're a great kisser too." So much for impressing her with his oral skills. He grinned. Well, at least the ones he'd had a chance to show her.

"There's that need for approval." She laughed. "You kiss very nicely."

He groaned and leaned his head back on the rock. "You're gonna be the death of me." The words were out before he could stop them. He snapped his head back up, an apology on his tongue. "I'm really sorry, Mery. I didn't mean anything by that."

She scooted off his lap and onto the tablecloth. "I know. It's okay."

Hurt shadowed her eyes. Damn it. That was a fool thing to say.

"Maybe we should eat." She traced one of the blue squares on the cloth. Her mouth settled into a fine line.

"Good idea." Still cursing himself, he unpacked the basket. "I made ceviche, do you know—never mind. Of course you know what that is." *Hurt her feelings. Check. Insult her culinary intelligence. Check.*

He set out the first two containers and reached in for more.

"I love ceviche. I haven't had it in years. Not since Michael and I were in Spain." She smiled wistfully. "Michael was my second husband."

"How did he...if you don't mind me asking, that is, how did he pass?"

She tucked a strand of hair behind one ear. "Car accident on a business trip. Drunk driver."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You didn't have anything to do with it." She squeezed his arm. "People say it because they don't know what else to say. I'm fine, really. It's been over two years." She paused a moment. "Almost three, really."

He nodded. "You sure seem okay."

She peered into the basket. "What else do you have in there?"

He pulled out two long rolls bundled in butcher paper. "Filet mignon bánh mì's."

Her eyes lit up. "I love those Vietnamese sandwiches."

"Don't look so surprised. I can do more than tex-mex." He set them down and reached in again for another container. "Redskin potato salad."

"Also great." Her stomach rumbled and she smiled. "I guess I'm hungrier than I thought."

He added utensils and napkins. "Good, 'cause my navel's gnawing on my backbone."

She laughed. "You say the funniest things."

"That's the Texas coming out." He handed her a bottle of water, glad to see her smiling again.

Conversation slowed as they ate. Mery complimented the food enough times to almost make him blush. When they finished, he repacked the empty containers in the basket and moved it to the side.

She kneeled facing him and propped her fists on her hips. "Where's dessert? You don't think I came out with you today just because of your charm and good looks, do you?"

Her words made him smile. "You think I'm charming?"

"Is there dessert?" she teased, arching her brows as though her entire opinion of him hinged on that fact.

He rested his arm on the basket in case she tried to open it. "Can't remember if I packed any or not."

"You're a bad liar." She laughed then narrowed her eyes. "What's it going to take to jog your memory?"

His head swam with the possible ways to answer that question. He kept his tone as serious as he could manage. "My lap is cold."

"Maybe I can improve your circulation." She straddled his lap and sat, her back to the bulk of the people out enjoying the day. "Warming up any?"

Warming up plenty. He took his arm off the basket and looped it around her waist. He opened his mouth to answer her but she silenced him with a finger across his lips.

Eyes twinkling, she cupped his jaw and drew him closer. "Kiss me," she whispered.

He obeyed to the best of his ability.

The spiciness of the food they'd eaten lingered on her mouth, quickening his pulse. She teased her tongue across his in little strokes. Quick, short caresses that drove his temperature higher.

Her hand slipped down behind his neck. She laced her fingers into his hair, her grip possessive. The move torched his blood. She kissed him like she owned him. If he'd been standing, he'd have sunk to his knees with pleasure.

"You're making me crazy," he breathed, surprised by the thickness of his voice.

She laughed. "I've hardly touched you."

He stared into her beautiful green eyes. This woman confounded him right down to his bones. "That's what I'm afraid of."

Tracing his lips with her finger, she tilted her head to look at him. "Should I stop then?"

"No, I like being scared." He kissed the tip of her finger.

She leaned in like she was going to kiss him again but whispered in his ear. "Where's my dessert?"

He laughed. "Okay, you win."

"I usually do."

He retrieved the box of chocolate fireballs he'd brought and presented them to her. "These are for you take home and these..." He reached into the basket again and pulled out the sweet finale to the meal. "These are for now."

She unwrapped the paper to reveal the dark chocolate raspberry brownies he'd made that morning. "Oh, those look good. Beyond good." She smirked. "Really makes kissing you worthwhile."

He groaned with mock disgust and playfully pushed her off his lap. "You sure know how to win a man's heart."

"Mmmm." Pleasure spread across her face as she finished the first bite of brownie. "Maybe it's not your heart I'm after."

His heartbeat stuttered. "What—what does that mean?"

She took a big bite, pointed to her full mouth and shrugged.

"You can answer when your mouth is empty."

She held out the other brownie to him, gesturing for him to eat.

Sighing because he knew he was beat, he took a bite.

She finished chewing. "Let's walk a little bit. I ate enough to burst."

"You owe me an answer," he mumbled through crumbs.

"Nope." She got to her feet. "A little mystery is good for you."

Rolling his eyes, he stood, flicked the tablecloth clean and tucked it back into the basket before scooping it up. He took her hand with his free one. "Walking it is then."

"So tell me about your mom."

Kelly glanced at her. That had come out of the blue.

Mery must have read the expression on his face. "Shelby won't ever answer me when I talk to her about her past. It would be helpful for me to understand what sort of grief patterns she established as a child."

Talking about his mother was the last thing he wanted to do on a date, or ever for that matter, but he trusted Mery. If it would help her help Shelby, he could tell Mery bits and pieces without revealing the whole truth.

Chapter Seventeen

Mery squeezed his hand. She hated to pressure him but if he wanted help for Shelby, she needed to know a little. "I know neither one of you likes talking about her, so I gather you didn't have a storybook childhood."

"Not exactly, no." He looked lost in memories.

"Just tell me what you're comfortable with."

"That would be nothing." He paused and when he spoke again there was a coldness to his voice she hadn't heard before. "Shelby and I have different fathers."

"I didn't know that." They certainly resembled each other enough that no one would ever think otherwise.

He shrugged. "I've never met mine. Shelby's is in prison."

"Your mother had great taste in men." She sounded like a real class act. Mery walked a little closer to him. "Did your grandmother raise both of you?"

"Yes and no." He sighed. "My mother didn't want me, plain and simple. She left me with Gram when I was a year old."

“What makes you think she didn’t want you?” She tried to imagine him at one. Probably the cutest thing to ever wear diapers, outside of Jason. *Great. Two seconds ago you were kissing him now you’re imagining him in Pampers.*

He glanced over. “Because I wasn’t a girl. Haven’t you wondered how I got a name like Kelly?”

She shrugged. “There are men named Kelly.”

“Not many. Not in Texas.”

“How did Shelby end up with your grandmother?”

He led her over to an empty bench and they sat. After tucking the basket at his feet, he turned to face her. “Look, I don’t talk about this with anyone but I want to help Shelby.” He ran his hand through his hair. “Just promise me...”

“It goes no further, I give you my word.” She leaned forward and kissed him lightly, denying the urge to take more. “I promise.”

A few kids on roller blades shushed by before he spoke again. “My mother has...problems with addiction.” He rested his elbows on the back of the bench, splaying his arms out like wings. “Drugs, alcohol, men, whatever comes along.”

The hurt in his eyes turn to anger. “Two years after she dumped me at Gram’s she brought Shelby. Couldn’t handle raising a kid and trying to keep her lowlife husband out of jail.”

He shook his head and exhaled. “The guy, Shelby’s dad, got locked up anyway three years later. After that Dee, that’s my mother, came back for Shelby.

“I was six. Shelby was almost four.” The faraway focus of his gaze disappeared as he brought his arms down and turned to look at her. “She took Shelby and left me. Do you have any idea what that feels like? To know flat out your mother doesn’t want you?”

Meredith swallowed the lump that had built in her throat. Even though she only had one son, she couldn’t imagine choosing one child over another. What mother would consciously do that? Her heart ached. She moved closer and put her hand on his shoulder. “That’s awful.”

He shrugged, but not enough to dislodge her hand. “A few years after that, Dee got busted for possession. Shelby came back to live with us. When Dee got out of county, she tried to take Shelby back again. Gram wouldn’t let her. She went to the courts and got legal guardianship of us.

“My mother never forgave Gram for that, but it probably saved Shelby from a mess of bad road. Dee’s been living on the wrong side of life so long I can’t believe she’s still alive.”

Meredith slipped her arm further across his shoulders and gently massaged the back of his neck. “You’re a remarkable man. I can see why you’re so protective of Shelby.”

He shrugged again but stayed silent.

A part of her wanted to confront his mother and tell her what a lousy parent she’d been. “Thanks for telling me. I know it wasn’t easy but it gives me some much needed insight.”

“When are you seeing Shelby again?” He kept his head down, the line of his jaw taut.

“Tuesday. We have another lunch date.”

He sat up, his face relaxing. “Good. Shelby’s definitely gotten better since she started reading your book.”

She slid her hand back to her lap. “I’m glad.” She studied him, her mind still turning over the pieces of his past. So many people over the years had revealed the secrets of their lives to her but it had never affected her like this. She wanted to protect Kelly from every bad thing in the world, to find a way to make his past okay, to give him a safe place to land.

“Mery?” He waved his hand in front of her face. “Are you in there?”

“Yes, I was just thinking.”

A sly smile returned to his face. “About me, I hope?”

She nodded, also smiling. “Yes, about you.”

“Was it X-rated?”

“No.” How quickly the male mind turned from tragedy to sex. Or from anything to sex for that matter.

“Was it R-rated?”

“Nope. Strictly G.” She laughed as his shoulders drooped.

“I’m losing my touch,” he said.

She scooted closer so they were hip to hip. He put his arm around her shoulders.

“How ‘bout you? What was your childhood like?”

“It was okay.”

“Just okay?” He squeezed her gently. “Are you close with your parents?”

She shrugged. “My parents divorced when I was thirteen. My mother lives in Boca with her fourth husband. My dad never remarried. Still lives in the house I grew up in.”

Pulling away a bit, he gave her an odd look.

“What?” she asked.

“So you take after your mother?”

“No.” She scowled softly. “My husbands died. Hers left of their own free will. If I take after anyone, it’s my dad. He never really stopped loving my mother, even after she cheated on him. He’s a good guy.”

“I’d love to meet him. Where’s he live?”

“Sheepshead Bay. That’s where I grew up.” He wanted to meet her father? She wasn’t sure she liked that line of thought.

“What’s he do?”

“You’re full of questions.”

“I’m trying to get to know you. Is that a crime?”

“No.” But it was letting him in. “My dad runs a charter boat. City skyline tours, that kind of thing.”

“A blue collar guy. I like him already.” Kelly settled back against the bench.

I don’t need you to like him. Just date me and leave it at that. Time to change the subject. “Isn’t there something you want to ask me?”

A puzzled expression came over him. “I’m not sure...” She could tell he was searching.

“Maybe you are losing your touch.” She elbowed him gently in the ribs. “Ask me if I’d like to go out with you again.”

He perked up, a big grin brightening his face. “Would you like to go out with me again?”

“I don’t know,” she sighed. “Depends on what you have planned.”

He groaned. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but you might actually be more woman than I can handle.”

Her body shook with suppressed laughter. “You should never admit that to a woman, even if she already knows it.”

“What do you mean, even if she already knows it?” His mock-indignation was clear by the playful tone in his voice.

“Oh please, I think we established that the first night in the elevator.” She wasn’t about to tell him the second kiss had turned her liquid.

“You’re never going to let me forget that kiss, are you?”

“Not until you redeem yourself.”

He leaned in to whisper in her ear. “Don’t you think I redeemed myself last night?”

A shiver of pleasure rippled through her. They *had* done a lot of kissing before she’d finally gotten in the cab. “You’re getting there.”

“If we weren’t out in public, you’d be in trouble, Dr. Black.” The lusty threat of his words made his blue eyes a shade darker.

She waved him away with her hand. “Yeah, yeah. I’m shaking in my boots.”

“Speaking of which...” He scooped her legs up onto his lap. “You’d look hot in boots.”

“What’s next? Riding lessons?” As soon as the words were out, an image formed in her mind. Heat spread through her cheeks with lightning speed. She hid her face behind her hands while she listened to him laugh.

“Mery, Mery, Mery. I’d be happy to teach you to *ride*, you just say the word.”

Through her fingers, she could see he looked entirely too pleased with himself. She dropped her hands and put her feet back on the ground. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Well, you know what they say...” He winked.

“No, I don’t. What do they say?” She had a feeling she was going to regret asking.

“Save a horse, ride a cowboy.”

She was right, she wished she hadn’t asked. Not that the thought hadn’t occurred to her. She leaned back on her hands and met his wicked gaze with one of her own. “Which do you prefer, a crop or spurs?”

He shook his head. “You’re all right, you know that? Very few women can give and take with me like you do.”

That’s because you’ve been dating twits. She moved toward him a tiny bit and trailed her fingers down his bicep, admiring the muscle beneath the long-sleeve tee. “So where are you taking me on our next date?”

“How about a boat tour of the Manhattan skyline? I bet your dad would give us a discount.”

She stared at him through her lashes, daring him to push that subject further.

“Okay.” He held his hands up. “Quit glaring at me. How about an old-fashioned date, dinner and movie? And by dinner, I mean at a restaurant I don’t own.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Then you pick the restaurant.”

“I don’t know.” She shook her head. “That’s a lot of pressure, you being a chef and all. How about you pick the restaurant and I’ll pick the movie?”

“Deal, on one condition.”

“Which is?”

“The movie doesn’t require tissues.”

“I take it chick flicks aren’t high on your list.”

Before Kelly could respond, an older man approached them. “Excuse me, but are you Chef Spicer?”

Kelly nodded. “Yes, sir.”

The man smiled. “I thought so. My wife and I eat at your restaurant all the time. Not Sedona, we can’t ever get in there but we go to Gauchos at least once a month. I bought her your cookbook for her birthday. I wish I had it, I’d ask you to sign it.”

“What’s your name?” Kelly asked.

“Frank Merritt.”

“Nice to meet you, Frank.” Kelly shook the man’s hand. “When would you like to take your wife to Sedona?”

“Anytime.” The man smiled and shrugged.

Kelly popped his cell phone out of its holster and punched a number. “Hey, Becca. I need a table for two this Friday or Saturday night. What do we have?”

He nodded as he listened. “Yeah, that’s fine. Put it under Merritt. Thanks. Bye.”

He clipped the phone back into place. “This Saturday night at 8:30 you and your wife have a table reserved in the VIP dining room at Sedona. Bring the book, I’ll be happy to sign it.”

The man’s face beamed. “Really? Wow, thanks. My wife isn’t going to believe this. Thank you.” He shook Kelly’s hand again. “I’ll bring the book. See you Saturday.”

“See you Saturday.” Kelly nodded as the man left.

“That was really nice of you,” Meredith said. What a sweet thing to do.

He arched his brows. “Does it make you want to kiss me?”

Everything makes me want to kiss you. She shrugged. “Sure, why not?”

“I love your wild enthusiasm.” He rolled his eyes. “Really gets the ego revved up.”

Smiling, she pecked his cheek. “You’re cute.”

“Thanks.” He looked sideways at her. “Do you mean that or did I miss the punch line?”

“What’s wrong with cute?”

“Kittens are cute.” He puffed up his chest. “I like to think of myself as ruggedly handsome.”

She couldn’t hold back the laughter on that one. “Okay, you’re ruggedly handsome.”

“Compliments are more effective when you’re not laughing.”

“I know, I’m sorry.” She wiped her eyes. “I can’t believe I’m having this much fun sitting on a park bench.”

“Just think how much fun I’d be in other places,” he said with a wolfish grin.

Oh, I have, trust me. She cleared her throat. “So, you want to go back to my place?”

Chapter Eighteen

In the time it took them to walk back to Meredith’s apartment, her bravado completely disappeared. Great. Now he’d think he was getting sex. Which he might. Eventually. But not now. It was too soon. Way too soon.

“Nice place.” Kelly tipped his head toward the drooping bouquet on her dining table. “Your roses look pretty shot.”

She shut the door and toed her sneakers off. “I know but it’s hard to throw them away.” Jittery about the possibility of what he expected, she brushed past and went into the kitchen. “You want something to drink?”

He set the basket down on the small bench by the door and toed off his sneakers. “Sure, what do you have?”

The fridge looked bare since Jason’s visit. “Not much. Bottled water, a can of Mountain Dew or I could make a pot of decaf.”

He walked over and took a seat on one of the bar stools. “You don’t strike me as the type to drink Mountain Dew.”

“I don’t but Jason does.”

“Water would be great.”

She handed him a bottle and their fingers touched. She pulled back as if stung. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to do that.”

“You’re not comfortable with me being here, are you?”

Leaning against the counter, she blew out a breath. “It’s been a long time.” For everything.

“It’s okay. I understand, really.” He set the water down. “I should go.”

“No.” She pushed off the counter. “I like your company. I’m just not ready for...more than that right now.”

He stood up, walked around into the kitchen and pulled her to him with his hands on her hips. “Whatever you want. You set the pace. Okay?”

“I just thought because I invited you up here that you’d think that I, well, you know...that you’d expect...” She rubbed her forehead. For someone with so much education, she felt like a fool.

“Hey, I’m not a beast.” He laughed softly. “Well, I am but I can turn it on and off at will.”

She laughed, too. “I feel dumb.”

He squeezed her forearms, then her biceps and shook his head. “You feel fine to me.”

“Silly boy.” She slipped her arms around his waist and stared up into his mesmerizing eyes. “Thanks. For understanding.”

He bent down and kissed her. The gentle, restrained press of his mouth against hers calmed her nerves. This was a good man. The kind of man she’d always fallen in love with.

She broke the kiss. She would not be falling in love with this one.

Stepping back, he let her out of the embrace and grabbed his water. “Want to see if there’s a movie on?”

“Sure.” She got a bottle for herself and followed him to the couch.

As they sat, he picked up the remote and held it out to her. “Your house.”

She waved it away. “I trust you.”

Five minutes into old Steve Martin movie, Kelly glanced over to her end of the couch. “You’re awfully far away.”

She scooted a few inches closer.

He sniffed his underarm. “Do I smell or something?”

“No.” Laughing, she moved all the way over to sit beside him. “Better?”

“Much.” He put his arm around her and scrunched down on the couch. “Can I put my feet on the table? I took my shoes off.”

“Yes.” She propped hers up too and rested her head on his shoulder. He smelled good. Nothing perfumey, just a fresh clean male scent. “This is nice.”

He kissed the top of her head. “Yeah, it is.”

She leaned back to look at him, the strong line of his jaw, the bow of his mouth, the broad sweep of his shoulders. The man was as close to perfect as she’d ever seen.

He turned to face her. “What?”

“What what?”

“How come you’re looking at me like that?”

“Like what?”

He pursed his lips. “Like there’s something wrong with me.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you. Not that I can see.” She slipped her hand behind his neck and pulled his head down to hers.

That was hint enough. He kissed her, harder than she’d expected after the gentle one shared in the kitchen. The shadow of his beard grazed her skin. His hunger for her was obvious in the needy press of his mouth. The hunger excited her. Being wanted was wonderful.

He moaned and the vibrations sent a hot wave of desire through her. He put his arms around her and shifted their position on the couch so he was above. Easing his mouth from hers, he feathered kisses down her neck.

She gasped with pleasure as he found the tender spot below her ear. He was learning her body well.

“You drive me crazy, Mery,” he murmured. Hot breath caressed her skin, inflaming her further. He nibbled her earlobe, then pressed his warm mouth to the tender skin beneath it. An electric shot of desire lit her up like a Times Square billboard.

“Likewise,” she whispered. Her hands traveled down his back. She wanted skin beneath her fingers, not cloth.

His mouth moved to her collarbone. He slid a hand up under her sweatshirt and splayed his fingers over her ribcage. The tank she wore did little to protect her from the heat of his touch.

He held still as if waiting to see her reaction.

The quiet moan that escaped her lips urged him on. He lifted the edge of her tank top and rested his hand on her bare skin.

“Ooh,” she gasped. His touch felt like fire. Delicious, wicked fire. Sweat beaded at the back of her neck.

His hand swept up her torso to cup her breast. Flames licked her skin through the lace of her bra. She swallowed, trying to think. Her body wanted more but her head knew it was too soon. She pushed him away enough so she could see his eyes. “No further,” she said.

He nodded, eyes heavy-lidded with the want they both felt. He pulled away. “Sorry.”

She pulled him down for a kiss. “Don’t say that. I’m not sorry. I’m just not ready.”

He rubbed the tip of his nose against hers. “You really do make me crazy.” He sat back, pushed his hands through his hair and sighed. “I guess the beast is a little harder to control than I thought.”

Giving him a smile, she sat up and tugged her sweatshirt down. “You get me pretty hot, too.”

“I do?” He laughed. “Wait. Let me guess. That’s my constant need for approval, right?”

She giggled, a soft girlish sound born of the moment. “You’re a fast learner.”

He nodded. “You’ll see.”

“I already do.” Could a man be more handsome? She doubted it.

His smile faded a little. “I better head out. Work and all.”

Disappointment filled her but she understood. “When are you taking me out to dinner and a movie?”

“How about Thursday night? I can move some shifts around, get coverage.”

“Sounds good.”

“Can you meet me at Sedona around six?”

She nodded.

He took her hand as he stood, then pulled her up and tugged her along to the door. He got his sneakers on before settling his hands possessively on her hips. “I’m going to kiss you once and leave. Nothing you do will get me to stay so don’t beg or cry or take your clothes off. Unless you really want to.” His teasing made her laugh.

He captured her still feverish lips and quieted her laugh with a kiss that reached her toes.

“Well done,” she whispered.

He smiled. "See you Thursday, gorgeous." He pulled the new box of chocolates out of the basket, handed them to her, then opened the door and left.

"Bye." She waved like a woman underwater, shutting the door as the elevator chimed, then dropped onto the bench in her small foyer. Her fingers brushed her mouth. She leaned back, grateful for the solidness of the wall.

Her blood sang with pleasure. He was a good man. The kind she always fell in love with.

That line of thinking had to stop. This was just a calculated move at getting some positive press. Nothing more. She grabbed the bench's arms and held on as a whirlpool of emotion tugged at her. Denying her feelings had worked in the past. It would work again.

Why did he have to be so sweet and sexy and vulnerable? She shook her head and tried to tell herself he wasn't anything special. Just a man. No, he was a boy. A very nice boy who's too young for anything but a fling. But her heart wasn't buying that.

She groaned softly and thumped her head against the wall, hoping to knock a little sense into herself.

She was in so much trouble.

* * *

Kelly leaned against the wall outside Mery's apartment. He needed to catch his breath, to let his racing heart slow down and most of all, to wait out the embarrassing bulge in his jeans.

Mery was screwing him up big time. Damn it. Not only had he apologized for copping a feel but he'd actually meant it. The woman was trouble. He smiled. The kind of trouble he could get used to.

No, no, no. She was a conquest. Nothing more. A chance to experience some of the finer things in life, like the accomplished lovemaking of an older woman. Just the way she kissed promised more than any other woman he'd been with.

Compared to Mery, those other women were just girls. Silly, marriage-happy girls. Mery...Mery was all woman. Brains and beauty and sass for days. And her skin. How could anyone be so soft?

His fingers curled with the remembered pleasure of her breast in his hand.

The thought sent fresh blood rushing to his groin. He closed his eyes and tried to think about his mother and bad cooking, two of the unsexiest things he could come up with. But that couldn't stop him from anticipating the next time he'd see Mery or touch her or hold her.

He was acting like a lovesick fool. A throaty growl from the back of his throat followed his thought. He might be a fool, but he was not lovesick. That implied...well, *love*, damn it.

He pushed off the wall and punched the elevator call button. *Love*. He shook his head and rolled his eyes. You could forget that.

He was not falling in love. With Mery or anyone. Not now. Not ever. Love led to marriage and marriage led to heartache. If his mother's life wasn't proof enough of that, Mery's sure was.

The elevator arrived and he got on, frowning as the doors slid shut and cut off his view of Mery's apartment.

Yeah, that's right. Think about her dead husbands, may they rest in peace. Marriage certainly hadn't worked out so hot for them.

Then why was he jealous of two dead men he hadn't even known?

Chapter Nineteen

"Celia, slow down. I don't understand. What pictures in what paper?" Meredith stretched out in bed with the phone to her ear and rubbed her eyes. She had no idea the uber wealthy got up so early.

"Pictures of you and Kelly. They're in the Daily Post."

Meredith turned over onto her side and tried to clear the fog from her head. "Pictures?"

Celia's grin came through loud and clear. "You went to the park with him yesterday, didn't you? Had a picnic on the grass? Did some more kissing? Ended up on a bench with your legs across his lap?"

That woke her up. "How do you know all that?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. There are pictures of you two in the paper. They call you...well, they don't know who you are. He's the only one named. Eventually they'll figure out who you are and then your problems are solved!"

"I hadn't expected this to happen quite so soon." She couldn't recall seeing anyone with a camera. "What paper did you say they were in?"

"The Daily Post."

“I’m going to run down to the newsstand and see for myself. Thanks, Celia. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Sure thing, Mer.”

Meredith hung up. So it had begun. This was what she wanted, wasn’t it? Of course, if they didn’t know who she was the pictures didn’t do her any good. She threw on jeans and a sweater, tucked her hair into one of Jason’s baseball caps, grabbed her purse and headed out.

The gray morning fit perfectly with her mood. She trekked to the corner newsstand and pulled a Daily Post from its slot. She flipped through, looking for the pictures Celia was talking about.

She stopped flipping the moment she saw them. Pictures of Kelly kissing her. Of them laughing together. Her stomach went queasy. She hadn’t counted on feeling so exposed. So violated. The page blurred for a moment and then her eyes refocused on the headline. “Cowboy Rides Again.”

How dare they imply such trash? What if her father saw this?

She skimmed the column, skidding to a halt at the first mention of herself. Randy older woman? Randy? They had to be kidding.

Temper flared along her spine. Her hands shook with indignant anger. Oh. Oh. No. This would not do. She was a respectable woman, not some flash in Kelly’s pan.

“Lady, you wanna read the paper for free, they got libraries for that.” The man behind the newsstand wiped a beefy hand across his nose.

She snatched every copy displayed. “How much for all of them?”

He narrowed his eyes and stabbed his finger into the air, counting the stack. “Twelve fifty.”

She dug in her purse, threw the money on the counter and walked away, hugging the papers to her chest. The next trashcan she came to, she dumped every copy but one.

She needed to speak to Kelly. This had to come to an end. Immediately.

* * *

The sharp slap of leather against leather cracked the air as Kelly’s glove connected with the bag. Mick shook his head. “You’re still seeing her, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.” *Smack*. “What about it?” *Smack. Smack*.

“You’re still wound up, that’s what.” Mick grinned. “You close the deal yet?”

Kelly stood up. “Who I sleep with is none of your business.” Sweat trickled down his back.

Mick rolled his eyes. “This from the man who text-messed me the bra size of his last date.”

“Not my last date. The one before Mery.”

“Whatever.” He shrugged. “You should bring her to the exhibit Saturday. Chicks dig art.”

Kelly bent back into fight stance. “You know Saturday’s a busy night for me.” *Smack.*

“Take a freakin’ Saturday off once in awhile, would you? You haven’t been to a single showing since I opened.” Mick grunted as Kelly hit the bag hard.

He shook his head. “That’s not true. I went to the first one.”

“But not one since,” Mick said.

“Really?” Kelly paused. “Damn. I haven’t, have I?”

“Nope.” Mick looked as hurt as an ex-Seal could.

Kelly rolled his head from side to side and jogged in place. “I’ll talk to JP, see if he’s ready for a Saturday alone. Mery would probably like the art thing.”

As they headed into the locker room, Kelly heard his phone beeping.

“Somebody’s hot for you.” Mick smirked. “Can’t imagine why.”

“Ask your mom. She’ll tell you.” Kelly winked.

Mick snapped his towel in Kelly’s direction. “Punk.”

Laughing, Kelly checked his phone. Three missed calls. Three new voicemails. Two from Mery, one from his agent.

News from his agent. An answer maybe. Anticipation galloped through him. But five minutes wouldn’t turn a no into a yes. He scrolled to Mery’s number and hit send.

“Hello?”

“Hey there, gorgeou—”

“Have you seen the paper this morning?” Steel edged her voice.

“Not yet, why?” In the back of his mind, he had an idea what was up.

“There are pictures of us. In the park. *Kissing.*” The last word came out in hiss.

Sighing, he rubbed his shoulder and leaned against the lockers. Definitely should have warned her. “Yeah, that happens sometimes. The Daily Post, right? It’s no big deal, just a picture here or there.”

Over by the sink, Mick shook his head.

“No big deal? I’m sorry but this isn’t my idea of great press. I’m going to call them up and give them a piece of my mind.”

“Won’t get you anywhere. There’s nothing you can do to stop them unless they threaten your person. I know it sucks, baby, but that’s the joy of living in a free country.”

Standing in front of the mirror, Mick rocked his cradled arms back and forth and made kissy lips.

Kelly rolled his eyes and mouthed, “Bite me” in his friend’s direction. *Baby*. He smiled at the term of endearment and wondered what she thought of it.

“Don’t ‘baby’ me.” Not much, apparently. “You haven’t seen it. Do you know what the headline reads? *Cowboy rides again*. That implies that we’re...” She growled something that sounded like a cuss word, “*doing it*.”

Although Mick had already disappeared into the showers, Kelly lowered his voice. “Actually, it implies that I’m doing you.” He wanted to laugh but thought better of it. They had come close yesterday. He didn’t want to ruin his chances for the future. Thinking about Mery had become his brain’s favorite pastime. He craved the woman so much it almost scared him. Almost.

Her breathing sharpened. “I don’t find you or these pictures amusing. Perhaps you should look for a woman who does.”

“Mery—” Too late. She’d hung up.

He huffed out a breath. Women. If they weren’t proof God had a sense of humor, he didn’t know what was. He called her back.

“Hello?”

“Hanging up on someone is a pretty childish thing to do, don’t you think?” Turnabout was fair play. And he loved stirring her up.

“Maybe.” Silence for a moment. “I’m sorry. It was a rude thing to do. But I’m upset about this. I feel like my privacy’s been violated.”

“It has. And I agree, it’s a low-down, no account way to treat people, but it’s part of my life.” And a part she’d have to accept if she was going to keep seeing him. He hoped she was okay with that, because he really liked having her around.

She sighed resignedly. “There’s nothing that can be done about it?”

He took that to mean she'd put up with the press. "Nope."

"Well, I think it's appalling."

"I'm sorry your name was dragged into this, Mery. I really am."

More silence. "They didn't exactly use my name."

"What did they call you then?"

"I don't want to say."

"I can buy the paper and read it for myself, you know."

She mumbled something.

"What?"

"Randy older woman."

Kelly bit his cheek to keep from laughing. "Sounds about right."

"What?"

"Well, you are older and I think randy pretty much describes the—"

"Stop right now or I'll hang up on you again."

He closed his eyes and remembered her smooth skin under her fingers and how hungrily she'd returned his kiss. "You want me just as much as I want you. Don't deny it. I was on that couch too Sunday afternoon."

The breathing coming through the phone sounded like panting. "Randy is an indecent word."

"So is the way you look in jeans. Meet me for lunch. I can't wait 'til Thursday."

"You just want to make out in your office." Her smile came through loud and clear.

"You say that like it's a bad thing." He grinned with the sheer pleasure of bantering with her. Life with this woman would be very interesting indeed.

She cleared her throat. "I think what you need is some discipline."

The teasing promise in her voice sent a tremor through his groin. "Like what? A spanking?" Damn, the idea was more erotic than odd when he imagined Mery on the other end of the paddle. Sweat trailed down the small of his back.

"I'll take it under advisement. I better go. Things to do and all that."

"Like getting ready to meet me for lunch?" Not that he was thinking about food.

"No. Like actual work. I can't do lunch today."

He frowned. "You're turning me down?"

“You’ll live. Talk to you later.”

He hung up and growled at the phone. She did not play fair. Wicked woman.

He returned the call from his agent. “Hey Marty. What’s up? Did they give you an answer?”

“Not yet but the studio loves the sales numbers on the cookbook. I just called to give you a heads up. It could happen anytime.”

“Okay, thanks. Good to know.” He disconnected the call and tucked the phone back in the locker. Life was taking some very interesting turns at the moment. And all for the better. Which meant it was only a matter of time before the other boot came crashing down.

* * *

Mery placed one of the Chanel ballet flats back into the box. “I’ll take them,” she said to the clerk.

“Very good, ma’am.” The girl slipped the shoes back into their dust bags and packed them into the box.

Celia nodded approvingly. “Très chic and so classic. Lizza would adore them.”

“She should for that kind of cash.”

“Ma’am, if you’d like to give me your credit card I can start ringing these up,” the clerk said. The girl didn’t look more than twenty or twenty-one. Her well-worn black suit had clearly not come from the store she worked in.

“Of course. Thank you.” Mery handed her credit card to the girl then leaned back to Celia. “Thanks again for meeting me for lunch. I needed the advice of an expert.”

“The press isn’t that bad, you just have to expect it. Like I said, if you’re going out without hair and makeup, you can’t complain when they show you looking like a hag.”

“I can’t see myself going out with Kelly without being made up.” She slipped her own shoes back on, then she and Celia walked to the counter.

“Invest in some smart hats and sunglasses, too,” Celia said.

Mery laughed as she signed the receipt. “I don’t think that’s necessary.”

“Do you plan to keep seeing him?”

She handed the pen back to the clerk. “So far, yes.”

Celia shook her head. “Then the press isn’t going to stop seeing you two, either. They’re going to keep after you, at least until they find out your name.” Her delicately arched brows rose, disappearing beneath her bangs. “That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

“Here’s your copy and thank you...” the clerk glanced at Meredith curiously then read her credit card before handing it back, “Mrs. Black, for shopping at Saks today.”

“Dr. Black,” Meredith corrected. She accepted the receipt and credit card, tucked them in her purse and picked up the shopping bag. “It’s more what my publicist wanted...”

Celia slanted her head toward the clerk and gave Meredith a you-never-know-who’s-listening sort of look.

Sliding the shopping bag a little further down her arm, Meredith shook her head. “You make this seem so cloak and dagger.”

“Mark my words,” Celia said. “This is only the beginning.”

Chapter Twenty

On the way to Tuesday’s lunch date with Shelby, Meredith scrunched down in the cab. If the press wanted pictures today, all they would get was the top of her head.

She jumped out of the cab, yanked open the door to Sedona and slipped inside. She exhaled a righteous sigh. Safe.

Only a few patrons made up the early lunch crowd. Besides Shelby at her usual table doing paperwork, the bar was empty. She glanced up as Meredith walked in. A subtle smile appeared and disappeared as quickly as it had shown up.

“What?” Meredith asked.

“Nothing,” Shelby said. “I didn’t realize the witness protection program had a new spring line out.”

Meredith pulled off her sunglasses and baby blue ball cap and shook out her hair. “You and Kelly must have studied at the same comedy school.”

She smiled. “I saw the pictures. They’re not so bad.”

Meredith tucked the hat and glasses into her bag. She took the other chair at the table. “They’re an invasion of my privacy.” She hadn’t anticipated feeling that way.

After a sip of water, Shelby shrugged. “Kelly’s been dealing with it since he opened Gauchos and Manhattan Today named him one of the city’s ‘Top Ten Bachelors To Watch’. You date him, you deal with the press.”

“So I’m learning. How are you doing?”

“Good, I guess.” Shelby tapped her pencil on the table. “I finished your book. Still working on the life assessment worksheets. It’s hard to think about stuff like that when the best part of your life is missing.”

“I understand. But at some point, you have to make a conscious effort to move in a more positive direction. Life doesn’t stop just because you’re at a standstill.”

Shelby sighed and shoved a strand of blonde hair out of her eyes. “I’m trying. I really am. Part of it is that I’m homesick for Texas. I am not a city girl, I can tell you that.”

“What’s stopping you from going back for a visit?”

Shelby held her hands up and looked around. “This.” She dropped her hands back in her lap. “I can’t leave Kelly. It wouldn’t be fair.”

Meredith assessed the files and forms spread out on the table. “I don’t mean to downplay the importance of what you do, but I’m sure he could get someone to fill in for a week or two.” How hard could it be to do Shelby’s job?

Her eyes brightened. “You think so?”

“Of course. It’s as easy as calling a temp agency.” Proud of her idea, Meredith sat back with a smile. A trip home would be great for Shelby. Time to reconnect with old friends and remember how good life could be.

Shelby pushed her chair back and stood up. “I’m suddenly starving. Let’s go get some lunch. My treat.”

When Meredith returned home, the blinking message light on her machine caught her eye. Two messages. She pressed play.

“Meredith! You’re a genius! A freaking genius. Love the pictures. Totally something I can work with. I have to say, I didn’t know you had it in you. I mean, Chef Spicer? What a coup! Talk soon.”

Jillian’s incredulous attitude toward Kelly grated on Meredith. Why was it so surprising? She shook her head and hit the delete button. The next message began.

“Hi Mery, it’s Kelly. Call me when you get in. Please.”

Hmm. He didn't sound thrilled. She dialed his private office number. "Hi, it's Mery, I got your message." Mery? When had she started calling herself that?

"Did you actually tell Shelby I could find someone to replace her? At a temp agency?" A nuance of tension edged his voice.

"Well, hello to you, too." So he was upset about Shelby's little vacation.

He sighed before answering her with obvious impatience. "Hi, how are you?"

The first chink in the cowboy's armor. She stifled a smile, hoping it wouldn't come through. "Fine and you?"

"Not so great. Which is why I called. Can we get back to the subject now?"

"My, my. You're awfully cranky for a man who claims to be concerned with his sister's well being."

"I *am* concerned about Shelby, but I can't just replace her like that." He blew out a long breath. "She's leaving Thursday. Thursday! That's two days from now. Things were just starting to return to normal around here and now she's leaving again."

What did he look like in this sort of mood? Sexier than ever, probably. "That's what temp agencies are for. They'll have someone there tomorrow if you want."

"No. I need someone I can trust. These are my books, server receipts, invoices...anything that has to do with money coming in or going out, goes by Shelby."

"Are you telling me you run two busy restaurants without a *real* accountant?"

"I have an accountant. Shelby's a fail-safe. A fact checker." He sighed. "You don't know how easy it is for servers to over bill or for kitchen help to walk home with a case of lobster. I can't just replace her with a temp."

"You serve lobster, but I got game hen for dinner?" She tsked.

"Are you listening to me? I'm serious." His tone moved toward agitated.

"I'm listening. I'm sure you'll find someone. How hard can it be to check some figures and baby-sit the help? Sounds like a cakewalk to me." Typical male. All bunched up over the simplest thing.

"You think so?" He paused. "Fine. Get your cakewalkin' shoes on. I'll expect you here 9 A.M. Thursday morning."

"What? Wait. I don't know anything about—"

"See you then." Chuckling softly, he hung up.

She called back. No answer. She tried his cell. His voicemail clicked on. She hung up without leaving a message and sent him a text. That didn't get answered, nor did the email she sent a few hours later. In fact, the next time she talked to him was ten minutes after she'd entered Sedona Thursday morning. "I don't know what I'm doing, you know. If I screw up, it's your fault."

Smiling as he approached, he planted his hands on her ribcage, closed the space between them and kissed her. He nuzzled his lips against her neck. "If you screw up, it's coming out of your pay."

His mouth sent a delicious heat through her blood. Maybe this would be fun. She leaned back. "You're paying me?"

He wagged his brows. "I was thinking we could work out some sort of barter system. Services rendered for services rendered."

Poking him in the chest, she shook her head. "Don't write checks you can't cash."

One brow shot up. His hands coasted from her sides to the curves of her backside. "The bank of Kelly is good for it. Believe me."

"Now who's randy?" she muttered.

He laughed and kissed her again before releasing her. "C'mon, I'll show you how we do things around here."

Two hours later and the stack of paperwork next to Mery on the bar had gotten taller not shorter, despite the amount she'd already done. Kelly was upstairs in his cushy office while she drowned beneath piles of receipts, lists of inventory, linen service bills and enough loops of adding machine tape to decorate the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree.

"This is ridiculous. I'm a doctor of psychology. I shouldn't be doing this." She threw her pencil down and shoved the adding machine away. "I was on Oprah, for crying out loud."

Game over. She was done. Grabbing the key card he'd given her, she hopped off the bar stool and headed upstairs to see her new "boss".

She stepped out of the elevator and padded down the hall to his office. Light filtered beneath the door. Twisting the knob, she pushed open the door and entered. "We need to talk."

With a slight jump, Kelly curved his arms around an old book laid open on his desk. "What? Oh, sure. I'll be down in a minute."

Shaking her head, she settled into a chair and crossed her legs. "We can talk right here."

He crossed his arms in front of the book, blocking her view. He was hiding something. Couldn't be porn. No pictures. Erotica maybe? She narrowed her eyes and tipped her chin toward his desk. "What are you reading?"

"Just some old recipes." He closed the book and tucked it beneath his desk before she could get a better look at it.

"Recipes? You're acting like you just got caught with porn." Let him sweat. It was good for him to remember who was in charge of this relationship.

His mouth twitched with the makings of a smile. "The only woman I want to see naked is you."

Fever burned across her cheeks and down under the buttons of her silk blouse. She stared at her shoes. The things that came out of his mouth. A mouth that could kiss her into oblivion without much effort. The heat traveled into her thighs.

"Are you all right, Mery? You look a little hot and bothered." Kelly's chair squeaked but she didn't look up. Couldn't look up, not with a four-alarm fire blazing on her face. Get a grip. Remember who's in charge. What had she come up here for?

"Yes, I'm hot and bothered." She lifted her chin and met his wickedly sparkling eyes. "Because of all the work you dumped on me."

He leaned back in his chair. She straightened. "I can't believe Shelby does all that in a day."

A smirk pushed up one side of his mouth. "She doesn't."

"I thought so."

"She does that in a morning." Kelly's smug expression said he was entirely too satisfied with himself. Unfortunately, it was also a very sexy look.

"Really?" Mery loosened the neck of her shirt. If she got any warmer she was going downstairs and dunking her head in the ice bin behind the bar.

He stood, walked around to the front of his desk and leaned against it. "Really."

The move put his denim-clad crotch at eye level. The ice bin sounded better and better. She focused on an imaginary spot on her pinstriped black pants. "I fold. I'm not cut out for Shelby's job."

Soft laughter reached her ears. She looked up, once again shot through by the piercing blue of his eyes. He crossed his arms across his chest. "There's a temp coming in at noon."

“Then why make me come in?”

“Because I wanted to prove a point.” He hesitated, wiping his hands down his jeans before hooking his thumbs in his waistband. “And I wanted to see you again.”

“We have a date. Tonight.” She couldn’t help but smile. It was sweet in a bothersome kind of way.

He reached for her, his fingers interlacing hers. He pulled her out of the chair and up against his chest. His mouth was only inches from hers. “How come you’re so levelheaded about this and I can’t go five minutes without thinking about you?”

The contact spread new heat through her. She was going to melt right here in his office. “This?” she whispered.

“Us.” He released her fingers to plant his hands on her hips.

He smelled like wood smoke and rosemary. Her mouth watered so badly she had to swallow. “I’ve had more practice.”

“Or maybe you just aren’t as nuts about me as I am about you?” A shadow of hurt glimmered in his eyes. “You can tell me. I can take it.”

Was that what he thought? Maybe she was playing it too cool. She brushed her fingers through the soft gold curls above his ear. “No, I am.”

“You are what?”

Her fingers trembled slightly. Why were these words so hard? It’s not like she was professing her undying love. “I am nuts about you.”

His eyes brightened. “You are?”

She nodded. “I guess I’m just overly cautious, given my past and all.”

“There’s nothing to be cautious about. This is just for fun, remember?” He shifted to put more space between them. “We already know this isn’t going anywhere serious. Neither one of us wants to get married or settle down into some sort of commitment. Isn’t that what you want?”

She patted his chest. “Yes, absolutely. You’re right. This is just for fun. Nothing to even think about really.” The tiniest sliver of disappointment wormed its way into her heart but she chalked it up to ego. This was what she wanted. What her career needed. No promises, no commitments, no “I love you’s” that led to “I do’s”.

She knew where love’s journey ended. No one would convince her to walk that path again.

Chapter Twenty-one

The theater lights went down and Kelly slipped his arm around Mery's shoulders. "You smell nice," he whispered, inhaling her scent. He wanted to smell that fragrance on his sheets in the morning.

Face lit by the glow of coming attractions, she smiled. "Thanks." She pulled his arm off her shoulders and he was about to ask why when she pushed the armrest up and out of the way. She settled his arm around her again and scooted closer. "I haven't been to a movie in ages."

"Me, either. I work too much." He held out the paper bucket of popcorn.

She took a handful and turned back to the screen. He watched the colors flickered over her face. Studied the few delicate lines fanning from the corners of her eyes and the softer ones that put parentheses around her smiles. Were they from all the sorrow in her life? He wanted to kiss them, to see what they tasted like. Maybe they'd be bitter from the pain that caused them or sweet like the woman who wore them.

Maybe she felt bad about the temp situation but she'd been extra understanding when he'd canceled dinner because of an emergency at the restaurant. He'd been lucky to get out in time to make the movie.

Clarissa would've told him not to worry about it and then launched into a big pout. Mery took everything in stride. Sure, the photos had thrown her but he despised them, too. Following people around trying to snap a juicy photo just wasn't good manners.

He glanced around the theater. All the eyes around them were focused on the screen. Content that no one watched them, he relaxed, kissed Mery's temple and got lost in the movie.

On their way out, he held her hand. "Hungry? Or did you fill up on popcorn?"

"Is it even possible to fill up on popcorn?" She laughed. "I could eat something. What do you have in mind?"

"Up for a little walk?"

She squeezed his hand. "Sure."

"Great. I promise it'll be worth it." He pulled out his cell phone and dialed Serendipity.

“Hey, Traci, it’s Kelly Spicer...fine, how are you?...great...can you save me a table for two in about fifteen minutes?...wonderful. I owe you...bye.” He smiled at Mery. “We’re good to go.”

The lights of the city twinkled around them like Texas stars and Kelly understood Shelby’s need to see home again. He tugged Mery a little closer. “I’m sorry I got cross with you for telling Shelby to go home for a visit. It was a great idea.”

Her shoulders scrunched up. “Going home can salve a lot of wounds. It’s a safe place to be, for most of us.”

“Gram’s is definitely that.” If anyone could turn a person right side up again, it was Gram. The only person she hadn’t been able to fix was Dee. Nobody could fix her. That was the price for misusing the book.

“I bet she’s a great woman,” Mery said.

Thoughts of his mother dissolved into smoke. “Who?”

“Your grandmother. Isn’t that who you were talking about?” She gave him a funny look.

“Oh yeah. Lot on my mind I guess.”

“Like what?”

“Nothing important.” He didn’t want to tell her anymore about Dee. The woman wasn’t worth wasting breath over anyway. “You doing anything Saturday night? Say no.”

“Okay, no,” she said laughing.

“Good. We’re going to an art exhibit at a gallery that belongs to a friend of mine. He’s showing a new artist and he’s really excited about it. Some eighty-eight year old French woman named Claudette. She takes photographs of bread.”

Mery’s brows bent. “Bread? As in Wonder?”

“I don’t know. Mick said it’s pretty racy stuff.” He shrugged. “How bread can be racy beats me. Anyway, ask your friends if they could come, too. Mick always thinks nobody’s going to show up.”

“If they aren’t busy I’m sure they’d love to come. I take it Mick is your friend?”

Her look spoke volumes. “Yes, I have friends and yes, I was planning on introducing you very soon. Mick is...well, Mick is Mick.”

“Your gift for description amazes and astounds.” She snickered.

“You’ll see when you met him.” Kelly inclined his head. “Oh and I’m catering the whole shindig.”

She turned to look at him. “You cater?”

“No. But Mick’s a hard guy to say no to. As in you don’t.”

Mery’s eyes twinkled. “I can’t wait for him to meet Viv.”

* * *

As they approached Serendipity, Mery grinned. She loved this place but hadn’t been here for ages. It was packed as usual. Kelly put his arm around her as they headed for the hostess stand.

The girl she assumed was the Traci Kelly had spoken with on the phone waved them through the crowd.

“Hi! How are you?” The cute brunette kissed him on both cheeks and he responded similarly. “Follow me.” She whispered behind her hand as she led them upstairs. “It’s not usually this crazy on a Thursday but Rowdy Martin is here.”

“The comedian?” Mery asked.

Traci nodded. “He’s filming a movie two blocks away. He’s been in here every day for the frozen hot chocolate.”

“That explains his figure,” Mery said.

Traci’s glanced over her shoulder, her eyes a little bigger. “He orders them two at a time.”

At the top of the stairs, she led them through the packed house to a small table by the window. She set menus down and leaned in as they sat. “He’s at the second table to the right against the wall, in case you’re interested.” She winked. “Enjoy your meal.”

Mery snuck a look at the rotund comedian. He wore his trademark newsboy cap over his fiery red hair and a pair of dark sunglasses. An entourage surrounded him. Jason would have loved the man’s autograph, but she wasn’t about to go interrupting anyone else’s private time.

She picked up her menu. “What are you getting? Food or dessert?”

Kelly peeked over the edge of his. “Dessert. If you order food, you won’t have room for anything else.”

That was true. Serendipity was known for its enormous desserts, especially the chocolate ones. She glanced out the window at the waiting crowd below. “Don’t you feel guilty that we just waltzed in here and got a table?”

He put his menu down. “I *did* call ahead.”

“But you know someone got bumped so we could have this table in...” she checked her watch, “twenty minutes from the time you called.”

“Would you rather go wait outside for an hour?”

“No.”

“Good. ‘Cause I’d miss you while you were gone.” He laughed.

She smacked his arm with the menu. “Brat.”

He smiled. “You should be sitting beside me.”

“What are you talking about? This table only has two chairs.”

“Yeah, but they don’t have to be on opposite sides.” He got up, slid his chair around one spot so it was directly beside her and sat back down. He reached under the table and squeezed her thigh. “See? Isn’t that better?”

“You just want to touch me.”

“You’re right. I do.”

She kissed him, because she could. If only he was a few years older, the relationship might have had real potential. But he was the perfect age for a fling. And that’s all this would ever be.

“So dessert then?” He kissed her knuckles.

“Mmm hmm. Dessert.” *Like you covered with whipped cream and a cherry.*

“You’re giving me that look again.”

“What look?” she asked.

He swallowed. “Like you’re imagining me naked and tied to your bed.”

She laughed wickedly. “You weren’t tied to anything.”

His eyes rounded. “So you don’t deny the naked part?”

She laughed again, feeling herself blush a little. “I think we should decide what we’re getting.”

He raised one brow. “I already know what I want.”

“That’s not on the menu.” She grinned, tickled with his blatant desire for her. The allure of taking him to bed grew stronger every time they were together. Except that she loathed the idea of being compared to all the tight little bodies he’d had before her.

His hand returned to her thigh, this time a little higher. His touch scattered sparks across her skin. “Are you torturing me as part of some lesson in anticipation or do you just get a kick out of it?”

A young man in a Serendipity t-shirt put a glass of ice water in front of each of them. He pulled a pad from his back pocket. “You two ready?”

Oh yes, she thought. I’m so ready I could set this building on fire. She sat up a little straighter and tried to ignore the heat radiating off Kelly’s hand and into her thigh. “I’ll have the Forbidden Broadway Sundae.” *Sublimating with ice cream and hot fudge, are we?*

Kelly handed both menus to the server. “And I’ll have the Coward’s Portion banana split.”

“Comin’ up.” The kid took the menus and disappeared.

Kelly leaned in to kiss the spot below her ear that made her want to squeal. “Sure you don’t want to just pick up some whipped cream and head back to your place?”

Now he was a mind reader. She nudged his hand off her thigh and bit her cheek to keep from giggling as his lips brushed her skin. “Behave yourself. We’re out in public.”

He kissed her once more before settling back in his chair. His hand stayed put. “Fine but only until we’re done with dessert.”

“Hah. You won’t be able to move after what you ordered.”

“Hey, I ordered the Coward’s Portion. Not that I’m a coward or anything.” He grinned. “I might be a little afraid of you, though.”

“Stop teasing.”

“I’m not teasing. I’m serious. You scare me.” He took his hand from her thigh and held his fingers up so they were a quarter inch apart. “A little.”

“You’re serious?” She couldn’t believe he was telling the truth. “How do *I* scare you?”

The bravado seemed to flush right out of him. He stared at the table and straightened his silverware. “Do I really have to explain this?”

She leaned her elbows on the table, interlaced her fingers beneath her chin and fluttered her lashes. “Pretty please? For little ole me?”

He gave her a crooked smile. “A Southern belle you’re not.” He sighed. “Your past intimidates me.”

“I see.” A shiver of realization chilled her and she sat back. He didn’t want to be the third man she buried. “Can’t say that I blame you.”

He sat back, too. “I’m glad you understand.”

“What’s the point of pursuing this then?” If she sounded angry, so be it. She hadn’t deliberately set out to marry men who were going to die before their time. No one chose to be a widow once, let alone twice. And they certainly hadn’t died because they’d married her. *Keep telling yourself that.*

His brows furrowed. “What are you talking about?”

“This.” She pointed between the two of them. “Us. Why even bother with any sort of relationship if you’re afraid you’re going to end up like my late husbands?”

His mouth quirked up on one side. “That’s about as clear as mud.”

She leaned forward, her voice a heated whisper. “I’m not cursed, you know. My husbands both died of natural causes.”

He sat blankly for a moment and then started to laugh. “You’re the nuttiest woman I’ve ever met. I’m not worried about *that*.” He lowered his voice. “I’m worried I’m not going to satisfy you in bed.”

“What?” Just when she’d cooled down, a new heat wave swept through her like she’d been stuck under a broiler.

“I’ve had my share of women and, right now I’m not very proud of that, but they’ve all been younger—”

“Thanks for pointing that out.”

“Let me finish.” He grabbed her hand and held it tight. With a deep inhale, he went on. “I can tell just by the way you kiss me that being with you is going to be a whole new ballgame. It’s the difference between driving a Saturn and a Ferrari.”

Slightly flattered, she still rolled her eyes. Thank heavens Viv hadn’t heard that. “So I’m a high performance automobile?”

He nipped her palm with his teeth. “Listen to me, will you? This is hard enough for me to get out. You’re not making it any easier.”

“Sorry. Go on.”

“I’m just saying I’ve never been with a woman as experienced as you. I don’t want you to get...” his voice lowered further, “bored with me.”

“You think I would get bored with you?” He was built like a sexual amusement park and he was worried she was going to be *bored* with him? The boy had definite approval issues.

“Quit smiling like that. I’m being serious.”

“I can’t help it. The idea that you of all people would think that...” She shook her head. “You don’t have anything to worry about. I promise. Okay?”

He shrugged. The gesture didn’t convince her he’d bought it.

“Maybe this will help.” She cupped his cheek to better hold his gaze. “You intimidate me.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You’re just trying to make me feel better.”

“No, I’m not.” Time for a little soul baring in the name of ego salving. The things women did for men. “I’m not twenty anymore. My body isn’t what it used to be despite the torture my Pilates instructor puts me through.” She watched his face for a reaction as she revealed the worst of it. “I have...stretch marks.” She couldn’t believe she’d just volunteered that. Might as well have outlined them in red lipstick.

“You have a son. I’d think it was odd if you didn’t have them.” He turned into her hand and kissed her palm. “They’re proof you bought life into the world.” He shook his head. “Nothing to be ashamed of.”

When did thirty-two get to be such an enlightened age?

The server returned with two enormous bowls of ice cream and toppings. He set the sundaes down and added extra napkins. “Anything else I can get for you?”

Mery smiled at Kelly with new appreciation. “No,” she said without looking at their server. “I think we’re good.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

They left Serendipity the same way they’d entered, hand in hand. The only difference was this time, they were both full of ice cream.

“Those sundaes are too big for one person. We should have split one,” Mery said.

“Next time.” Kelly winked. “Or maybe we’ll just make our own sundaes.”

A string of flashes momentarily blinded her. She looked over her shoulder to see if Rowdy Martin was behind them. He wasn't. She turned back just as Kelly stepped in front of her.

"You got your shot. Leave us alone."

The low growl of his voice surprised her. She wouldn't have thought he could sound so menacing. She peeked around him. Two men with cameras stood a few feet away. The dark-haired man, a camera in his hand and another hanging around his neck, nodded toward Kelly. "C'mon, Chef. How about a nice one with you kissing the doctor."

The doctor? They knew who she was.

The photographer caught Mery's eye. "Dr. Black, give your boyfriend a kiss. Prove those papers wrong."

How did he know? Her stomach clenched with nerves.

He lifted a camera and started snapping again. The second photographer moved around the other side of them.

She ducked back behind Kelly. His hand shot out in front of the lens. "Enough."

The younger photographer laughed. "It's never enough."

More flashes. A small crowd gathered. Mery heard whispers behind them. Questions about who they were and what was going on.

Kelly turned and pulled Mery against him. "Let's get out of here. I'll see if I can get a cab."

A few tourists raised their phones and started taking pictures. Kelly kept his arm around her and together they pushed through the crowd. He lifted his hand to hail a cab just as someone latched on to her arm.

She spun around. The younger photographer had a hold of her. She yanked her arm back. "Let go of me."

"Give Cheffy a kiss," he cajoled, camera clicking away.

Kelly grabbed the man's camera and yanked it out of his hands. The strap tightened around the man's neck and he coughed. "Get off me, you freakin' jerk."

Jaw twitching, Kelly tugged the man closer. "Touch her again and you'll regret it."

The man's eyes bulged. "You threatening me?"

A cab arrived. Kelly shoved the man away and opened the door. Mery jumped in. She shuddered. Kelly slid in behind her. He gave directions to the driver and the cab took off.

He put his arm around her and drew her close. "You okay? You're shaking."

She nodded. "I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't been there."

With a dismissive snort, he shook his head. "You wouldn't have had that problem if I hadn't been there."

That was probably true but beside the point. He'd stepped up and protected her. She slipped her arm around his waist and snuggled into his broad chest. "Thanks anyway. You're a great guy to have around."

"That guy should not have touched you." A low rumble reverberated through him. "I should have decked him."

She patted his chest. "Violence is never the answer." Although the idea of Kelly fighting to defend her had certain aphrodisiacal qualities. She smiled, closed her eyes and inhaled the reassuring male scent of him.

"Yeah, but it makes me feel better." His arms tightened like he was playing out a different version of the event.

She looked up. Even in the low light of the cab, anger darkened his face. For once his angelic good looks seemed more hell-bent than heaven-sent. She unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt, deepening the V at his neck.

He glanced down. "What are you doing?"

"Shhhh," she hushed and slipped her hand beneath the fabric. Velvety skin covered a body as hard and hot as sun-baked pavement.

He bent down and kissed her, his lips so soft and supple she lost herself for a moment in the pleasure of that single sensation.

With one hand at her back and another beneath her knees, he scooped her onto his lap, putting them face to face. She unfastened one more button. Slipped her hand in further. Sparse hairs tickled her palm as her fingers brushed one taut nipple.

His Adam's apple jumped. The tension that had been in his face was now refocused in a much more physical way.

"Mery," he whispered, shaking his head slowly. "What about the cab driver?"

"I don't care," she whispered back.

Kelly's hand eased up her ribcage, settling at the curve of her breast. His thumb grazed higher. She didn't stop him.

She kissed the line of his jaw to his ear. After nipping his ear lobe, she feathered more kisses down his neck. She spread his shirt so she could see his chest. Her mouth watered at the broad planes of muscle.

He was too beautiful for words. She put both hands against his bare chest and splayed her fingers. He was hers for the taking.

The thought was more powerful than a double shot of whiskey on an empty stomach. Drunk with pleasure, she leaned in and whispered in his ear. "Mine."

"Yes," he hissed, then nodded and swallowed again. His eyes held a mix of healthy fear and heady lust.

She grabbed his shirt and pulled, popping the last two buttons off and exposing his abs. She wanted to run her tongue over the ridges of muscle. To kiss down the line of fine hairs disappearing beneath his jeans.

She wanted to taste all of him.

The cab came to a stop outside her apartment building.

"I was hoping you might be able to come up and give me a cooking lesson," she purred.

"A cooking lesson?" He looked so pitiful she wanted to laugh.

"Pay the fare." She trailed her fingers down to his belt. "Then tomorrow morning you can teach me to make breakfast for two."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Kelly woke to a lavender-scented strand of hair tickling his nose. Inhaling, he smiled as memories of last night returned with delicious clarity.

Beside him, Mery shifted with a soft exhale. Her head rested on his arm, facing away from him. Her backside nestled against his hip. He lifted the covers and took a peek at the most surprising thing to turn him on in years.

Her white cotton panties. No thong, no lace, no bows or flowers. Just simple little white bikini panties. Damn, they were sexy.

After her mind blowing come-on in the cab and her take charge attitude when they'd barely made it through the door, he'd expected a black leather g-string or something made of chains. Maybe a slip of red satin.

The unadorned undies had been a complete shock. And yet, when he thought about it, they fit her. Honest, straightforward, no games. They were what they were. Just like her.

He turned onto his side and snuggled her against him, burying his face into her hair. She still intimidated him but not as much as she had last night.

Last night, she'd given him the same kind of nerves Rhonda "Bombshell" Bombeck had. Rhonda'd been head cheerleader and homecoming queen. There wasn't a guy at Sam Houston High that hadn't craved Rhonda's attention. Including Kelly. And if Chet Murphey hadn't banged up his knee, Kelly wouldn't have gotten the chance to quarterback the homecoming game. That's when Rhonda had noticed him.

After the game, she'd let him get to second base under the bleachers. Kelly was sure he was in love with her. Of course when Chet came back to school with a brace on his leg, Rhonda returned to her role as the faithful girlfriend. She barely looked at Kelly, let alone acknowledged what had happened between them after the game.

Women. So damn fickle if they were in charge of telling time the sun would shine at night.

He wanted to believe Mery was different. She shifted again, this time turning into him. Her breath warmed his chest in soft sighs. Gently so as not to wake her, he twirled a strand of her hair around his finger. Had he pleased her last night? She seemed satisfied enough, but he thought he'd done all right the first time he'd kissed her, too.

Satisfied didn't quite describe the way he felt. Sated, yes. Satisfied, no – not because it wasn't good between them but because it was so good, he wanted more. She'd infected his blood like a fever.

He rarely spent the night with a woman but when he did, he was up and gone by dawn. Not today. If it weren't for the obligations of life, he could spend the rest of his day exactly where he was.

"Mmmmm..." Mery slipped an arm around his waist as he turned to lie on his back. "You awake?" she murmured in the sweetest sleepy voice he'd ever heard.

"Just." He hugged her. Waking up with her was nice. She was warm and snuggly.

The phone rang, ruining the moment. She reached for it, pulling away from him. “Hello? Hi, Celia. Again? Great. They must be from last night. Thanks for calling, talk to you later.” She hung up.

“There are pictures of us in the paper again.” She blew out an angry sigh. “They’re calling me the merry widow.”

“Well, you are, aren’t you?” He slid his hand up her thigh. “Least you should be after last night.”

She laughed and poked his chest. “Shouldn’t you be in the kitchen making me breakfast?”

“Damn, woman. How can you be so bossy after that much sex?” He rested his hand on her waist.

“I’m just teasing. I don’t want you to go anywhere.” She propped her head on her hand and pulled the sheet over her breasts. Her hair was wild and her eye makeup smudged. She’d never looked more beautiful.

He brushed a few strands out of her eyes. “So...did that meet your approval?”

Her mouth twisted. “You show definite promise.”

He rolled his eyes. “I can get this kind of abuse anywhere, you know.”

“Really? Who else are you dating?” She kissed his chest. “You’re hot stuff. Last night was...” she rolled beside him and waved her hands in the air. “Phenomenal. Sex-tastic.”

“I love it when you talk dirty.”

She giggled. “With a little training, you could be world class.”

“What?” He sat up and twisted to look at her. “You just said I was phenomenal and sex-tastic. If you have to make up a word to describe it, it must be pretty damn good.”

Reaching up to grab his bicep, she nodded. “It was. And you’re great. Tons of energy, lots of enthusiasm, a willingness like no other man I’ve known. You just need some fine tuning is all.”

He sighed and lay back down. “You could take the wind out of Chicago, you know that?”

More laughter. “Poor baby.”

He frowned. “Maybe I should call Clarissa. She never complained about—”

She rolled over and clamped her hand across his mouth. "That's because the little tramp didn't know any better. And don't ever mention another woman when you're in bed with me or—"

He licked her palm and she pulled it away. "Or what?" he taunted.

"Just be a good boy, will you?" Her eyes sparkled with mischief.

"I hate that," he growled. "I am not a boy."

"Prove it," she taunted.

And he did.

* * *

Thirty minutes later, they lay panting and spent. Mery sighed a long happy sigh. "I knew you had potential. You're getting better already."

"Enough with the flattery," he said, amping up the sarcasm in his voice. "I'm too wiped out to do that again." He shot her a wicked grin. "Least for another five minutes." Time to fight fire with fire.

She looked just scared enough to satisfy him. "Okay, truce. No more lessons today. At some point, I have to get up and do some work. I'm giving a talk at the New School at three."

He held up his hands. "Just so long as we both agree that you declined, not me."

"Yes, dear heart, you win." She leaned up on her elbows. "Guess I should get moving."

"Me, too. That temp is in again today. More fun."

"Sorry," she said.

"Don't worry about it. I'm sure Shelby's having a great time." He kissed her, sat up and swung his feet out of the bed. "How 'bout I whip up some breakfast while you shower?" Sharing a shower sounded like a much better idea but he knew where that would lead. Next time.

"That would be great. I seem to have worked up an appetite." Smiling, she turned on her side and tucked the sheet around her.

He looked over his shoulder. "Aren't you getting up?"

"Soon."

Did she not want him to see her naked? After last night, that seemed kind of silly. Whatever. Women. He slid out of bed to retrieve his boxers, but couldn't find them. How were his jeans in here but not his drawers? He grabbed them and tossed them over his shoulder.

"Mmm...very nice," she murmured.

He glanced over his shoulder. Her gaze focused on his backside. He'd been ogled before but her look gave him goose bumps. "I thought you were done."

"Doesn't mean I can't admire the goods."

He turned away and grinned. "Knock yourself out." He added a little extra strut to his walk as he left the bedroom and was rewarded with a lusty growl.

"Keep that up and I might change my mind," she yelled after him.

"Get in that shower now or I'm coming back in there," he answered.

She squealed and moments later, he heard the shush of water and the muted click of the shower door closing. He found an apron, tied it on and got to work feeding the woman who had just given him the greatest night of his life.

* * *

Mery stepped out of the shower to the delicious aroma of cinnamon and vanilla and coffee. "Someone's earning his keep." Not that he hadn't last night. She wrapped her hair up in a towel, slipped into her robe and applied moisturizer. She added a flick of mascara and a touch of concealer as an afterthought. Her skin was so luminous with afterglow she didn't need blush.

"Woman, thy name is vanity."

She laughed softly. If there ever was a day to feel vain, this was it. She stretched, enjoying the pleasurable ache left behind by a wicked night in the arms of a younger man. Kelly was amazing in bed.

Amazing. A little rough around the edges but edges could be polished. She towed her hair then put on bra and underwear.

He was even better than—she would not compare him to her husbands. Guilt assailed her. That wasn't fair. Dead men couldn't defend themselves. She tugged a soft turquoise t-shirt over her head, then stepped into some yoga pants.

Garrett had been a wonderful lover. Kind, gentle, a little awkward at times, sure, but they were young. Maybe too young at twenty and twenty-four but he'd promised her she'd finish her degree while he took care of things and he had. They'd grown to know each other's likes and dislikes quickly. And Garrett had given her Jason. She smiled, full of love for her first husband.

Michael had been a different man altogether. His first wife had died from the same type of cancer Garrett had. The shared experience created a friendship that grew into a comfortable

sort of love. He'd stepped into the role of father easily, treating Jason like his own. For that, her second husband would forever hold a special place in her heart.

They'd found out about his heart condition only weeks before the civil ceremony. Because of that, their relationship returned to an almost completely plutonic stage. On the rare occasions they made love, it was safe. Cautious. Sometimes--she hated to think the word--boring. She shook her head. That wasn't a nice thing to think about such a sweet man. They'd just been cautious. Not that it had mattered. The drunk driver had ended Michael's life before his heart had a chance to fail.

She flipped the blow dryer on.

Kelly was so different from them in some ways and so alike in others. He had Garrett's kindness and Michael's generosity plus a roguishness that made him irresistible. That illegally sexy body didn't hurt either.

He was so much fun to be with. She loved laughing with him. The way they bantered back and forth. She loved being with him. The way he could melt her with just a look. In truth, she loved everything about him.

The realization sent a shiver through her. She turned off the blow dryer, put her hairbrush down and stared at herself in the mirror.

You will not fall in love with him. It isn't fair. He deserves a woman that can give him children of his own. A woman that doesn't come with so much baggage.

She swallowed down the dark fear born out of Garrett's death and grown stronger with Michael's.

More than anything, Kelly deserved a woman that wouldn't put him in the ground before his time.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Mery looked a little pale when she came out of the bedroom. Kelly figured he'd tired her out some. A good meal should help with that. From his spot behind the breakfast bar, he sprinkled powdered sugar onto the dish he'd prepared.

She tipped her chin at him. "I thought I had hidden that thing away."

He glanced down at the leopard print apron he wore and plucked at the strap around his neck. "You mean this?"

She nodded. "One of Viv's gifts, if you were wondering what I was doing with a thing like that." She peeked over the counter from the other side. "Is that French toast?"

"Yep. Cinnamon-pecan French toast with orange butter." He lifted a glass of the cranberry juice he'd mixed up from a can of concentrate found in the freezer.

She wrinkled her brow. "That came out of my kitchen? You must have some kind of magical power."

He choked on the juice. "What?"

"I can't believe I had all the ingredients for that."

"Well, then, let's eat." He picked up the plates and took them to the small table he'd already set.

She whistled then laughed.

He turned around grinning.

Her eyes were brighter than they'd been when she first came out. "I realized you were shirtless but I didn't know you were bottomless, too. Can't say as I've had a naked man in my kitchen before."

"I'm not naked. I'm wearing an apron."

She stared at his legs. At least he thought that's what she stared at. "I don't think I'll be able to concentrate on breakfast knowing that's all you have on."

He put his hands on his hips. "I couldn't find my boxers and I'm not much on going commando under jeans."

She walked to the couch and rummaged between the cushions, finally yanking out his blue-striped shorts. She tossed them in his direction. "I guess last night was a little crazy."

"Ya think?" He snagged the boxers and grinned. Last night had been more than crazy. It had been a learning experience. Mery was a great teacher. One he wanted to learn more from. He slid the shorts on under the apron and held out his hand to her. "Ready to eat?"

She took it and nodded. "Starved."

He gave her a quick kiss before pulling out her chair.

When they finished, he cleared the plates and turned on the tap to fill the sink.

She shooed him away. "I'll clean. You cooked."

“Thanks.” He slipped the apron off, grabbed his jeans from the bar stool where he’d left them and tugged them on.

“You’re welcome to take a shower if you want.”

“I’ll grab one at my place. I’ve got to home to change anyway.” He buttoned the remaining buttons on his shirt and tucked it in.

“Give me a sec.” She squirted detergent into the sink water and dumped the frying pan in. She wiped her hands on a towel, then walked with him to the door.

He gathered her into his arms. “See you tomorrow night.”

She leaned into him. “That reminds me, I have to call the girls.”

“Going to tell them about the wicked things you did to me?” He laughed. Wouldn’t that be something? He could imagine what the reaction to that x-rated story would be.

“And make them jealous?” Her laughter blended with his. “You’re too much.”

He pulled her closer and captured her mouth in a short, hungry kiss. “Am I?”

“No,” she whispered. “You’re exactly enough.”

* * *

Mery fastened the bracelet of sparkly jet beads she’d bought to go with her new black dress. The color was comforting but the cut of the dress was anything but. Other than a single swath of fabric looped loosely over one shoulder the dress was strapless. Ruching down the sides accented every curve with perfect definition. She couldn’t wait to see what Kelly thought of it.

Matching jet bead dangles glittered at her ears like black diamonds. She stepped into the black satin sling-backs, tottering on one foot as she adjusted the strap on the other.

The intercom buzzed. She pressed the talk button. “Yes?”

“Dr. Black, your car is here.”

“Thank you. Would you let them know I’ll be right down?” She checked her watch. Viv and the girls were right on time. She grabbed her wrap and evening bag then checked her reflection in the mirror again before heading down.

The dress was very sexy. The jewelry and shoes were just right. She looked good. No. She looked great. A smile crossed her face. Something told her this was going to be a night to remember. Maybe it should also be their last night, before things got any more complicated. She’d gotten some good press. Shown the world she wasn’t anti-man.

Marcus opened the limo door for her with smile. “Evening, Dr. Black.”

“Hi, Marcus. Thank you.” She got into the car to a chorus of “oohs” and “ahhs”.

“Hot dress, Mer.” Celia grinned. “Out to impress someone?”

Viv nudged the curvy blonde. “Wouldn’t you look your best if you were dating that scrummy hunk of man?”

Celia sighed. “Thanks for reminding me that I’m not.”

Viv arched a brow in Mery’s direction. “Did Lizza have anything to do with that outfit?”

“Not a stitch,” Mery said proudly. “Bergdorf’s has some great dresses.” She stuck one foot out. “And shoes.”

Viv nodded. “Well done. You look stunning.” She leaned back with a Cheshire grin. “You have a real glow about you.” She looked at Celia across from them. “Wouldn’t you say so, Celia? Don’t you think Meredith looks especially happy?”

She nodded. Such an obedient little minion. Mery rolled her eyes.

Viv’s gaze returned to Mery. “Might go so far as to say you look *satisfied*.”

“I’m not telling you anything.”

Celia stuck out her bottom lip. “But we’re your best friends. And we’re dying to know.”

“Things are going well. End of discussion.”

“Translation: he must not be any good. What a shame,” Celia said to Viv.

The older woman nodded and shrugged. “How much can a boy that age know about the art of lovemaking?”

“He’s not a boy,” Mery interjected.

“Probably couldn’t last more than a few minutes, tops,” Celia added.

“I’m not telling you a thing,” Mery repeated.

“Ohhh...” Viv said, as if she suddenly understood the universe. She shook her head and clucked her tongue sympathetically. “The excitement of being with a more mature woman brought him to an untimely finish, didn’t it?”

Unspoken words danced on Mery’s tongue. If only they knew. Premature was the last thing Kelly had been.

Viv patted her hand. “He still has his looks.”

“The two of you should be ashamed of yourselves.” Mery glared at her friends. They were all on the verge of laughter. “You’re a naughty bunch of wenches.” She hesitated.

“Probably not as naughty as I was last night, however.”

“Oh, Mer, please just tell me a little. It’s been so long, I can’t remember the last time I...you know.” Celia smiled encouragingly.

Mery groaned at her own sudden willingness to share. Or was it bragging? “You’re rotten, rotten women, you know that?”

Viv smiled. “We know. Now give us the highlights.”

* * *

A very elegant and eclectic crowd occupied Bishop Gallery. A woman in a charcoal gray sequin dress walked by, her black hair cropped in a short Mohawk. Just past her, two men--one in an expensive suit, the other in paint splattered jeans and studded leather jacket--talked with another woman in a Pucci-print dress that probably was genuine Pucci.

The gallery was clean-lined and well lit. Wire-strung halogens floated overhead warming the dark wood floors and brilliant white walls.

Mery didn’t see Kelly and since she didn’t know what his friend Mick looked like, she and the girls headed for one of the photographs on display. On the way, they helped themselves to glasses of wine being passed by a server.

Stopping in front of the black and white photograph, they stared silently. At least until the shock wore off.

“Is that supposed to be what I think it’s supposed to be?” Celia whispered.

“I do believe it is.” Viv sipped her wine.

“That’s the most risqué thing I’ve ever seen,” Celia breathed.

Mery doubted that, but nodded any way. It was risqué all right.

A thick rivulet of melted butter dripped down an upright baguette anchored between two smaller round loaves of seeded rye.

Celia’s whisper got louder. “It looks like a peni—”

“Mery, there you are.” Kelly gave her a quick kiss. “I’ve been looking all over for you.” He stepped back and she noticed a large red stain down the front of his white chef coat. His gaze traveled from head to foot and back up. “You look more beautiful than I have words for.”

“Thank you.” She did a little twirl. She’d known he was going to like it. “Little accident?” She pointed at the crimson blotch.

“Clumsy server,” he mumbled, then smiled at the duo behind her. “Pleasure to see you ladies. Viv, Celia. Really nice of you to come. I’ll introduce you to Mick in just a minute but first I need to borrow Mery. If you’ll excuse us?”

They all nodded. Mery ignored their knowing smiles. Kelly slipped his arm around her waist and led her to an uncrowded corner. “I missed you,” he said, his voice low. “That dress is smoking. Can I help you out of it later?”

She laughed. “We’ll see. I’m glad you like it. I picked it out with you in mind.”

“Then I should definitely get to take it off you.” He grinned. “I want to kiss you like you deserve to be kissed but since I’m actually kind of working...”

“It’s okay. I understand.” She wanted to help herself to that kiss. Instead, she drew a finger down his sleeve. “You can make up for it later.”

“Can you do me a big favor? I hate to ask since you just got here. Normally I could call Shelby but with her in Texas, and both restaurants in the weeds at the moment, I don’t have anyone else to ask.”

“Of course. As long as you aren’t asking me to serve food. I have to draw the line somewhere.” She winked.

“I’ll pay for the cab and everything.”

“Kelly, what do you need me to do? Just ask.”

He slipped his keycard out of his pants pocket. “I can’t stay in this coat. I need a clean one. You know where I keep them in my office, on the hanger behind the door? I should have brought a change with me but I was in such a hurry to get down here and make sure the food was right and the servers were here...” He shook his head and pulled the soiled coat away from his body. “I am not a caterer and this reminds me why. This is never going to come out.”

“Red wine?”

“Sangria. The server poured it on me instead of into the glass.”

She took the keycard. “I’ll be back before you know it.” She tapped the edge of the card against his chest. “Don’t think this is a freebie, though.”

He grinned big. “I was hoping you’d expect payment.” He kissed her, a little longer this time. “Let me introduce you to Mick before you go.”

A friend of Kelly’s. This should be interesting. She interlaced her arm with his. “I’m all yours.”

“I like the sound of that.”

They headed toward a group of people chatting about the show. As they waited for a break in the conversation, a server came by with a tray of goodies. “May I offer you a chorizo-stuffed mushroom?”

“Sounds great.” Mery helped herself to one but Kelly waved the tray away and the server left.

“I worry when the chef doesn’t eat his own food.”

“Nerves,” Kelly said.

Normally, she’d argue that. Kelly was one of the most confident men she knew but he did seem a little off his game tonight. She took a bite of the mushroom. “They’re good.”

Kelly smiled. “Thanks.”

Mery studied the small group while she ate the rest. One of the men stood a head taller than the rest and was easily a foot wider. He wore his black hair in a short, military-style buzz cut that made his ebony eyes stand out like chips of obsidian. He stroked his well-groomed goatee as he laughed. She wondered if the devil knew he had a twin living in Manhattan.

Kelly slipped his hand to the small of her back. “Mick, I’d like you to meet Mery.”

Beelzebub’s brother turned and smiled. His eyes sparkled as he offered his catcher’s mitt of a hand. “Mick Bishop, how you doing?”

At a loss for words, Mery took his hand and prayed his handshake wouldn’t live up to his image.

It didn’t.

He was as gentle as if he were petting a kitten. “I couldn’t wait to meet you.” He tapped his chest with his fingers. “I had to see for myself the woman who’s had such an effect on Tex here.” His gravelly voice held more than a hint of Brooklyn.

“Tex?” She glanced sideways at Kelly to see his reaction, then looked back at Mick. She had to hear more about this. “Such an effect, you say?”

He nodded. “Like no other woman I’ve seen.”

She glanced at Kelly. “Could you elaborate on that, Mr. Bishop?”

“Call me Mick.”

Kelly put his hands on her shoulders. “Mery has to run an errand for me. She’s too busy to chat now.”

She patted his hand while she smiled at Mick. “I’ll find you when I get back and we’ll continue this conversation. And maybe you can help me pick out one of these photographs? I’m suddenly in the mood to spend.”

“You got it, sweetheart,” Mick said.

Despite her initial impression, Mery thought Mick seemed like an okay guy. Probably kept Kelly, or should she say Tex, on his toes. That made her like Mick even more.

“C’mon, let’s go.” Kelly steered her toward the exit. On the way out, she let the girls know she’d be back in a few minutes and then Kelly walked her out to get a cab.

He raised his hand to the oncoming traffic. “You have my keycard, right?”

“In my purse.” She waved the little bag for him to see. “Too bad there’s not a chef coat store open. I could just buy you a new one.”

He smiled, a little sheepishly. “The one in my office will do just fine, but thanks.”

One block away a cab sitting at the red light put its turn signal on. Kelly stepped back from the curb and glanced toward the gallery. She grabbed a handful of fabric and tugged him closer. “No one’s looking.”

“I don’t care if they see, but—”

“Shut up and kiss me.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He eased his fingers under the edges of her jaw and tipped her face up to meet his. The first touch of his lips sent a shiver of pleasure down her spine.

She danced her tongue across his, drinking in the sweetness of the kiss. He was enough to make a woman forget her manners in public.

He broke the kiss, eyes dark with need. “Any more of that and we’ll both go back to the office.” His gaze traveled over her outfit again. “As if that dress isn’t enough to make a grown man cry.”

The cab rumbled to a halt. Kelly opened the door for her. “Don’t be long.”

She smiled. “Try not to miss me too much.”

“Impossible.” He closed the door and gave her a wink. She waved then settled back into the seat for the ride. How could a man be that perfect?

He seemed too flawless to be real.

Mery hurried past the crowd waiting at Sedona's entrance and down the hall to the elevator. She slid Kelly's keycard through the reader and the lift whirred to life.

Things had certainly changed from that first night she'd used a secret password to access the VIP dining room. She rode up to the second floor and headed to his office. She slid the keycard through another reader, and the lock snicked open.

She ran her hand along the wall, feeling for the light switch. Finding it, she flipped it on and closed the door behind her.

Two clean chef coats hung there, one white, one denim. She reached for the white one, then stopped. It really should be covered with something. She looked around for a plastic bag. Nothing. She opened the small closet and rummaged around. Boxes of envelopes, old menus, menu sleeves, a stack of Gauchos t-shirts. Those were cool. She'd have to ask Kelly about getting one of those for Jason.

She shut the closet door. Maybe she could ask the hostess for a garbage bag. Or just be very careful.

The phone rang. Mery jumped then laughed at herself for feeling like an intruder. She had every right to be here. Kelly had given her the key.

His answering machine picked up on the third ring. "You've reached Kelly Spicer's office, thanks for calling and leave a message." She smiled at his sexy twang.

"Hi Kel, it's Shelby."

Mery grabbed the phone. "Shelby? Hi, it's Mery Black."

"Dr. Black? Is this...but that was Kelly's answering machine."

"I'm in his office. He's catering a showing at Mick's gallery and he got red wine all over his chef coat so he asked me to run up here and grab him a clean one." She plopped down in Kelly's big leather desk chair. It smelled like him and she closed her eyes to enjoy it.

"Oh. Well, I just called to let Kel know everything is fine."

"Just fine?" She propped her feet up like Kelly always did. If he could see her now, he'd probably get a good laugh.

Shelby sighed. "Our mother is here."

Mery put her feet back down and slid the chair under the desk so she could prop her elbows on the surface. "That's not good. That's not what you need right now."

“She says she’s changed and wants to make things right. I want to believe her but it’s so hard, you know? I don’t know what to do.”

Poor girl. “Trust like that can’t be rebuilt in a few days, Shelby. Her actions have to follow her words. Don’t let her put the burden of renewing this relationship on you. That’s what she’s doing isn’t it? Telling you it’s your decision?”

“Yes. How did you know that? I’m so glad you answered the phone. What should I do?”

“Well, how much contact you want to have with her is up to you but keep in mind, you need to protect yourself, too. If you want her back in your life, you should let her in one tiny piece at a time. Start small. Run an errand together. Go to lunch. Get coffee and just sit and talk for an hour or so.”

“Okay, I can do that.” There was hesitancy in Shelby’s voice. “There’s one more thing.”

“What’s that?”

“She wants Kelly’s number. She wants to talk to him, too.”

Mery exhaled slowly. “You need to talk to Kelly about that first. That has to be his decision.”

“You’re right. Don’t worry about giving him the message. I’m sure he’s got enough to handle tonight.”

Mery had a pretty good idea of what his answer on that would be. “Well, I better get back. Kelly’s waiting on me.”

“Have fun. Don’t tell him I called. I’ll talk to him tomorrow after I’ve sorted out what I’m going to do.”

“You got it.” Mery hung up and swiveled in the chair. Her foot connected with something metal. “Ow!”

She peeked under the desk. Apparently Kelly had been in such a rush to leave he hadn’t locked his safe either. She’d kicked the door with her foot and now it sat half open. Rubbing her toe, she wondered if she should shut it.

On the bottom shelf of the safe sat an old book. Looked like the one Kelly had been reading the day she’d filled in for Shelby. He said he’d been looking at recipes but he’d acted like she’d caught him doing something he shouldn’t.

Leave it alone. It’s none of your business.

The clock ticked as she stared at the book. “I should shut the safe and leave.”

Instead, she reached into the safe. It took both hands to lift the book out and onto his desk.

That was odd. The book was warm, like it had been sitting in the sun. Worn brown leather covered the outside and tarnished metal scrolls decorated the front corners. No title anywhere she could see.

She opened to the first page and read the fancy script out loud. “A Wyse Book of Cookery.” The yellowed paper was dark around the edges with age.

A cookbook. A really old cookbook. What kind of recipes had he been looking for? And why was it such a big secret?

The first recipe she came to made no sense. It was for Caudell, whatever that was.

She read the first line. “Take faire tryed yolkes of eyren...” What the heck were eyren? Sounded like old English. She flipped forward, reading bits and pieces of the recipes as she did. The further she got through the book, the more the recipes made sense.

Turning a large section of pages, she came to some blank pages. One by one, she went back through them until she came to the last two recipes in the book.

“Well, well, well. Will you look at that?” *Chocolate-covered pepita clusters*. Underneath the name was the word persuasion.

The recipe next to that one was for Chorizo-stuffed mushrooms, the very thing Kelly had been serving at the gallery. The word extravagance was written under that header.

A sudden coldness came over her as her brain made an eerie connection. She’d eaten the chocolates right before she’d agreed to meet Shelby in person. Tonight, right after eating one of the mushrooms, she’d thought about buying a painting. And a new chef coat for Kelly.

She flipped back a few pages. All the recipes had words underneath the titles.

Her stomach knotted. “What does this mean?” she whispered.

The pages of the book began to move on their own. She yanked her hands away and watched as the book settled open to a new recipe. Her gaze fixed on the word beneath the heading.

Understanding.

Her mouth watered like she might throw up. “Don’t jump to conclusions. There has to be a logical explanation. There was a probably a draft and the book just happened to open to that page.” And now she was talking to herself. Calm down. Think this through. Test the theory.

She took a deep breath. “I want a recipe for love.”

The pages moved again, this time almost to the beginning of the book. The recipe it stopped at had the word love written beneath it.

She shoved away from the desk. This was a book of spells. Black magic if there ever was such a thing. Kelly had used this book to manipulate her. He was doing the same thing to the people at the gallery to get them to buy. What kind of person had a book like this? Where had he even gotten it? No wonder he’d tried to hide it.

A hard chill shook her. Had she really wanted to sleep with him or was that the result of a spell too?

Anger crawled up her spine.

Her friends were at the gallery.

She grabbed her purse, stormed out of the office and slammed the door behind her.

Chapter Twenty-Six

“Kelly.”

At Mery’s voice, he turned from the plate of hors d’oeuvres he was arranging in the small kitchen of Mick’s gallery. “Hey, there you are. I was starting to worry, you were gone longer than I—”

“We need to talk. Now.” Sparks flew from Mery’s eyes. Her hands fisted at her sides. Her empty hands.

“Where’s my coat?”

She kept quiet as a server passed them, the click of the girl’s heels on the hardwood like the tick of time passing. “I found the book.”

“What book?” But he knew. His jaw tightened.

Her eyes narrowed. “Your recipe book. Or should I say your book of spells?”

How had she... The bottom dropped out of his gut. “You what?” He knew he was speaking but the voice he heard sounded very far away. The edge of his vision darkened.

“I don’t understand it, but I know enough to know you manipulated me and you’re doing the same thing to all these people.” She jabbed her finger at him.

He shook his head. “I can explain—”

“Save it.” She tossed his keycard at him. “This...” she pointed between the two of them, “is over.”

The card clattered to the ground. “It’s not what you think.” She twisted away from him, headed toward the door. He caught her arm, not ready to end the conversation. “That book was in my safe with my personal things. That was none of your business.”

“Sleeping with you makes it my business.” Her mouth returned to a thin, tight line. She yanked her arm out of his grasp. “And that business just went bust.”

He followed her as she stalked out of the back room and into the gallery. “Mery, you don’t understand.” He kept his voice low and, he hoped, his anger out of it.

“I don’t need to understand,” she spat back. “But your sister might when you tell her I won’t be counseling her anymore.”

Heads turned in their direction. Kelly offered a few smiles as he followed Mery. She approached her friends who were chatting with Mick. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but I just wanted to let you know I’m leaving.

“I don’t understand.” Standing beside Mick, Celia shook her head. “You just got back.”

Mery glanced at Kelly, her expression deadly. “I’m not feeling well. Good night.” She paused. “I would suggest you put careful thought into making any purchases this evening. Things are not what they seem.” With a slight nod, Mery headed for the door.

Kelly looked at the small group to see the three of them staring back questioningly. “I didn’t do anything,” he said before taking off after her, but he’d done plenty. This was exactly the kind of thing Shelby had warned him about.

Out on the street, Mery was already hailing a cab.

“I deserve a chance to explain.”

“You don’t deserve anything. Especially not me.” She kept her eyes on the approaching taxi.

“Yes, I do. I care for you, Mery.” He was shocked by the truth of his own words. He did care for her. Deeply. “People who care for one other don’t treat each other this way. It just isn’t proper.”

“What would you know about how to treat people?” Rolling her eyes, she pulled the car door open before the vehicle came to a complete stop. Thunder rumbled overhead. “Save the

Southern gentleman crap for one of your bleached bimbos. It's not going to work on me anymore."

She was in the cab and closing the door. He grabbed the edge, preventing her from leaving. "I understand you're mad. I'll call you tomorrow and we'll talk when you've cooled off."

"Get it through your thick Texas skull. We're done. I don't ever want to see you again."

Stunned, he let go. She slammed the door. The cab took off into traffic as the first raindrops pelted his face.

* * *

Mery refused to open her eyes until the phone stopped ringing. When it did, she checked the clock on her nightstand. Six fifteen. He'd called twice in the last ten minutes. Did Kelly actually think he was going to persuade her to listen when she wasn't even awake?

Weak gray light filtered through the sheers in her bedroom. Looked like it was still raining. Perfect. That fit her mood exactly.

She rolled over in bed and thought about last night. Her anger had dissipated a little but there was still plenty left. When she was ready, she'd listen to his explanation, but it wasn't going to change her mind.

He'd lost her trust. Made her feel used. Like a fool. Dating a younger man, even if it had been just a fling for the sake of her career, had been a horrid idea. She would never let anyone or anything sway her into doing something so foolish again.

There would be no second chance for the black magic cowboy.

Two minutes later the phone rang again. She snatched the receiver. "Stop calling, will you? I'm not ready to talk."

"Mery, it's Celia."

"Oh. Sorry, I thought you were—"

"Kelly was in a motorcycle accident last night. He's in the hospital right now."

"What?" She sat up. Her heart jumped in her chest. "Where? How do you know this? How is he? Is he—"

"I don't know his condition. The paper didn't say, which is how I found out. But I called around. He's at Mount Sinai. I also recommend you not buy the paper."

"Why? Just tell me. I'm already in a bad mood, you can't make it worse."

Celia sighed, long and slow. “They’re calling you the Black Widow.”

Mery’s face got hot. She was either going to cry or combust. A small whimper escaped her lips.

“I knew I shouldn’t have told you.” Celia sighed again. “His sister is still in Texas, isn’t she? I don’t know what happened between you two last night but you should really go see him, Meredith.”

“Yes, Shelby’s in Texas.” Mery whispered. “I really don’t think it would be appropriate—”

“Visiting hours start at 11 A.M.”

“I don’t want to have this conversation,” she said.

“Just think about it.” Celia disconnected.

Mery sat there with the phone in her lap. Kelly was hurt, no telling how badly. The last thing she’d said was that she never wanted to see him again.

That wasn’t true. Despite the hurt and anger she felt over finding the book and its implications, she did want to see him again.

But not in the hospital. She hated hospitals. Garrett had wasted away in one. The drunk driver who’d hit Michael’s car had been resuscitated in an emergency room. The same emergency room Michael had died in moments later.

Now Kelly was in one.

Maybe the paper was right. Maybe she was a black widow. She’d felt that way about herself for a long time. Jinxed. Cursed. Whatever you wanted to call it. She was a death sentence for the men she loved.

She shook her head. No. She didn’t love Kelly. She’d started to care about him but that had ended last night. Except that didn’t explain why her heart ached at the thought of him alone in that hospital room.

“I’m not going to see him. I’m not.” The phone beeped in her clenched hand. “*If you’d like to make a call, please hang up and—*” She smacked the receiver into its cradle, flopped down and tugged the covers up to her chin. A rush of wind brought a sheet of rain against her window.

“He manipulated me.” To help his sister. That didn’t balance the scale.

People who cared for one other didn't treat each other this way. His words echoed in her head. He cared about her. Not quite the admission of a mastermind manipulator. Or was it? What did she really know about him anyway?

Kelly was sweet, charming, a great cook, a gentleman, an amazing lover and had probably sold his soul to the devil for a black magic cookbook.

Exhaling slowly, she rubbed her eyes. Even the soulless shouldn't have to suffer alone.

She got to the hospital at 9 A.M. and quickly found out which room he was in. She took the elevator to his floor and was immediately stopped by a heavy-set nurse whose attitude was as sharp as her blinding white scrubs. "Visiting hours don't start until 11 A.M. Wait in the lobby."

Good thing she'd worn her black suit. She peered at the woman's ID tag. "I'm aware of that Nurse Torres. I'm Dr. Black." She slipped her old hospital ID out of her pocket and hoped the nurse didn't notice her thumb covering the expiration date. She hadn't used the ID since she'd stopped treating patients years ago. "I'm looking for a patient of mine, Kelly Spicer. He was admitted last night. Motorcycle accident. Perhaps you can help me?"

The woman narrowed her eyes, obviously considering what to do. "You're a doctor?"

"Yes. Perhaps you've read one of my books?" No response. The nurse appeared to be a slow thinker. "Or seen me on Oprah?"

Dark brows shot up. "You were on Oprah? I thought you looked familiar. C'mon, I'll take you back." She shifted and started down the hall. "That boy is messed up, let me tell you. Lucky he was wearing a helmet."

"Messed up?" Mery swallowed down her panic.

"Broken ankle, bruised ribs, numerous lacerations and multiple contusions." The woman shook her head. "Motorcycles are so dangerous."

"I tried to tell him that," Mery muttered.

"Like a man's going to listen anyway." The nurse gave a short laugh as she stopped in front of a room. "Here you go. He was still sleeping when I last checked his vitals."

"Thank you." Mery rested her hand on the door handle as the nurse left, but didn't turn it. The metal's chill seeped into her fingers. She willed herself to breathe slow, calming breaths. She closed her eyes and an image of Garrett flashed in her mind. Gaunt arms bruised by numerous IV's, the soft fuzz covering his scalp the only hair chemo had left behind. Then

Michael, body broken from the wreck, ghostly pale and already gone by the time she'd arrived. Her lids flew open and she shook her head. *You can do this.*

She turned the handle, eased the door open. The private room was dim. The faint whir of the machines at his bedside the only sound. An acrid aroma, half medicinal-half cleanser hung in the air.

She hated that smell. Hated the way it stuck in the back of her throat so that she could almost taste it. She shut the door gently behind her, careful not to wake him, and walked to his bed.

Her hands trembled when she saw him. She clenched her teeth to silence the gasp threatening to slip out. Breathe. Blinking back tears, she stared at the ceiling and willed them away. He was hurt, not dying. *You aren't responsible for this.* She looked down at his hand. Below the IV site, his knuckles were scraped raw.

Red scratches shadowed with purple trailed up his arm and disappeared beneath the sleeve of his blue-dotted gown. She lifted her gaze to look at his face.

His sandy curls framed his boyish face like an angel's halo. Even the small gash across his nose and the deep bruising along his jaw didn't detract from his peaceful expression. They must have him well sedated. She pulled her suit jacket a little tighter. Why did they keep these rooms so cold?

She walked around to a chair on the other side of the bed. She pulled it closer to his side, wincing as it screeched across the floor.

His eyes stayed shut. Breathing easier, she leaned back in the chair. On this side of the bed, his arm hung off the edge. She slipped her fingers under his palm and lifted. His fingers curled around hers but there was as much strength in his grip as a child's.

Liquid built at her lash line. To see such a capable man reduced to such helplessness tore at her heart. She kept one hand beneath his and wiped her eyes with the other. He certainly didn't look like a man in league with the devil at the moment. Maybe she was the only curse he suffered from.

She propped her elbow on her knee, rested her forehead in her palm and closed her eyes. *Get him better and get out of his life before you do any more damage.* She gave his hand a gentle squeeze. "I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"Mery?"

Chapter Twenty-Seven

His voice was weak, edged with pain. She looked up. "I'm here. Do you need anything?"

"You're here." His eyes were half-closed, the beautiful blue obscured by the fog of sedation.

She nodded, afraid she wouldn't be able to hold back the tears this time.

"I wrecked my bike."

That got a partial smile out of her. "I know. You wrecked yourself too. Go back to sleep now. I'll be here when you wake up."

"Promise," he whispered.

"I promise."

"I love you." His lids fluttered down.

The chill she'd felt before dropped to sub-zero. A million words rushed to her lips. *Don't say that. Don't even think that. Don't even joke about it.* She was bad news. The black widow. *Love me and you'll never get out of here.* But he slept again.

She let out a deep shuddering breath and shook her head. "Don't say that," she whispered. "It's too dangerous to love me. Besides, I'm still mad at you."

He didn't wake up this time and for that she was thankful. She didn't wait to explain to a man in the hospital how loving her was a death sentence. And that for his sake, she couldn't love him back. Even if she did care about him. She wasn't nearly as mad as she'd been last night. But without a world-class explanation about that cookbook and some sort of divine reassurance that she wasn't somehow responsible for the deaths of her husbands, their relationship was still over.

At 11am sharp, Mick, Celia and Viv walked in. Mery put a finger to her lips then pointed to the bed where Kelly slept. The nurse had come in a few minutes prior to check his vitals and administer more meds.

"How's he doing," Mick rasped in what she assumed passed for a whisper in Brooklyn.

"Hard to tell," she whispered back. "He's only been awake for about a minute."

Viv set a huge bouquet of blue bonnets and yellow roses on the narrow table beneath the window.

Kelly shifted, moaning slightly, and they all went still. He lifted one arm a few inches as though he was trying to get up, then let it drop back to the bed. His eyes opened to small slits. He looked at them for a long minute without speaking. He groaned softly. "Am I dead?"

They all laughed, breaking the mood of the room. Mick shook his head. "No, Tex, but you're pretty banged up."

Kelly swallowed with apparent difficulty. "Water." He gestured lamely to a cup on the bedside table. Mery jumped up and lifted the cup, guiding the straw to his lips. He drank half before he was through.

"Better. Thanks." He smiled and an old, familiar but now unwelcome warmth built in her belly.

After about ten minutes of small talk, Kelly's eyes started closing again.

"I'd better go," Viv said, clutching her purse beneath her arm. She glanced at Mery, concern in her eyes. "Don't want to wear you out any more than you already are."

Mery gave her a weak smile to show she was all right with everything that was going on.

"Get better soon, cowboy," Celia added.

Kelly's eyes opened more fully. He grinned and for a moment, looked like his old self. "Thanks for coming."

Viv nodded then left, shutting the door softly behind them.

Mery glanced at Celia. "Aren't you going with her?"

Celia blushed and shook her head. "No."

Mery raised her eyebrows.

"Mick and I are having lunch."

That was interesting. Her brows went a half-inch higher as her gaze went to Mick. The man was grinning like a baby at a topless bar.

"We should probably go, too." Mick's hand settled on the small of Celia's back. "See you later, Tex."

"I'll talk to you soon, Mer." Celia wiggled her fingers in a coy wave.

You bet you will. Mery watched them leave in a minor state of shock. Mick and Celia? Not a match she ever would have made. She shook her head. What did it matter? It would end up going nowhere once Celia's parents met him. No man she dated was good enough for her father

or wealthy enough for her mother. They'd have a field day with Mick. Poor girl. It was no wonder she hadn't married yet.

Thinking of things that didn't matter made her think of Kelly's confession of "I love you". Surely that had been drug-induced. He couldn't love her.

Just like she couldn't love him.

Too much introspection and an hour later, a nurse brought in a tray of food, flipping the light on as she came in. Mery rolled her eyes. So much for compassion for the injured. Why couldn't they just let him sleep?

"Lunch time, Mr. Spicer," the woman announced.

Kelly blinked at the light in a groggy haze and tried to push himself upright. He moaned with the effort.

The nurse powered his bed up to a sitting position. He winced at the movement. "C'mon now. Let's get some food in you."

Mery stood. "Leave the tray on the table. I'll take care of him." She gave the woman a dismissive glare.

To her credit, the woman didn't argue. She turned for the door, then hesitated. "I'll be back to see that he's eaten something."

"I'm sure you will," Mery said, already busying herself with fixing a pillow behind Kelly's head. "Twit," she muttered under her breath as the door closed.

A soft laugh made her look down. A sleepy grin lifted the corners of his mouth. "You're meaner than a skillet full of rattlesnakes."

She huffed out a breath. "She should have let you sleep."

"Been sleepin' all day." He inhaled and let it out slowly. "Thanks for coming."

Shrugging off his words, she crossed her arms. "This doesn't forgive anything. I'm still mad as hell at you."

"Then why'd you come?"

"I can't yell at you until you're better. I figured I'd come and help that along."

He smirked like he didn't believe a word she said. "What's for lunch?"

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

"Not really. But I should eat, huh?"

"At least a little something." She lifted the cover off the tray. "Or not."

He lifted his head to see better. "What is that?"

"Mashed potatoes, a plain chicken breast—I'm guessing that's what part it is, olive drab green beans and applesauce."

His upper lip curled as he inspected the plate. "Any chance it tastes better than it looks?"

"I doubt it."

He leaned back on the pillow. "I'll pass."

Scooping up a spoonful of runny mashed potatoes, she shook her head. "Eat this and I'll sneak you in something better tomorrow."

"Like wha—"

She stuck the spoon in his mouth. "Now swallow."

He choked down the mouthful and glared at her. "I don't like you."

That's not what he'd said earlier. She gave him a sip of water. "Sorry. I won't do that again. But you have to eat. Your body needs the energy."

The hard line of his mouth softened. "I'll eat on one condition."

"What?"

"Kiss me."

She put the spoon down. "I don't think you're in any condition for that."

"Just a peck."

Rolling her eyes, she bent to kiss his cheek. He turned and caught her mouth. The spark was instant and electric. Heat flashed to every nerve ending in her body. She inhaled at the rush of pleasure and pulled away.

He shook his head slowly. "I guess you didn't enjoy that since you're still mad at me." He met her gaze with clearer eyes than she'd seen all day. "Too bad. I sure did."

"You're right. I didn't." *Liar.* She grabbed the spoon and stuck it in his hand, hoping he wouldn't notice she was trembling. "Eat."

Stepping aside, she pushed the rolling table so the tray was in front of him then went back to her chair.

"I can explain about the book."

"I don't want to hear it. Not now." She crossed her legs and pointed to the tray. "Eat."

He didn't move. "It's not as bad as you think."

She pulled her purse strap over her shoulder and stood. "I think it's time for me to go."

“No, don’t. I like having you here.” He lifted his hand, still holding the spoon. “I won’t talk about it.”

She sat back down.

“Tell me about your husbands.” He took a spoonful of something, grimacing as soon as he tasted it.

“Why?”

“Take my mind off the food.”

What could it hurt? “As long as you keep eating.”

He nodded.

“My first husband and the father of my son was Garrett Black. He was an investment banker. Worked for Celia’s dad actually, which is how I met her. Of course, she was only twelve then.” She exhaled, lost in happy memories. “Garrett and I married young but he knew school was important to me. Wanted me to finish.” She smiled. It was hard not to when she remembered Garrett. “He was the love of my life.”

Something dark glinted in Kelly’s eyes at those words but it came and went so quickly she couldn’t read it.

“How did he...”

“Lymphoma.” She fiddled with her ring, staring at a seam in the flooring. “He fought long and hard but it was too far advanced.” The lump in her throat kept her from saying more.

“I bet you’re not keen on hospitals.”

She swallowed and found her voice. “I hate them. This one especially.”

He raised a brow.

Wrapping her arms around herself, she leaned back in the chair. “Both Garrett and Michael died here.” She glanced at him. His spoon hung in mid-air. She could tell by the look in his eyes he was searching for something to say. Something that would make it better, but there weren’t any words that could do that.

She nodded at his plate. “Your food’s going to get cold.”

The clatter of metal on melamine rang through the room when he dropped his spoon. “Both of them?”

“Technically. I think Michael was gone before the ambulance got him here.”

“But Garrett...”

“Yes. I sat with him right up until the last moment.” She’d held his hand, trying to remember the vibrant man he’d been instead of the one whose veins showed through his tissue-paper skin like blue scars. She closed her eyes too late. A single tear burned a trail down her cheek. She rubbed it away with her palm.

“You know what his last words to me were?”

“I don’t think—”

“He said ‘if love were enough, I’d be with you forever’.” She pursed her lips and blew out a hard breath.

Kelly stared at his plate. “I don’t know what to say.”

She cleared her throat. “I know. You don’t have to say anything. But if you don’t eat, that nurse is going to read me the riot act when she gets back.”

While he ate a few more bites of potato, she stared at the floor, lost in thought until an odd scraping raised her head. He growled in disgust.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Trying to cut this rubber chicken.”

She walked over, picked up his fork and knife and did the job for him. “You could ask, you know.”

“I’m a grown man. I can cut my own food.”

“With one hand and a spoon?” She laughed in hopes of lightening the mood. “You’re good but you’re not that good.”

He took the fork from her when she offered it but made no move to eat anything else. He stared at the wall ahead of him, his jaw tight. “I screwed up. Big time. I’m more sorry than I can say.”

“I told you I don’t want to talk about—”

“I’m sorry. That’s all I wanted to say.”

She nodded then stopped in case he thought she’d accepted his apology. “I think I’ll go down to the cafeteria and get something to eat myself. I’ll be back in a bit.”

He didn’t respond as she grabbed her purse and headed for the door. She opened it and looked back. “You want a milkshake or something?”

He shook his head without looking at her.

Fine. Let him sulk. She wasn't the bad guy here. So why did she feel like she ought to be apologizing too?

Before her heart took command of her tongue, she slipped out the door.

When she returned, the lights were off and he was dozing again. The food tray was gone. The nurse must have come back with more meds. Maybe it was just as well. She tiptoed to his bedside and was halfway to kissing his forehead when she realized what she was doing.

Stop that. You're mad at him. She brushed her fingers through the curls around his face and whispered, "I'll be back tomorrow."

* * *

Kelly smiled when Mery walked into his room the next morning. The gesture made his aching jaw throb but seeing her was worth it. After what she'd told him yesterday, he couldn't believe she'd willingly step foot in a hospital ever again. "Hi, gorgeous."

"Hi. How are you feeling this morning?" She set a plastic bag down on his bedside table. Something smelled great.

"Like ten miles of bad road. Which is how I look." She shook her head and he held up his hand. "I've seen a mirror, don't try to tell me otherwise. What's in the bag?"

"Lobster bisque and beef barley. I wasn't sure what you'd like so I got a pint of each."

His mouth watered. "They both sound good. Even mixed together. I'm starving."

"You seem a lot better today." She pulled the containers out, opened them up and put a spoon in each one.

"After my MRI this morning, I told them to cut the painkillers back. I'd rather hurt than be a zombie." He wondered if asking for a kiss would do any good. She looked like a million bucks. For the hundredth time, he cursed himself for screwing things up. "You look great. Thanks for coming and for the soup. I don't deserve it."

She sighed. "Remember what I said yesterday about not wanting to talk about that?"

"Yeah, I know." He shrugged and immediately winced as fresh pain shot down his side.

"Maybe ditching your meds wasn't such a hot idea." She sat back in the chair, her gaze drifting over him.

"I'm fine." He ate some of the beef barley. "This is the best soup I've ever had."

"I'm glad you like it," she said.

He spooned up some of the lobster bisque. “I changed my mind. *This* is the best soup I’ve ever had.” If he thought he could have managed it, he would have picked up the container and drank out of it.

While he ate, she added water to the vase of flowers by the window. Blue bonnets and yellow roses. Reminded him of Texas. He smiled. “Those are from Viv and Celia, right? I was pretty out of it when they were here yesterday.”

“Yep. Mick was here too.”

“I remember.”

She fussed with the flowers. “What kind of guy is Mick? I know he’s your friend but be honest.”

Her words grated. He almost said “have I ever not been?” but thought better of it. Using the cookbook wasn’t exactly dishonest but it wasn’t exactly straight shooting, either. “Mick’s all right. Ex-Navy Seal. Self-made man. Real stand up guy.” He finished the lobster bisque. “Why?”

She took the empty soup container, threw it in the bathroom trash then sat back down. “He and Celia went out to lunch yesterday.”

“Good for Mick.” Kelly started back on the beef barley.

Her mouth opened, snapped shut, then opened again. “Good for Mick? What about Celia? She’s lived a fairly sheltered life. Mick better not hurt her.”

The idea of Mick hurting a woman was so laughable, Kelly’s ribs ached. “Mick would never hurt her. He needs a good woman in his life. Somebody to share his success with. Someone who will love him, flaws and all.”

Mery frowned and looked away. He knew she understood he wasn’t just talking about Mick. Kelly wanted to talk about what had happened, to explain, but he didn’t want to push her. If she couldn’t love him for who he was, all the talking in the world wouldn’t change that. “Promise when I get out of here, we’ll talk?”

“That’s all I can promise.” She sighed. “I’m not big on second chances, Kelly. You need to know that.”

He nodded. “So noted.”

A moment of uncomfortable silence passed until she spoke again. “Celia said there were more pictures in the paper. I haven’t seen them but apparently they’ve taken to calling me ‘The Black Widow.’ Nice, huh?”

This time his grimace was out of disgust, not pain. “Bunch of lowlives.” He thought about it some more. “They blaming you for this?”

He caught the glimmer of unshed tears in her eyes before she dipped her head. “That’s ridiculous!” He slammed his fist on the bedside table. Pain radiated up his arm and he clenched his jaw.

She jumped up. “Don’t do that, you’re going to hurt yourself worse than you already are.” She came to his side and applied gentle pressure to his good shoulder until he lay back down.

“I can handle it.” A weak smile curved her lush mouth. “Besides, my agent says sales on my backlist have skyrocketed.” She sighed, staring at the blanket. “My editor’s talking to me again, too.”

He wasn’t aware her editor had stopped talking to her. “I still don’t like it.”

Soft fingers smoothed his brow. “Relax, okay? Stress won’t help you heal. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Huffing out a breath, he forced himself to calm down. “I just hate when people take advantage of a situation for their own gain, regardless of who gets hurt.”

She raised her brows and opened her mouth to respond when Shelby burst into the room.

“Kelly, oh Kel...are you all right?” She scrubbed tears off her cheeks. “I got the first flight back I could. What happened? You look awful.”

“Thanks,” he smirked. “You sure know how to make a guy feel good.”

Someone else followed behind Shelby. The nurse, he thought at first but then got a better look. The muscle along his jaw twitched. He could barely unclench his teeth. “What’s she doing here?”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The woman walked to his bedside. Her platinum blonde ponytail hung limp over the shoulder of her faded jean jacket. Lines scoured the corners of her mouth and eyes, a roadmap of all the bad places her life had gone. “That’s a nice way to greet your mother.”

He scowled. “You haven’t been a mother to me in years.” At the edge of his vision, Mery tensed. This was not a meeting that should have ever taken place.

Shelby offered a half-smile as though that would smooth things over. “She was at Gram’s. She wanted to come see you when she heard what happened.”

“Why? What’s she want?” The only times he’d seen her, she’d been looking for something. A something that had never been him.

Dee pushed a limp strand of loose hair behind one multi-studded ear. The inside of her wrist bore a small tattoo of a four-leaf clover. “Why you always assume I want something? Can’t I just come see you? That ain’t a crime.”

Kelly turned away before he commented on that. He looked at Mery. Her eyes glittered with a coldness he’d never seen before. “Mery, this is Dee.”

“Hello.” Her voice held an icy protectiveness that shot through him. Damn, he loved this woman. He glanced at Dee to see her reaction.

She stared blankly but he knew she had probably done a quick assessment of Mery’s expensive jewelry and well-cut clothes and was now wondering how this new person could benefit her. “Nice to meet you. You a friend of my son’s?”

“You could say that.” Mery twisted the diamond ring on her finger absentmindedly, a gesture that drew Dee’s gaze like flies to garbage.

Dee lifted her eyes from Mery’s hardware to her face. “So are you or not?”

Shelby answered before Mery could. “Mery is Dr. Black. The doctor I’ve been telling you about.” She rested her hand on Dee’s arm, as if to reassure her Mery was good people.

Kelly held his tongue. Shelby had always been afraid of upsetting Dee. Always too willing to want to please her. He’d never felt that way.

“I see,” Dee said and in those two words, Kelly heard the mocking tone that had been directed at him more times in his life than he cared to count. “So you’re the headshrinker that’s gonna help my kids get over what a bad mother I was?”

Mery rose from the chair, buttoned the single button on her suit jacket and walked to the side of Kelly’s bed so she stood eye to eye with Dee. She looked like a warrior about to do battle.

“I’m the doctor of psychology who is assisting Shelby in working through her grief over her husband’s death,” Mery smiled like she was full of sugar and spice, “but I’m seeing Kelly in an entirely different capacity.”

Dee’s eyes narrowed. “What does that mean, ‘an entirely different capacity’?”

Sly as a fox, Mery grinned at him and winked. His blood pressure shot up. “I think you can safely assume it’s not a professional relationship.”

Kelly laughed. His whole body hurt but he didn’t care. Regardless of what had happened, Mery was still on his side. She had to love him just a little, didn’t she? He looked over at Dee.

Her face broiled red as soon as she made sense of Mery’s words. “You two...you and him...” she sputtered and pointed back and forth between them. “Are you...”

“Are we what?” Kelly asked. “Are we sleeping together?” He returned Mery’s smile. “I don’t think we do enough sleeping to call it that right and proper.”

Shelby blushed a rosy hue. “Kel,” she hissed. “Stop that.”

Dee’s eyes bugged out. She thrust her finger in Mery’s face. “You have no right sleeping with my boy, you cradle-robbin’ hussy. I don’t care what kind of fancy degree you have.”

Unphased by the accusation, Mery laughed softly. “He is so not a boy.”

“And certainly not your boy,” Kelly snapped. “I am a grown man and I’ll do what I want, with whoever I want and you can’t say a damn thing about it.” He took a breath. “Don’t ever speak to Mery like that again.”

Mery’s hand curved gently over his.

“So that’s what you’ve come to,” Dee said, her chest still heaving. “I heard you were some big famous chef and come to find out you’re just some rich woman’s play thing.” She shook her head. “Makes me glad I didn’t raise you.”

Kelly’s jaw tightened. He struggled to remain calm. “Makes two of us.” His head throbbed. His bones ached. “Go away, Dee. I don’t want to fight with you. I don’t want to see you. I like my life the way it is, without you in it.”

“I got to talk to you first. Alone.” She gave Mery the evil eye.

“No. Anything you have to say to me, you can say in front of her.” Enough games. He was sick and tired of all his mother’s foolishness.

“It’s family business,” she said. “Your *girlfriend* don’t need to hear it.”

A look of understanding crossed Shelby’s face. “Maybe Mery and I could go for a walk.”

“No.” Kelly refused to back down. Whatever Dee wanted—and he had a pretty good idea what that was—she could just spit it out.

“*Family* business, Kel,” Shelby said.

Kelly caught his sister’s gaze. “Mery knows about the book.”

“Oh.” Her eyes widened. She glanced at Mery then released a long slow breath.

Dee’s mouth screwed up in scowl. “Can’t keep your blame mouth shut, can you, boy?”

He ignored her comment. “What do you want?”

She scowled at Mery then looked at him. “I want the book back.”

“Your claim to it has been gone since I was eighteen.”

“If I could just have it for a little while, I could make things right, I know I could.” She was pleading now, her voice soft and cajoling.

“You mean you’d find a way to make our childhoods *Leave It To Beaver* perfect?” He knew better. She was so stinking full of it.

Chewing her bottom lip, she stared silently at the rails on his bed.

He answered for her. “That’s not what you meant, is it? The only life you want to fix is your own. You’ve tried that. Only got yourself in deeper.”

“It would work this time.”

“No, it wouldn’t.”

“I’m not using anymore. I’m clean and straight, and I deserve another chance.”

Sadness welled up in him. He’d heard this all before. He lowered his voice to keep it from catching on the lump in his throat. “You’ve had lots of chances. This time, there aren’t any more.”

Dee backed away from the bed. “Tell him, Shelby. Tell him I’m different this time. Tell him I’ve changed.”

“You are trying,” Shelby said without conviction.

Poor Shelby. Always stuck in the middle. “Shel, you know what she’s like. Her changes never last more than a month, tops.”

“But I think she really is trying this time,” his sister’s voice wavered. “She seems different.”

He sighed. “Has she asked you for money?”

Shelby swallowed and looked at Dee.

“Who paid for her ticket up here?” he asked.

“I did,” Shelby whispered.

Kelly shook his head. “I hope it was round trip.”

Dee stormed out of the room. Shelby went after her.

Mery took a step toward the door. "Maybe I should go talk to Shelby."

"As long as Dee is here, nothing you say will make much difference."

"I shouldn't have said anything to her about us. That wasn't very adult of me."

"Screw adult. I'm glad you did."

She shook her head and came back to his side. "Are you okay?"

Closing his eyes, he dropped his head back on his pillow with a heavy sigh. "As long as you're here, I am."

* * *

Kelly hobbled into Mery's building, a bouquet of yellow roses tucked under one arm. He nodded at the doorman as he passed. "I'm here to see Mery Black."

The doorman nodded back and went ahead of him. "She's in, Chef Spicer. Heard about your accident. Glad to see you up and around. My wife and I had our anniversary dinner at Sedona last month. Great meal."

"Always happy to hear that." He leaned on his crutches as the doorman hit the button for her floor. The man slipped away as Kelly slipped into thought. He couldn't believe how much had happened since he'd been here a week and a half ago.

She'd found out about the book, he'd totaled his bike, nearly killing himself in the process, and his mother had shown up. At least his agent hadn't given him any bad news. That was one thing that seemed to be going all right.

Today he was going to get the chance to explain. His only chance. Do or die. He'd never been so wired in all his life. He hadn't seen her in a week and he missed her something awful. She'd wanted the time to herself, she'd said, to think and work and get her life back on track.

Maybe he should apologize for derailing her life, too. Hell, he'd apologize for World War II if it got her back.

She opened the door on the second knock, which made him smile. Must have been waiting on him. "These are for you." He nodded toward the flowers. His heart raced like a jackrabbit. Damn, she looked good.

"Thank you, they're lovely," she said as she slipped them from between his side and his crutch then stepped out of the way to let him in. "How are you doing?"

"Getting around okay. Still bruised up like a one-legged bull rider, though." He stayed on the landing and waited for her to close the door.

She gave him a funny look. "Don't you want to sit?"

"In a minute. C'mere, will you?" The need to touch her overwhelmed him. He hooked his thumbs on his crutches and wiggled his fingers. "You're too far away."

She smirked and stepped close enough for his fingertips to graze her hips.

"Closer," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

One more step but she kept the bouquet between them. He bent his head and inhaled her perfume. "I've missed you."

"I haven't forgiven you." She tipped her chin up. Their lips were dangerously close. "But I've missed you, too."

That was a good sign. "Kiss me."

She shook her head. "I don't think that's a good idea."

It was a fantastic idea. "Indulge an injured man." He tried to look as wounded as possible. "Just a little one?"

She didn't move away. He took that for a yes. The kiss was gentle and sweet. The soft warmth of her mouth against his was better than he remembered. He didn't want to be without her again. Hopefully, after he explained everything, she'd feel that way, too.

Stepping back, she broke the kiss. "Consider yourself indulged." Her cheeks flushed and she motioned toward the couch. "Go sit."

He ambled to the couch, eased himself onto the cushions then laid the crutches on the floor. "Feels good to get off those things." Felt even better to kiss her again.

"I bet." She took the roses into the kitchen. A scraping sound broke the silence. He twisted to look over his shoulder. With a vase in one hand, she shut the cabinet then moved to the sink and turned on the tap. She arranged the flowers while the container filled. "I met with Shelby yesterday."

"I know." He'd grilled Shelby afterwards to see if Mery had asked about him. She had, but only to see how he was recovering. He'd hoped for some sort of broken-hearted out-pouring.

"She said you talked to Dee before she went back." She carried the vase over, set it down on the coffee table then sat at the far end of the couch.

He shrugged and made a mental note to tell Shelby to keep her yap shut.

"She also implied that you paid Dee off to keep her away." She watched him intently. "It's not really any of my business but if you want the woman out of your life, giving her money

sends a pretty mixed message.” She paused for half a second. “Of course, it’s still a better way to spend your insurance check than buying another motorcycle.”

Here we go. He shook his head. “I didn’t give her money.”

“Shelby said—”

“That’s part of what I came to tell you.” He swallowed, thinking about what he’d done. “I gave her the cookbook.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“You gave her the cookbook?” Mery’s brows arched up sharply. Maybe he’d gotten knocked on the head harder than she’d realized in that accident “Why did you do that? That’s what she wanted in the hospital and you told her no.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “I should explain this from the beginning.”

She folded her arms across her chest and leaned back. “That’s what you’re here for.”

Make it good so I can take you back with dignity.

He settled against the couch, turning to face her better. “That cookbook has been passed down through my family for more generations that I can number. It *is* magic but no one seems to remember exactly how our family came to have the book anymore.”

“And the purpose of the book?”

“It creates recipes that will accomplish certain goals.”

“Like persuading me to sleep with you.” A tendril of anger sprouted in her belly. She hated being taken advantage of.

“No.” He caught her gaze. “That was *not* the purpose of that recipe.”

She glared at him. Did he think she was stupid? “I saw the word persuasion.”

“That was to get you to help Shelby, not me. Using the book for personal gain can destroy your life.” His voice held a reverent tone. “I wouldn’t do that. Not that I haven’t thought about it, but I’ve seen what it did to Dee.”

That was interesting. “Explain.”

He propped his arm across the back of the cushions. “Once created, a recipe only stays in the book for seven days unless you bind it. Without the binding ritual, the page goes blank and the recipe can’t be created again.”

“So copy it down on another sheet of paper.” Didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure that one out, just a PhD.

“Doesn’t work.” He shook his head. “I’ve tried it. It never tastes the same, still good, but always a little off. And not a lick of power.”

“What’s that have to do with your mother?”

“I’m getting there.”

“Sorry. Go on.”

“Once the recipe is bound, it will continue working for the creator unless they eat what was made from the recipe.”

“I never did see you eat one of those chocolate fireballs.” She thought back. “Or anything that night at the gallery.”

“Right. The power of the recipes would have been useless for my purposes. Someone else could have used them but not me.” He paused. “So far so good?”

She nodded. “I’m keeping up.”

“Okay.” He exhaled hard. “I’ve never told this to anyone.”

“I appreciate that.” Like anyone would believe this anyway. She rolled her hand forward in a circle. “Explain all ready about how you didn’t use the chocolates to get me into bed and about Dee.”

“Almost there. The recipes *can* be used for personal gain but the risk of failure carries a heavy price.”

“That implies the spell created isn’t all powerful.”

A half-smile creased his mouth. “You got it. The book is white magic. The spells are suggestive in nature only. They take what’s in your subconscious and make it more desirable. If you truly didn’t want to follow the spell’s leading, you wouldn’t.”

She rolled her eyes. “So you’re telling me deep down inside, I really wanted to sleep with you.”

“No. Or yes. Maybe. Well, you didn’t complain.” He grinned but it disappeared quickly. He cleared his throat. “What I’m saying is that you really wanted to help Shelby.”

“I’ll go along with that. But at the gallery, I was thinking about buying one of those photographs. I can’t believe obscene pictures of wheat products is something I’ve always secretly longed for.”

He shrugged. "I'm not a mind reader, I only know how the spells work."

"Get back to your mother."

"Yes, ma'am." His shoulders relaxed and he rolled his head from side to side before continuing. "The problem with using the spells for personal gain lays in the very fact I just explained. They don't always work the way you want. When used for someone else's benefit that's no big deal. But when a spell used for your own fails, the spell's suggestion turns back on its creator."

"You become susceptible to the spell?"

"Yes." A soft sigh escaped his lips. "Dee's first spell was one of loyalty. She used it on my father but all he wanted was an uncommitted good time."

"Ouch," she said. The implications of such having such a spell reversed..."What happened?"

"After he left her, pregnant with me, every one she met became her best friend. She was an easy target. Within a few months, she'd given away most of her earthly possessions. Out of loyalty to her *friends*."

"She understood the consequences of the book to begin with?"

He nodded. "Perfectly."

"And yet she did it again?"

"Numerous times. Spells of irresistibility, wealth..." He ticked them off on his fingers. "And love." He fisted his hand and bounced it on the back on the couch. "Probably more I don't know about."

"If she knew all these, why did she bind the spells to the book? Why not try them for a week and see what happened?" she asked with a slight shrug. Seemed logical to her.

"Most were already bound."

She nodded. "I saw the love spell."

"One of the oldest. And most powerful." He hesitated. "Dee has always had a bit of a chip on her shoulder. Can't tell her anything. She does what she wants."

Mery snorted out a quick breath. "I guess that proves she's definitely your mother."

"What's that supposed to mean?" He narrowed his eyes but the curve of his mouth softened the look.

“I believe I warned you about the dangers of motorcycles.” She tucked one errant rose down a little further into the bunch.

“And that makes me stubborn?”

Glancing over at him with a coy smile, she nodded. “That and a few other things. You pursued me when I told you not to. You kissed me when I said it was a bad idea. You repeatedly tried to explain all this to me at the hospital when you knew I didn’t want to listen.”

“All of which turned out for the better.” He splayed his hands over his thighs. “You fail to mention the times I did exactly as you asked.”

She screwed up her mouth as her brows furrowed. How hard had he hit his head? “Like what? Name one time that happened.”

Rising up off the couch slightly, he adjusted his jeans. “Like the time you ripped my shirt off in the cab, forced me to come upstairs with you then proceeded to have your way with me. I never complained once.”

“What?” Hoping to distract him from the heat radiating off her face, she threw a pillow at him. “Forced you?”

He caught the pillow and laughed. “With your mature feminine wiles.”

“*Mature* feminine wiles?” She stared at him. Had he forgotten this was supposed to be his chance to get back in her good graces? “And this makes me want to date you again how?”

Sticking the pillow behind him, he slid toward her. “Because I adore those mature feminine wiles.” He lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed her fingertips. “Forgive me.”

She pulled her hand back despite the delicious tingles prancing across her skin. “I still don’t understand why you gave the book to her.”

“I didn’t want it to come between us.”

“You should have given away the motorcycle instead. Don’t you worry she’ll get herself in deeper?”

“There’s nothing left of the bike to give away.” He shrugged. “Shelby begged me to give Dee another chance. I was tired of arguing and well...” He sighed. “I thought getting rid of the book would make you happy.”

“Hmm.” She liked that the book was no longer in the picture. “I don’t like that you did it to make me happy. This is supposed to be a fling, remember? Flings don’t require sacrifice.”

He laced his fingers with hers and gave her hand a little squeeze. "We both know this isn't just a fling."

"Whoa." She jerked back and stood up. "It is a fling. That's it. Strictly casual."

Shaking his head, he ran his thumb down the seam of his jeans. "Whatever you say." But the look in his blue eyes didn't mesh with his words. They said he wanted her and not just for another long, hot night.

She walked to the kitchen, poured herself a glass of ice water and gulped it down. That was a little better. Her internal temperature dropped a notch. "I'm serious. You know how I feel about getting involved in anything heavy. This isn't that kind of relationship. I made that clear up front."

"Fine. Just a fling." He grabbed his crutches, pulled himself up and limped over. "Does that mean we're back on?"

She swallowed another icy mouthful. "I guess so."

He threw his head back and whooped.

She nearly dropped the glass. "Stop that." She smacked his chest. "You scared the daylights out of me."

"Well, then." He wagged his brows and moved closer. "Maybe you should give me a lesson in how to behave properly indoors."

She fought the urge to smile. "I don't take on impossible clients."

Balancing on his good leg, he leaned his crutches against the counter and pulled her into his arms. "I missed that wicked tongue."

"It's only been a week." A long week. She'd missed him, too. Every single part of him.

"Seems like a coon's age." He kissed her forehead. "I'll try really hard not to screw up again, okay?"

"Okay." She inhaled his wonderful clean male scent, loving the warmth of his body against hers. She rested her hands on his hard chest. Had it only been a week? It seemed so much longer. Her blood thrummed with anticipation. She wanted to tear his clothes off and remind herself what she'd been missing.

"So I'm forgiven then? Completely?"

"Hmm...yes, you're forgiven but you're on probation." She nipped at his stubble-shadowed jaw.

His grin went lazy at her touch, his lids lowering even as his eyes darkened with need. “Is that like house arrest?”

“Uh-uh.” She kissed his neck. The heat of his skin flushed through her. She wanted him now.

“Bed arrest? ‘Cause I could probably earn my freedom through good behavior.”

She laughed. “Somehow I doubt that.”

His smile disappeared.

“Don’t look so pitiful.” She traced a finger over his lush lower lip. Heaven help her but he was a succulent piece of man candy. “I’m willing to let you try.”

Chapter Thirty

“It’s a pleasure to have you with us tonight, Chef.” The manager presented a bottle of wine. “Compliments of the house.”

“That’s mighty nice of you,” Kelly said, giving the manager a grin while he squeezed Mery’s thigh under the table. Warmth curled in her belly at his touch, a touch she’d become even more intimately acquainted with in the last two months of hanging out, staying in, and getting to know what made this wonderful man tick.

She slid her hand around his back and dipped her fingertips below his waistband until they connected with his skin. His grin got a little bigger.

As the manager walked away, Mick leaned forward from his side of the booth. “What am I, chopped liver?”

Celia giggled. “You’re at least ground round, honey.”

He leaned back, put his arm around her and whispered something in her ear that made her blush from the roots of her hair to the neckline of the black tank top beneath her cranberry leather jacket.

Mery cleared her throat. “Perhaps you two should get a room,” she teased. Granted, Mick and Celia were about as odd a pairing as peanut butter and anchovies, but Celia was happy. Even though she hadn’t told her parents about him yet.

“Yeah,” Kelly said, his hand coasting a little further up her thigh.

Mick raised a brow. “Big talk from a couple whose hands haven’t been above the table since we sat down.”

Celia shot Mery a “so there” smile and helped herself to a piece of focaccia bread laden with olives and rosemary.

Kelly laughed and held both his hands up. “Truce. Let’s order.”

“I know what I want.” Celia winked at Mick.

Mery rolled her eyes even though she was thrilled with her friend’s new found love interest. “That isn’t on the menu.”

“Celia gets whatever Celia wants.” Mick grinned at the petite blonde, clearly a man swept away.

Slipping his hand back onto her thigh and under the edge of her little black dress, Kelly tipped his head to whisper in her ear. “I’d be more than happy to give you whatever you want, too. Anytime, any place.”

“You always do,” she whispered back. His fingers tickled her inner thigh sending hot bolts of need through her lower half. “Behave yourself, we just got here.” She nipped his earlobe a little harder than normal.

He pulled back, delighted shock in his eyes. “Okay, we need food and fast. I’m getting devoured over here.” He laughed. “Not that I’m complaining.”

Feeling deliciously naughty, Mery winked. “That’s what you get for dating a man-eater.”

After dinner, they walked down to the theater where one of Viv’s friend’s husbands was producing a show and picked up their tickets at the Will Call window.

“A freakin’ musical.” Shaking his head slowly, Mick stared at his ticket then glanced at Celia. “You realize this is good for like two week’s worth of ball games with beer and extra innings.”

“I promised you a fair trade.” She nodded. “Are you sure that’s what you really want?”

“Don’t try to talk me out of it.” He crossed his arms. “Two week’s worth and that’s final.”

“Okay, but—”

“No buts. If I gotta sit through singing and dancing, that’s the least you can do for me.”

Mery suppressed a grin. Men really didn’t know what was best for them sometimes.

Celia pursed her lips in a sexy pout. “Fine.” Her eyes took on a seductive glint. “Of course, I had a totally different type of trade in mind but whatever.” She shrugged, turned on the heels of her slingbacks and headed into the theater.

Mick’s jaw hung open for a second before he started after her. “Wait, honey, we should talk about this—”

“Too late,” Celia called over her shoulder.

Under his breath, Mick muttered something about high maintenance woman and Kelly chuckled.

“What’s so funny?” Mery asked.

“Mick. Celia’s got him totally whipped.”

Mery planted her hands on her hips and gave him the sweetest smile she could manage. “And by whipped, I assume you mean she’s got him wrapped around her little finger?”

“Yeah, something like that.” He shifted from one foot to the other. “We should go in.”

“I guess you’re not whipped at all then, are you?”

“Hush up, woman. You’re going to ruin my bad boy image.”

She laughed. “I think your image is just fine. Don’t you read the papers? You’re dating the Black Widow.”

A buzzing interrupted their laughter. He grabbed his phone off his hip and checked the screen. He looked at her then back at the phone.

“Answer it.” She gave him a wink and slipped his ticket in his shirt pocket. “I’ll see you inside. Miss you already.”

Kelly slid his finger across the screen as Mery walked away. His heart thudded in his chest. “Hi, Marty.” He checked his watch. “It’s twenty to eight on a Friday night. This had better be good news.”

On the other end, Marty laughed. “How soon can you be in California?”

* * *

Kelly slipped into the seat beside Mery minutes before the curtain went up. He kissed her cheek firmly as he sat and gave her hand a squeeze. Even in the dimming theater lights, his face seemed to glow.

She leaned over, careful to keep her voice low. “What’s up? You look like you won the lottery.”

One side of his mouth quirked up in a joyful grin. He looked like he was fighting laughter. “Not the lottery, but close.”

“Shush!”

Mery glanced over her shoulder at the woman behind them. “Sorry.” She turned back to Kelly hoping he’d spill it but his eyes were already trained on the stage. Sighing, she focused hers the same way.

His hot breath tickled her ear. “Tomorrow night. You. Me. Dinner. Big news.” He kissed her neck. “*Big.*”

Mery gasped at sensation of the unexpected kiss. Next to her, Celia giggled. The woman behind them grumbled something. Mick gave the woman a look that shut her up completely. Mery scooted down in her seat as the curtain went up and the score began. Whatever the news, it must be something wonderful.

The following day went by so slowly, she could hardly stand it. She’d already spoken to her father, her mother and her son. She’d called Jason first thing in the morning to see how his summer internship was going. A firm in Florida had offered him the opportunity and since her mother lived so close to the company, he was staying there. Mery grimaced. She couldn’t imagine what was worse, the summer heat in Florida or spending three months with her mother.

She made a note on her calendar about dinner with her Dad and his new girlfriend the next weekend. She couldn’t believe he was actually dating someone. This was a woman she had to meet. Maybe she’d take Kelly. She sighed. Maybe she wouldn’t. How did you explain to your father that you were involved a strictly physical relationship with a younger man who turned you inside out and made you forget your own name?

Laughing, she shook her head. Okay, so that was more information than he needed. Still, she couldn’t imagine the meeting going well. Oh sure, her Dad would like Kelly. How could he not? Everybody liked Kelly. But then they’d talk and sooner or later, her Dad would ask what Kelly’s intentions were—she had no reason to think otherwise since he’d done the same thing upon meeting Garrett and Michael—and that would put Kelly in the awkward position of being the one to tell her father the wicked truth.

Except Kelly’s truth would probably scare the living daylights out of her. Ever since his whispered, “I love you” in the hospital, things had changed. She struggled to keep the

relationship light and carefree and centered on the physical, especially when Kelly would say something that led her to believe his feelings for her were becoming serious.

Although the last couple of months had gone by without those three little whispered words being repeated, she worried that Kelly was just waiting for her to say them.

She'd thought those words. Imagined saying them to him a million times. But that would never happen. Couldn't happen. There was no point to it happening. He needed someone his own age, someone whose future shone as brightly and offered as much promise.

Steepling her fingers, she tapped them against her chin. Maybe at the end of the summer, she'd break it off. Set him free to find the woman he really needed. Her heart ached at the thought of being without him but it would have to be done. She closed her eyes, knowing the papers would document whatever new woman he took up with after her and worse, when he did marry, they'd celebrate whichever young nubile thing he proposed to.

She chewed her lower lip. Getting involved with him in the first place had been a foolish idea. She was the marrying kind, not the passionate affair kind. She wasn't cut out for love 'em and leave 'em.

Jillian had been right about the relationship's potential, too. *The Merry Widow's* pre-sales had surpassed her previous books with wide margins. Her agent was in the process of vetting the renewed contract for her children's book. She'd even made an appearance on the morning show. Kelly had done wonders for her career.

More than that, Kelly made her happy. Made her laugh. Made her enjoy life again. The man was almost perfect. Why couldn't he be a little older? Maybe divorced or widowed, with a couple of grown kids. If only he were at a different point in his life, she might not hesitate to say those three little words she kept biting back.

She checked the clock. Four more hours before she met Kelly at Sedona. She was dying to know what his news was. Regardless of their lack of a future, she would always want the best for him. Maybe he'd gotten another book deal. She knew his cookbook was doing well because she checked his rank on Amazon every time she checked her own.

She called his cell to see if she could wrangle the news out of him a little sooner. It rang four times then switched to voicemail. He probably wasn't answering on purpose. Anticipation would just make the night that much sweeter.

* * *

Kelly glanced at his cell phone and smiled when he saw Mery's number displayed on the caller ID. Much as he wanted to talk to her, he was afraid he'd let something slip if he did. Tonight would be as perfect as he could manage. She deserved it after everything life had put her through.

Mick nudged his arm. "You gonna do this or what?"

"Yeah." He nodded, his gaze darting over the three choices laid out on black velvet. He looked up at the man behind the counter. "They're all in my price range?"

The man bobbed his head. The long curls tucked behind his ears bounced like springs. "For a friend of Mick's, we will make the price right."

"And they'll all fit in the setting I picked out?"

Again the man nodded. "We will have it done in an hour. Maybe two."

"In that case, I want the biggest one." He gently tapped a spot on the velvet board beneath his selection.

The merchant smiled. "Excellent choice. I'll be right back with some paperwork." He lifted the board carefully and backed through a door into a workshop fronted by a large glass window.

Kelly's stomach knotted as the realization of what he was about to do set in.

Mick whistled. "That's gonna be hard to miss." His eyes narrowed. "You all right, Tex? You don't look so hot."

"Just nerves." His gut might be rolling but his heart was just fine.

"You?" Mick snorted and clapped Kelly on the back. "If anybody should be getting sick, it's the single women of this city." He shook his head. "I hope this doesn't give Celia any ideas."

Kelly grinned and punched his friend in the arm. "Something wrong, Mick? 'Cause suddenly you don't look so good."

Chapter Thirty-One

Mery walked into Sedona knowing she should expect the unexpected because that's all Kelly would say the fourth time she'd called and finally gotten him to answer. She hated surprises. Kelly loved them. She had to admit, he pulled them off in grand fashion. Or maybe she should say Texas-style. Big. Wild. Over the top.

Just like the way he made love.

Swallowing a heated laugh, she approached the hostess stand. Becca, the buxom red-head, gave Mery such a smile, she almost looked over her shoulder to see if a hot, single man had followed her in.

“Hi, Dr. Black. You look very nice this evening.” Becca’s eyes sparkled with unusual happiness. She leaned forward. “He’s waiting for you in the VIP dining room.” She seemed on the verge of a giggle or a good cry.

“Thanks.” With some concern for the girl’s mental well-being, Mery returned her smile with a great deal less wattage and a careful nod. Maybe Becca was stoned, although she didn’t strike Mery as the type. She inhaled. Nothing but Becca’s usual too-sweet perfume.

Becca handed her a small ivory envelope. “He left this for you. He said for you to read it before you go up.”

Mery turned the envelope over. Nothing but a calligraphy M on the front. “Thank you,” she said but the girl was already speaking to a couple that had just come in.

She walked down to the elevator and opened the envelope. Inside was a keycard to access the elevator and a simple fold-over card in ivory stock that matched the envelope. On the front, a single embossed star, about the size of half-dollar. The paper had the luxurious heft and creamy feel only expensive stationery carried.

She opened the card, read the single word written inside and laughed out loud.

Yeehaw!

She shook her head. The man was just plain nuts. And completely adorable. She slid the note into her purse, pulled out the security card and ran it through the reader to call the elevator.

The ride up wasn’t fast enough. She wanted to see Kelly now, to find out what this news was all about. The doors opened and she inhaled, caught off guard by the sight of what waited for her.

Kelly waited on the other side. In a suit. The charcoal wool draped his athletic form in sharp lines, imbuing him with a powerful sexiness. A crisp white shirt and burgundy tie set off his blue eyes beautifully, turning them into brilliant pools so deep she thought she might fall in.

“Wow.” Wow. She was lucky to come up with that much. Her pulse rose as she let her gaze wander over him again. Talk about cleaning up well. Even his boots were shined. The effect was stunning. Amazing. Mouthwatering. But then when wasn’t he?

He held his hands out and glanced down at his outfit, then back at her. "You like it?"

"Oh yes." Still reeling, she nodded. *Expect the unexpected.* Point proved.

He smiled, took her hand and twirled her once before drawing her in for a kiss. "You look beautiful. Love the shoes," he said with a knowing wink.

"Thanks." She glanced down at the strappy bronze sandals she'd worn that fateful first night. They'd seemed a good match to the chocolate silk dress she'd chosen for this evening. Amazing how steady she'd become in heels after a few months of dates. She stepped back to get another good look at him and had her breath taken away a second time. "You look...amazing. I've never seen you in a suit." She raised her brows in appreciation, smoothed her hand down his lapel. "It's a very good look on you."

"I'm glad you approve. I don't wear suits much but tonight seemed like a suit kind of night."

"Really?" She ran her hand down his tie, just to touch him some more. "Why is that?"

Shaking his head slowly, he stepped forward and put a hand possessively on her hip. "Patience."

"Not one of my virtues," she whispered, tilting her face up to meet his.

"I know," he whispered back before he kissed her again. The kiss was a slow, deliberate tease, and said he knew exactly how much she wanted him.

Her knees went liquid but his hand on her waist kept her steady as he broke contact. "So would you say I've improved?"

She nodded, still tasting his desire on her lips. "Most definitely." She slipped a hand behind his neck and pulled him down for another kiss.

This time, the connection burned hot and urgent. How she didn't melt into a puddle on the floor, she had no idea.

He pulled away, his control visibly shaken. "Any more of that and you can forget dinner."

"You say that like it's a bad thing." At the moment, food was not what she hungered for. "We could go to your office—"

"We will." His voice was thick and husky, dripping with the promise of things to come. "But not yet. We have an entire evening ahead of us. No need to rush." He swept his hand out behind him, toward the dining room.

Red rose petals covered the floor in a trail leading to a small table for two. Just like the first dinner he'd prepared for her here, the room was alight with candles, the table impeccably set with fine china and crystal. Except instead of the pristine white she'd seen before everything tonight was dressed in crimson; the tablecloth, the napkins, the chair covers. In the center of the table sat a low bouquet of roses in red, burgundy and a deep pink.

All for her. "Thank you, Kelly. It's so beautiful." She squeezed his hand. He really was the most wonderfully romantic man. A small twinge of sadness nipped at her. Why couldn't he be a little older? At a different place in his life? "I can't believe you went to all this trouble for me."

He smiled and kissed her hand. "Why shouldn't I? You're the most important woman in my life."

Smiling weakly, she didn't know what to say. Words like that made her uneasy. Made her feel like she was teetering on the edge of cliff she'd already fallen over twice.

"Besides," he slipped his arm around her waist, "you're hard to impress. You told me so yourself."

"I did say that, didn't I?" She had only herself to blame. She'd encouraged him without even realizing it.

"Mm-hmm." He escorted her halfway to the table, then stopped, reached into his pocket and pulled out a small black remote. He pushed a button and the soft jazz playing in the background stopped, only to be replaced by the opening strains of "Unforgettable".

"Dance with me?" he asked.

She nodded and he put his other arm around her, resting his hands on the small of her back. Being surrounded by him sent a new wave of warmth over her skin. She clasped her hands behind his neck and smiled coyly. "Are you trying to seduce me?"

"You mean it hasn't worked yet?" He gave her a wink. "I thought it would be nice to dance. We haven't done that yet, you know."

"You're right, we haven't." She rested her head on his shoulder and they swayed together as Nat King Cole serenaded them with the classic love song. It was nice, resting against his strong form, his arms wrapped around her like he'd been holding her this way all his life. How could she give this up? Heat built in her eyes at the thought of life without him. But she'd known from the start that this was just for fun. Nothing serious. *You're not the woman he needs.*

She pushed those thoughts down and let herself sink back into the moment. A deep centering inhale brought his warm male scent. She smiled. She might not be the woman he needed for his future, but she could certainly be the woman he needed right now.

And when the future came, she'd be strong. Stoic. Carefree. He didn't need to know her heart was breaking, which she was one hundred percent sure it would.

Kelly hummed along softly with the music as it faded out. He kissed the top of her head, then used the little remote to restart the background music. "We should do that more often."

A man who wanted to dance. Couldn't he have at least one serious flaw? "I think the chances are good. Viv's annual charity ball is only a few weeks away. There's usually a full orchestra. Plenty of dancing opportunities."

He walked her to the table, pulled out her chair then moved to a silver floor stand holding a bottle of icy champagne. He opened the bottle with the skill born of years of practice, easing the cork out with a soft pop. He filled their flutes before joining her at the table.

"When do I get to find out what we're celebrating?" She almost couldn't stand it.

He lifted his glass with a dazzling grin. "Here's to impatient women and persistent agents."

She lifted hers, too. "That doesn't tell me much. I can't stand it."

"I know. Isn't it fun?"

He drank and she followed suit, hoping to hurry him up. "Now are you going to tell me?"

Nodding very slowly, he set his glass back on the table. "Are you ready?"

"Yes!" She'd been ready since last night.

He tipped his head to the side and seemed to be considering the silverware. He straightened his fork. "Maybe later."

"For the love of all that's holy, if you don't tell me right now, I will never sleep with you again." Anticipation crawled over her skin like ants. She wanted the news and she wanted it now.

"I thought using sex as a weapon was frowned upon by you therapist types."

She raised her brows and gave him her best don't-mess-with-me glare. It had always worked on her husbands. Maybe it would work on him. "Do you really want to play this game with me?"

He laughed and held his hands up. "Quit looking at me that way. Makes me as nervous as a tick on dip day."

She pounded her fist lightly on the table, clinking the silverware against the plates. “Tell me!”

“Okay, okay.” He shifted in his seat. “My agent’s been working on a big deal for the last couple of months. It’s taken a while because the folks involved wanted to see how my cookbook was going to do.”

She smiled and nodded. She knew it had something to do with his book. “Go on.”

“Anyway, Marty, my agent, called me a few days ago and the deal is on. They want me.” He took another torturously slow sip of champagne, smacking his lips when he finished.

She inched forward to the edge of her seat. “Who wants you? For what? Details. Now.”

His smile almost blinded her. “The Foodie Network. They want me to do a cooking show. Can you believe it? A little ole country boy from Texas on TV.”

“Oh, Kelly, that’s wonderful news. You certainly have the looks to be on television.” She leaned back, letting his words sink in. With his easy charm and handsome face, the camera would love him. He’d be an instant success. His star was going to rise so fast, he’d have no choice but leave her behind. He’d probably end up with some vapid Hollywood actress. Ignoring the growing lump in her throat, she forced a smile. “I’m so, so happy for you. What’s the show going to be called?”

“Texas Spice. It’s going to be a live show with a studio audience.” His eyes were sparkling, his words coming in a rush. “They want a full season. Twenty-two shows. Twenty-two. I still can’t believe it.”

“You deserve this, Kelly. You’re a hard worker. A genius in the kitchen.” She reached across the table and squeezed his hand. “You’re going to be a star. A bigger star.”

“Thanks, honey. Of everyone I know, I wanted to share this with you the most.”

“You’ve done a good job of keeping it a secret. But then, I guess keeping secrets is something you’ve had practice in.” She gave him a wink to let him know she was teasing.

“All right, I deserved that.” He pushed his chair back from the table. “We should eat. Let me just run to the kitchen and tell them to start the service.” He kissed her on his way past.

As soon as he was gone, she took a deep breath. The time to break things off had come sooner than she’d expected. No, that wasn’t true. It had come sooner than she was ready. Better to end things now before he became any more well known. The papers would already run her name through the wringer over this as it was.

She wouldn't do it tonight. That would be cruel. Tonight she'd celebrate with him. She closed her eyes. Take him to bed one last time. Reveal in the attentive way he made love, the way he made her feel like the most desired woman in the world, like age really was just a number.

Then tomorrow, she'd come by and explain things. He'd understand. They were both adults and this was never meant to be anything more than a fling. They'd agreed on that. The "I love you" in the hospital had been an aberration of sedatives and pain, nothing more. He probably didn't even remember saying it.

She opened her eyes and stared at the beautiful red roses in the center of the table. She wanted to wish she didn't remember hearing it but that would've been a lie. Those words would be with her until the day she died.

Footsteps sounded behind her.

Kelly returned to his seat. "Food's on its way."

With a cheerfulness she didn't quite feel, she answered, "Wonderful. What are we having?"

"To start, roasted leek and corn chowder followed by grilled lobster with cilantro butter, rosemary polenta and avocado salad. And of course, dessert."

"I finally get lobster? Too bad you didn't get a TV show sooner." She gave him a smile and told herself she might as well enjoy the night, since it was going to be their last.

"You had lobster last week at that French place."

"I'm talking about lobster you made for me." She tucked her napkin on lap. She was going to miss the banter.

"Yeah, you're right. I'm a bad boyfriend. You should probably give me a tongue-lashing." He laughed.

"That will depend on how good dessert is." She tried to ignore that he just called himself her boyfriend. Tried to ignore the little shiver of pleasure tickling her spine. Tried to tell herself she was too old to feel so giggly about a word she didn't want him using in the first place.

She changed the subject. "So where's the studio? Uptown?"

"No." He shook his head, a strange light in his eyes. "Neither. They're building a set at the studio." He offered her a tentative smile. "The show's being filmed in California."

Chapter Thirty-Two

“Oh.” She didn’t have the breath to say more. He was leaving. Her appetite vanished.

“I’ll only be gone long enough to do the tapings.” He reached across the table and laced his fingers with hers. “Wait, that’s not entirely true. Marty’s booking some promotional stuff for me to do while I’m out there. So a month at the minimum but probably more like two. Anyway, I’ll be there until things wrap up.”

His hand felt surprisingly warm. Or hers had gone cold. She nodded, her tongue as numb as her brain. Maybe she *should* break it off tonight. The candlelight coming through her champagne glass lit the bubbles like tiny Christmas bulbs. She watched them rise to the surface, pop and disappear.

“Mery, look at me.”

She glanced up. His eyes were lit up like a summer sky. How could she tell him now they couldn’t see each other any more?

“It’s too long,” he continued. “Too long to be apart.”

She breathed a small sigh of relief. So that was what this elaborate dinner was all about. He was going to break things off. Good. As long as she didn’t have to do, that was fine with her.

“Right,” she agreed, more than willing to help him out. The sooner this was over, the sooner she could go home and have a good cry. “Too long. People change, especially when they’re experiencing that kind of growth in their lives. You’ll come back a different person.”

“Exactly.” He smiled and released her hand. “I knew you’d understand.” He slipped out of his chair to stand beside her. Pulling something from his pocket, he dropped down to one knee. “Which is why when you come with me, as my wife.”

He opened the small velvet box. A diamond the color of sunshine sparkled up at her.

The room spun, the floor tilted beneath her feet and even though she was seated, she felt herself slipping. Her fingers bit into the chair’s soft leather seat. She couldn’t breath. It was like drowning in water two inches above your head. She could see the surface, she just couldn’t reach it.

Concern crossed his face. “I know the ring’s a little different. It’s called a fancy yellow rose cut. Little over two carats. I picked it out special, because yellow roses always make me

think of you. I guess I shouldn't have figured you'd like it, too. If you don't want it, you can pick out a different one." He inhaled. "I think I'm rambling."

She managed a deep shuddering breath.

He swallowed. "I know we haven't known each other long but I can't imagine my life without you. I love you, Mery. And with this trip to California and the show, well, my life isn't about to get any simpler. I need you."

"You said you didn't want to get married." Nerves thinned her voice down to a whisper.

"I know." With a relieved sigh, he nodded. "But that was before I realized life without you wouldn't mean squat."

"I told you I didn't want to get married either." The tingling in her fingers spread up her arms. Maybe she was going into shock. Was the air being siphoned out of the room?

"Honey, are you okay? You look a little pale."

"I'm not ready for this." She pushed back in her chair. Wood scraped against wood.

"I'm fine with a long engagement. Whatever you want." He set the black velvet box on the table in front of her.

The ring was beautiful. Three small, white marquis diamonds flanked each side of the exquisite center stone like leaves. It really did look like a yellow rose. She couldn't help but be touched by the thought and care he'd put into picking it out.

She snapped the box shut and steeled herself for what she was about to do.

"I told you I didn't want to get married. I meant it." She pushed her chair further away from the table and stood. "I'm sorry you went to all this trouble but my answer is no."

He stood up, disbelief haunting his eyes. "You mean you just don't want to get married? I guess we could live together but seems to me if you love someone, you should do the right thing."

"That's just it." She could do this, no matter how much it hurt. The pain was her own fault. She'd known this day would come. She stared at the seams in the wood floor. "I don't love you."

He laughed, short and sharp. "That dog won't hunt. I already know you love me. I see it in your eyes when you look at me. I hear it in your voice when you say my name and laugh at my jokes. I taste it in your kiss. I feel it in the way you cling to me when we make love. Say the

words, Mery. Don't be afraid of the truth. You love me." The assuredness in his voice didn't surprise her. His confidence was one of the things she lov—she refused to finish the thought.

"No," she repeated. "I don't."

"Look me in the eyes and say it."

She inhaled, willed herself to be clinical and detached, clenched her fists and lifted her chin to meet his gaze. "I'm fond of you, that's true but from the very beginning I told you I was only interested in one thing. Sex. And while I have enjoyed your company, I do not love you now nor will I ever love you." She turned and stepped away from the table. "I think it best if we just agree this relationship has come to its natural conclusion and part ways. I apologize if I've caused you any—"

"I give up. Talking to you is like trying to herd cats." He grabbed her and kissed her. Hard. Desperate. Proving. The onslaught nearly undid her, buckling her knees with the sudden rush of pleasure, the sudden knowledge of everything she was giving up.

It was for his own good. But mad passion swept that thought away as quickly as it had popped into her head.

He tangled one hand into the hair at the back of her head and used the other to press her against him. Even through the fabric of his suit, his warmth invaded her senses. He teased with his tongue, mimicking the dance of lovemaking until colors spun behind her eyelid.

She did want this man. Maybe more than she'd ever wanted a man in her life. But that was selfish of her and dangerous for him. She broke the kiss, gasping for a sane breath, praying for the strength to walk away and not look back every day for the rest of her life.

He kept her close, resting his chin against her cheek. The rise and fall of his chest began to slow. "You're a bad liar."

A soft inhale was her only reply.

"I love you, Mery."

"You don't love me. This is just the infatuation stage of—"

"I'm not a patient, Mery. Don't tell me what I feel. I love you."

"Stop saying that."

"Not saying it won't make the feelings go away. Loving you is like breathing. I'm not about to stop either one."

Shaking her head she pulled out of his embrace. "I have to go."

“Just like that you’re gonna turn tail and run? I didn’t peg you for a coward.”

“Well, now you know.” She tucked her bronze evening bag beneath her arm. Her hands were shaking too badly to hold it any other way.

He stepped in her way. “Give me one good reason why marrying me is a bad idea.”

She moved back, not trusting herself to be so close to him. Her heart ached but she shoved the pain down, just like she had so many times before.

“The difference in our ages, for one.”

He rolled his eyes, disgust evident in the tight line of his mouth. “You can’t let go of the age thing, can you? I don’t see what it matters if we love each other.”

“You need a woman who can give you children.”

“Don’t tell me what I need.” The glint in his eyes was dark and dangerous. “I know what I need and she’s standing in front of me.”

“Now who’s a liar?” She planted a hand on her hip. “Your dream of the future doesn’t include children?”

“Are you listening to me, woman? Until I met you, it didn’t even include getting hitched.” He drove his fingers through his hair. “I don’t need kids to be happy. I just need you.”

“And you don’t care that when you’re sixty, I’ll be seventy.” She had to make him understand. “I could need constant care. I could be an invalid. Or worse, I could be in diapers.”

His soft laughter filled her ears. “You’re assuming I’m gonna live that long.”

She froze.

The smile died on his lips. “I didn’t mean because of you—”

“Don’t.” She shook her head, tears blurring her vision. “I’m not going to marry you, Kelly. Nothing you say or do will change my mind.”

* * *

Someone was pounding on her brain. Meredith opened her eyes a slit. The pounding wasn’t in her head. It was at her door. She tugged the covers up. They’d go away soon enough.

Voices joined the pounding, calling her name, yelling for her to open up and threatening to use a gun to shoot the lock out.

She pushed the covers down. Jack never should’ve bought Viv that Walther PPK for her birthday. Like the woman wasn’t dangerous enough already.

Meredith dragged herself out of bed, pulled on her robe and trudged to the door. Yanking it open, she glared at her friends. “If I so much as see a gun—”

“Oh please.” Viv waved the comment away. “Do you actually think I’d ruin the shape of my new Chanel bag with that hunk of metal?” She looked Meredith up and down then wrinkled her nose. “The bloom is certainly off the rose, isn’t it?”

She pushed past before Meredith could answer. Celia came in right behind her.

“I didn’t invite you in,” Meredith said, shutting the door.

Celia’s eyes sparkled. “We’re doing an interdiction.”

“Intervention,” Viv corrected.

“Right, intervention.” Celia looked around. “Anything good for breakfast in here? I’m famished and Viv wouldn’t let us stop at La Boulangerie for even the tiniest little pain au chocolat.” She flattened her hand on her stomach. “They have the best French pastries. And their rum raisin scones—”

“Celia, concentrate.” Viv snapped.

Putting her hands to her head, Meredith groaned. “I don’t need an intervention or breakfast. I need to be left alone.”

“I’ll make coffee.” Celia headed for the kitchen.

“Why are you here?” Meredith asked. She tugged her robe a little tighter. Maybe if she went along with whatever cockamamie game they were playing, they’d leave sooner.

Viv took Meredith by the arm, led her to the couch and sat her down, then patted her leg. “You haven’t answered your phone for the last three days. What did you think we would do?”

“Some people would get the hint,” Meredith growled. “I want to be left alone.”

Viv reached out like she was going to brush the hair from Meredith’s eyes then stopped. “Don’t look at me that way. We’re here to help.”

“I don’t need help.” Above the noise of Celia rummaging, Meredith could hear her humming. The tune sounded vaguely familiar.

“You turned down a proposal from a man whose food tastes as good as he looks and who also happens to be madly in love with you.” Viv shook her head. “You might need shock therapy.”

“I don’t love him.” Meredith drew her knees up and wrapped her arms around them, trying to insulate herself from the pain of those words.

Viv nodded. "Which is why you went to see him in hospital?"

Meredith scowled at her. "That was out of a sense of obligation."

Viv leaned in. "Does he make you happy?"

"That isn't the point." Whatever Celia was humming was starting to stick in her brain. Meredith put her feet back on the floor. "You know what happens to the men I marry. When it comes to love, I'm the unluckiest woman to ever walk the face of the earth."

Coffee started, Celia came and sat in the chair adjacent to the couch. "Unlucky? Are you serious? Look how many men I've dated. I haven't married a single one." Sighing, she sat back and started humming that infernal tune again.

"That's because they were all wrong for you." Why wouldn't they just leave her alone? And stop humming.

"Exactly," Viv said. "But you, my dear, you've had the cosmic fortune to meet and marry two wonderful men, both of whom loved you madly. And now, in some bizarre twist of karmic matchmaking, you've met another one." She gave Meredith a little shove. "How dare you say you're unlucky in love? You're the luckiest woman I know where men are concerned."

Celia softly cleared her throat. "William Thackeray once wrote 'To love and win is the best thing. To love and lose, the next best.'" She smiled, clearly pleased she'd remembered the quote.

Meredith bit her lower lip. She'd never thought of herself as lucky. Hard to do when most of the black dresses in her closet had been worn to a spouse's funeral. Until recently, anyway.

"Grief is the price we pay for loving someone," Celia said quietly.

Meredith looked up. "Don't quote me to me." She shook her head. "There's more to it than that. He's too young. People will look at him and wonder why he couldn't do better. Or they'll look at me and think I've got some sort of Svengali hold on him. The papers already make too much fuss over it."

"Screw the papers and their gossip columns." Celia rolled her eyes. "What do you care what people think? That wouldn't stop me."

"Oh really?" Meredith raised her brows. "So how *do* your parents like Mick? Have they invited him to the country club yet?"

Celia tucked one leg up underneath her. "This isn't about me. My situation is different."

Viv slipped her arm around Meredith's shoulders. "Truly, deep down inside, can you honestly say you don't love him?"

Meredith shrugged off her friend's embrace and stood up. "None of you understand. I can't take the possibility of him dying. I will not bury another man I love. I can't." She went into the kitchen and got out some mugs. Celia's tune was rolling around in her head, the words dancing on the tip of her tongue. What was that song?

Viv sighed. "He's not going to die. He's young and healthy." She waved a ring-laden hand in the air. "He's perfect."

Meredith poured coffee into her cup. "He could get into another motorcycle accident."

Viv furrowed her brow. "I thought his bike was totaled?"

"It was," Meredith answered. "But any day now he'll take that insurance check and buy another one. He's stubborn that way."

Celia stopped humming and shook her head slowly. "He already spent that insurance check."

Meredith turned. "What?"

"He already spent that check." Celia fidgeted with her skirt, pressing and repressing the seam with her thumb and forefinger.

"On what?" Meredith picked up her mug to take a sip of coffee.

Celia shrugged and started humming again. The name of the song came to Meredith like a stab of pain. *Unforgettable*.

Celia obviously knew something. Probably through Mick. Meredith narrowed her eyes at the little blonde with as much ferocity as she could muster. "Stop humming that damn song and tell me where that money went. I swear, if he bought some sort of extreme sports-motorcycle hybrid thing, I will never speak to the man again."

Celia chewed her fingernail.

"Tell me," Meredith insisted. "What did he buy?"

Celia gulped down a breath. "Your ring."

Meredith almost dropped her coffee. "How do you know that?"

"Mick was with him when he picked it out." She sighed dreamily. "I wish I could have seen it. It sounds so beautiful and romantic. You're his yellow rose of Manhattan, Mer."

With a shaking hand, Meredith set her mug down. Her breath hitched in her throat. He'd given away the cookbook and now this. He'd given her love and she'd hurt him in return. She'd turned him down. Rebuked him. Told him all she'd wanted from him was sex.

He'd said he loved her and she'd told him lies.

"I'm such a fool." She covered her face with her hands and wept.

Two pairs of arms hugged her, held her; a duet of voices whispered that it would be all right. She took the comfort they offered, but only for a moment.

"I don't deserve him."

"Shut up," Viv muttered, her own eyes damp.

Meredith hiccupped, half-sob, half-laugh. "Thanks." She wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. "I guess I did need an intervention."

Viv's low chuckle mixed with Celia's giggle. "You're welcome," they both said.

Meredith's soft grin faded as a new fear crept into her mind. "Let's just hope I'm not too late."

Chapter Thirty-Three

Shelby stuck her pencil behind her ear, folded her arms and kicked her feet up onto the chair across from her. "You've got some nerve showing up here."

"Hello, Shelby." Mery didn't expect to be welcomed with open arms. She'd spent the last two days working up the nerve to face Kelly and trying to figure out what to say that would fix everything. She stayed where she was, standing at the entrance to the bar. "I've come to talk to Kelly."

"Little late for that, don't you think?" Shelby's eyes reinforced the disapproval in her body language.

"No, I don't think it's too late. I want, no, I *need* to apologize to him."

"Hmph." Shelby shook her head. "I'd say that's the least of what you need to do."

Mery sighed. "Look, I told him up front I wasn't interested in getting married. I tried to tell him I wasn't the right woman, that he needed someone who could..." She trailed off at Shelby's response. "Why are you laughing?"

“‘Cause telling Kelly what he needs is like trying to climb a greased pole. You’re not gonna get far.” She narrowed her eyes a little. “How’d you do?”

“Not well.” She leaned against the wall. “He told me not to tell him what he needs.”

“Sounds about right.” Shelby plopped her feet onto the floor and leaned an elbow on top of her paperwork on the table. All traces of laughter were gone. “How do you really feel about my brother? And tell me the straight-up truth.”

Mery twisted the two-diamond ring on her right hand. “I love him. I love him so much I thought I was doing the right thing by pushing him away.” She bent her head and stared at the toe of her ballet flats. “I was an idiot.”

She looked up, caught Shelby’s gaze. “I have to talk to him, Shelby. I have to explain.”

A subtle smile curved Shelby’s mouth. “How much do you love him?”

“With all my heart.”

Shelby shrugged like that wasn’t enough.

Mery pushed off the wall and took a few steps forward. “I do. I love him so much I can’t imagine being without him any longer. I’ve been miserable these last few days.”

“He might not want you any more.” Shelby’s words came out like a dare, sharp-edged and full of hurt.

Mery closed her eyes for a moment and sighed. What a mess she’d made of things. “I know. I’ve thought about that. I’ll just do my best to convince him I’m worth a second chance.”

The tap of Shelby’s pencil on the table filled the space. “Maybe being your boytoy isn’t good enough for him.”

“Your brother was not my boytoy. You read too many papers.”

“So you didn’t just want him for sex?”

“Shelby, what I wanted him for then and what I want him for now are two different things.” Shelby’s hard gaze challenged her to continue. “I want to marry him. If he’ll still have me.”

“You do?”

“Yes. Do you think I’d put myself through this misery if I just wanted sex? This city is full of men who could fill that need. I love him.”

“You swear it?”

“I swear it.” Her voice cracked. “Will you help me? I need him, Shelby. Please.”

“All right. I believe you. Besides, you helped me, so I guess I owe you.” Shelby smiled. “You’re going to need three things to get Kelly back.”

Mery grabbed a chair and sat down. “Anything. Just tell me.”

“The first thing you’re going to need you already have and that’s the ability to stand up to him. He’s madder than a wet hen and twice as hurt. Getting his proposal turned down may have put him off marriage for good, I don’t know.” Shelby’s forehead crinkled with uncertainty.

“Let’s hope not. I don’t think I could carry a man that size to the courthouse.”

Shelby laughed. “That’s the spirit. Second, you’re going need to convince him with some words he can really wrap his head around. He’s just a good ole country boy at heart and well, let’s face it, you’re about as city as a person can get. I can help you with that.”

“I’m not sure whether to thank you for that or not.”

“You will.” Shelby leaned back in her chair. “The third thing you’re going to need is a ticket.”

Mery scrunched up her forehead. “A ticket?”

“Yep.” Shelby tilted her chin down but her cool gaze stayed level. “He left for California two days ago.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Mery glanced down at her outfit. She’d never worn something so foolish in all her life. Well, maybe the outfit wasn’t foolish, but she felt like a fool in it. Her cute little Chanel ballet flats were in the rental car. She could run out there and—no. This was part of her penance.

She took a few breaths to calm her nerves and reminded herself that looking like a fool was just fine because she was about to make a fool of herself anyway. Might as well dress the part.

One of the show’s producers walked up, speaking to someone on her headset. Thanks to the information Shelby had provided, Mery’s plan was going like clockwork. So far. The hard part was yet to come. The producer finished the conversation then turned to Mery. “The show wraps in two minutes. When the house lights come up, that’s your cue.”

Mery nodded and flexed her hands. She couldn’t get a deep breath no matter how hard she tried.

The producer moved her mouthpiece out of the way. “You’re not going to pass out, are you?”

Inhaling through her already bone-dry mouth, Mery shook her head. “I could use some water, though.”

“Sure, right over here.” The woman led her to a table laden with coffee machines, trays of pastries and a cooler of bottled water. “Help yourself.”

Mery twisted the top off one and downed a third of it without stopping.

The producer grinned. “You’re pretty gutsy to do this.”

“Thanks, I guess.” Mery smiled weakly. This was a bad idea. It was never going to work. She exhaled, hoping the lightheadedness would pass soon. This had to work. Too late to back out anyway and she didn’t have a Plan B.

“What was Oprah like? I hear her set is amazing. She has the best lighting in the business.”

“Yeah, um,” Mery swallowed another sip of water. “It was...really um, great.”

The woman laughed. “Sorry, I guess your mind’s on other things right now.” She held her headset tight against her ear and spoke into the mouthpiece. “Cue music and house lights.” She covered the mouthpiece to whisper, “Good luck,” and left, giving Mery the thumbs up sign.

The closing theme song swelled and the audience clapped wildly. Mery’s heart thumped in her chest. She wiped her sweaty palms on the front of her jeans. Calm, cleansing breaths. She inhaled a huge gulp of air and forced it down into her diaphragm.

The cheering died down and the house lights came on with an audible thunk. An announcer spoke to the crowd. “Ladies and gentlemen, The Foodie Network would like to thank you for attending today’s taping of Texas Spice, starring chef extraordinaire, Kelly Spicer. Chef Spicer will be taking a few questions from the audience at this time.”

Her feet stuck to the cement. She clenched her fists until her fingernails bit into her palms. The pain cleared her head enough for her to shove one foot in front of the other. She made it to the edge of the set but hung back in the shadows.

He looked so handsome. So in charge. So much like everything she wanted. What had possessed her to tell this man no? If he didn’t want her back...she shook her head. She refused to think that way right now.

An intern held the microphone for a colorfully dressed older woman with the most flaming red hair Mery had ever seen. When had blue eye shadow come back in style? The woman leaned forward to ask her question. “Howdy, Chef Spicer.” The crowd snickered and she waggled her fingers at him like a two-year old waving bye-bye.

“My name’s Emma Sparton from Lemon Cove and I’m a huge fan. I thought your show today was wonderful. I plan to watch every single episode. I have your cookbook, too, and I just adore it. You are the cutest thing. If my husband looked like you or cooked like you, I never would’ve divorced him.”

The crowd erupted with laughter. Mery wanted to smack her.

“Anyhoo,” the woman went on, “my question is this,” she fluttered her press-on lashes, “how *hot* do you like it?”

More snickering from the audience. Mery suppressed the urge to gag.

Kelly smiled but it wasn’t his usual light-up-the-room grin. Apparently he didn’t think Ms. Emma Smarty-pants was funny either. Good. She could still be in love with him. He crossed his arms and leaned against the front of a massive built-in grill that took center stage of the set.

“Heat is a very individual taste. Lot of it depends on where you were raised, what you grew up with. As a Texan, I say the hotter, the better. Now if you’re from some of the New England states you probably...”

Mery walked out into the house lights. She couldn’t hear anything but the click of her footsteps on the polished cement floor and the pounding of her heart.

Kelly stared at her, his face a stony mask. Even the fake smile was gone. He paused then finished answering the question. “You probably wouldn’t want it as hot.”

In her peripheral vision, Mery saw the intern working his way toward her. A low buzz emanated from the crowd, like bees trapped in Tupperware. She and Kelly continued to stare at each other without saying a word. Her heart beat against her chest, her breath stuttered and her fingers and toes went numb. *Please don’t hate me.*

Panting slightly, the announcer approached and held the mike up to her. “Do you have a question, miss?”

“Yes,” Mery said, dismayed that she hadn’t been able to keep the waver out of one little word.

“Go ahead then,” the intern urged.

Kelly crossed one foot over the other and looked as disinterested as if the subject had been changed to pre-Columbian economics.

She cleared her throat. “M-my name is Mery Black and I’m from Manhattan and I...” She took a deep, shuddering breath, concentrated on staying upright. “I love you.”

Whistles and cheers echoed in the studio space. A raspy female voice yelled, “Get in line.” Kelly’s mouth quirked dismissively. His eyebrows pinched together a quarter inch then evened back out.

The intern started to say something but Mery grabbed the microphone out of his hand, leaving his mouth hanging open. The warm metal felt good, gave her something to hang on to. She took another step forward.

“I was a fool. A fool the size of Texas. Letting you go was the dumbest thing I’ve done.” She tried to remember what Shelby’d told her. “Letting you go makes me about as sharp as a sack of wet mice.”

A hint of a smile turned up one corner of his mouth then disappeared. “Might be too little, too late.”

Someone in the audience cheered. Mery whipped her head around to glare at whoever had opened their mouth. This time she spoke to the crowd. “I love this man...” she glanced back at Kelly and prayed Shelby’s advice kept working, “more than a fat kid loves cake.”

That got a real smile out of him, but he rested one elbow on his still crossed arm and covered his mouth with his hand. She took a few more steps in his direction. “I don’t care about anything but having you in my life. I’m sorry. Utterly, completely sorry. And you’re right, I do love you. With all my heart.” She inhaled. “If you were to ask me that question again that you asked me that night at dinner, I’d say yes. Just in case you were wondering.”

He looked her over from head to toe, stopping at her feet. “Nice boots.”

“Thanks,” she whispered. She stared at her feet then back at him. He liked the boots. For a reason she couldn’t quite pinpoint, her eyes began to fill. She blinked hard. She would not cry, not here, in front of all these people who would obviously rather see Kelly single. Her vision blurred and she covered her face with her hands.

Someone took the microphone from her hand and then she was lifted off her feet and hugged against the hardest, warmest, most wonderful body to ever come out of Texas.

* * *

“Show’s over,” Kelly announced to the spellbound audience. A few of them started clapping. Cradling Mery in his arms, he swung around and carried her off the set, not stopping until he came to his dressing room. Shelby must have told her how to find him. He kicked the door shut, then eased Mery onto the small sofa.

He sat beside her, waiting for her to stop covering her face with her hands. “Are you crying? Please don’t cry.”

“I made a mess of everything.” She sniffled. “I feel like such an idiot.” Her words came out muffled.

“Really? ‘Cause I feel pretty damn special.” He smiled. He felt like whooping but that might scare the bejeezus out of her.

She peeked through her fingers. “You do?”

He nodded, happy to see those beautiful green eyes again. “I’ve never had such a smart woman make such a gigantic fool of herself over me.”

She covered her face back up.

“I’m just teasing.” He tugged her hands away. “C’mon, you didn’t come all this way to hide, did you?”

“No.” She clasped her hands in her lap and stared at them. “Are you still mad at me? It’s okay if you are.”

“Hard to be mad at a woman who loves me more than a fat kid loves cake.” He couldn’t believe those words had actually come out of her mouth. All the anger he’d felt was gone, replaced by an overpowering happiness.

“More than a hobo wants a ham sandwich,” she added with a late sob and a hopeful smile.

He chuckled and shook his head. “You’re spending too much time with that sister of mine.”

“If it wasn’t for her, I wouldn’t have found you.” She chewed her bottom lip and looked like she might cry again. “I’m sorry for being so stubborn and sorry for caring what people might think and for letting my past get to me and sorry that I tried to tell you what you need. And I’m also sorry I made you give your cookbook to your mother.”

“It’s okay, and for the record, you didn’t make me give it to her, I did that of my own free will. Besides, I already got it back.”

“You did?”

“Yep. Gram found out Dee had it. She snatched it up and mailed it back to me. I don’t think Dee’s too happy but it takes a tougher woman than her to change Gram’s direction when she’s got a mind to do something.” He took Mery’s face in his hands and kissed her, not like he really wanted to, but gently to soothe her and let her know everything was going to be all right.

“I’m still afraid that being married to me might be bad luck.”

He brushed his thumb along her jaw, studied the emerald depths of her eyes. “Shhhh. Nothing’s going to happen to me.”

“What if you get into another motorcycle accident?”

“I’m not getting another bike for a while. I decided to invest that insurance check instead.”

The corner of her mouth bunched up in an impish smile.

He narrowed his eyes. “You find that funny?”

“I was just wondering if you might have brought that investment with you, so we could make this engagement official. If you’re still interested in marrying me, that is?”

“Hell yeah, I’m still interest—how do you know what I spent that check on?”

She laughed. “Mick tells Celia a lot.”

Shaking his head, he reached behind his neck to unclasp his chain. He pulled it off and held it up for her to see. The engagement ring swung between them, sparkling and golden.

“This what you want?”

She nodded.

Slipping the ring off the chain, he went down on one knee and took her hand. “Mery Black, will you do me the great honor of becoming my wife?”

“Yes,” she whispered, breaking into a huge smile. “Yes, yes, yes.”

The ring was halfway up her finger when he stopped. “You don’t like this ring, do you?”

“What? No, I love it.” She hugged her hand to her chest. “It’s beautiful.”

“You sure? You could get a different one.”

“After everything you put into getting this? Not a chance.” She wiggled it the rest of the way down on her finger and held her hand out to admire it. “I love it.”

He got up and sat next to her on the couch. “I love you.”

She turned, a bright smile shining on her face. Before she could say anything he grabbed her by the waist and tugged her onto his lap. "I'm so happy you came. I've been miserable. Let's get married right away. I don't want to wait."

Winding her arms around his neck she shook her head. "And keep Viv from planning some outrageous shindig? Not a chance. Plus I still need to introduce you to Jason."

"You think he'll like me?"

"Make him dinner. You'll own his soul." Her smile faltered. "You don't have a spell for that, do you?"

He laughed. "No, and no more spells, I promise." He bent his head, capturing her mouth for the long, hot kiss he'd wanted to give her since she first walked out of the wings and caused his heart to stop.

She returned his passion with a delicious wantonness that went straight to his groin. She wiggled closer. Her fingers curled into his hair in teasing little caresses that sent fire down his spine.

His woman. Wearing his ring. He laughed against her mouth and she pulled away.

"What's so funny?" she asked, nibbling kisses at his jaw and chin.

"You make me happy."

She brushed her lips across his. "That's all I want to do. Make you happy."

"That so?"

"Yep." She winked. "Why?"

He glanced down at her boots. "Were those my sister's idea, too?"

"Nope." She stretched one leg out to give him a better look. "I had a layover in Dallas and while I was walking around killing time, I saw these in a shop window. I thought you might like them."

"I love them." He cleared his throat. She had no idea. "Actually, I've had a fantasy about you in boots since the first time we met."

"You did? About me in boots?" Laughing self-consciously, she scrunched up her face like she couldn't quite believe him. "But at the party that night you told me you liked those high heels I had on."

"Those shoes are hot. Very hot. But I was talking about the day of the book signing."

“The book signing?” A look he could only describe as horror filled her eyes. “You were fantasizing about me then?”

Pulling her closer, he shrugged. “Maybe I’m an optimist but I had a feeling that suit and tied-up hair hid an insatiable wild woman.”

“You’re silly.” She giggled. “And wicked.”

“I know.” He kissed her fingers as she traced his mouth. “But you like that about me.”

Her hands moved down to his chef coat. “Speaking of insatiable, how quickly can we get to your hotel? Shelby said they put you up at a suite in the Carlton Grand. I hear the rooms have giant whirlpool baths.”

“And you think I’m the wicked one?” If she wiggled one more time, they wouldn’t make it out of the dressing room. But the thought of joining her in the tub had a definite appeal. “You don’t even know what the rest of the fantasy is.”

“Does it involve keeping the boots on?” She had his coat almost all the way off.

Sheepishly, he rolled his eyes to the ceiling. “Yeah.” He had to have her soon or he was going to implode. “What do you have to say to that?”

Grabbing handfuls of his shirt, she rearranged herself to straddle his lap. She looked at him with a saucy smile on her lips and a naughty gleam in her eye.

“Yippee-ki-yay, cowboy.”

The End

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Kristen Painter likes to balance her obsessions with shoes and cats by making the lives of her characters miserable and surprising her readers with interesting twists.

She currently writes paranormal romance in the Sin City Collectors series and award-winning urban fantasy for Orbit Books. The former college English teacher can often be found all over social media where she loves to interact with readers:

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* * * EXCERPT * * *

HEART OF FIRE

by

Kristen Painter

* * * * *

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Kristen Painter

Heart Of Fire

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Chapter One

A shout ripped Ertemis from sleep. He bolted to his feet, yanked his sword from its sheath at his hip, and in a blur of flashing metal, prepared to deal death to the intruder.

There was no one in the room.

He relaxed and sheathed his sword, groaning as the remnants of last night throbbed anew in his skull. Cheap human ale. He rubbed his eyes, still stinging from the smoky tavern air.

An aching head, gritty eyes and naught to show in his hunt for his birthfather. How the edge of his Feyre hungered for the bastard's blood. He scrubbed his eyes again. Other than the Traveler's tales, he had little to go on and time was running out. Surely, the Legion knew he'd deserted. If only his bond price weren't so high.

Midday sun spilled through the old wood shutter slats, slashing the dusty air into light and dark slices. He leaned his Legion-issued sword against the bed and picked his leather breastplate off the floor. Another shout rang through the air. He clutched his head. Vile, stinking, babbling humans. At least the residual effects of the ale dampened his heightened senses. More shouting broke out.

What in Saladan's name was going on? He dropped the breastplate onto the bed. The ruckus erupting outside needed squelching if there was any chance of further sleep. The more he slept, the faster his elven blood would work the healing magic that enabled him to pickle his brain night after night and kept his black skin scar free despite his many battles.

He drew on his trousers, grabbed his sword belt, and unwedged the room's only chair from beneath the rusty door latch. The scarred, faded leather notched easily into the silver buckle at his waist as he trudged down the steps. The belt settled low on his hips, the weight of the sword as comfortable as the press of a woman but far more reliable. His fingers tightened around the hilt as he stepped onto the crowded street.

The brilliant noonday sun drove daggers into his head. He grimaced, shielding his eyes with his hand. People rushed through the streets, their faces drawn into worried masks. Even with his faculties dulled, the tang of panic hung in the air like burning refuse.

The daylight, the noise and the crush of unwashed human flesh reminded of why he'd had the ale in the first place. Blunting his acute senses made time spent among humans a little less wretched. Night's quiet solitude was preferable, and since quitting life as the Legion's fatal messenger, night offered a security day did not. The Legion would soon realize their deadliest weapon had no plans of returning. They would place a hefty bounty on his head, send men to hunt him. No one left the Legion until the Legion decided it was time.

Snarling a curse, Ertemis narrowed his eyes against the glare. He scanned passing faces for someone who might know what was going on. Few returned his gaze, but the flow of humans split, giving him a wide berth.

The frightened expressions as mothers pulled their children closer, the timid glances of men...none of it was new to him. Few sane people were of a mind to engage a dark elf, especially one of Ertemis's size and current disposition. He hadn't earned the nick 'Black Death' for being kind and sweet.

The crowd's collective gaze crawled over his body like a regiment of ants, staring at his telltale black skin and the silver runes tattooed down his spine and up his slanted ears. With less ale and more thought, he would've donned a tunic and trousers. His clothed appearance drew stares enough but the sight of him shirtless stalled traffic.

He wanted to shout at them to stop staring, that he wasn't one of the Travelers' curiosities to be gawked at. Instead, he ground his teeth and held his tongue. An outburst would only make them stare harder.

A bright spot of green bobbed toward him through the sea of humans. He reached into the crowd, snatching the vibrant cloak of a small man coming toward him. The left side of the man's face was a bunched mass of scars that disappeared beneath his tunic collar.

"What's this ruckus about?" Ertemis muttered to his captive.

The little man stumbled and put his hands out to catch himself. He looked up, fear registering on his face. He stared at Ertemis in dumbfounded silence, mouth agape, eyes large.

In his peripheral vision, Ertemis saw a crowd developing at a distance around him. The only thing he missed about the Legion was being left alone.

He dragged the little man into the alley between the tavern inn and the mercantile beside it. “Just tell me what this commotion is about and you’re free to go.”

The man whispered, “Quarantine,” then cleared his throat before speaking again. “Quarantine’s been called on the whole city. Half of the north quarter and all of the eastside have come down with Speckled Fever, and they ain’t lettin’ anybody out. The gates are locked up tighter than an Ulvian’s pocketbook.” He added, “Sir,” as if hoping to gain enough favor to be allowed to live.

“Don’t call me sir,” Ertemis snapped. He released his grip on the man’s cloak. Raking a hand through his hair, he swore under his breath. “Codswallop.”

His elven half could protect him from human illness, even if he had to suffer through it first. But being quarantined wasn’t going to help him find the man who’d ruined his mother’s life. Slodsham was a passable place to spend a few days, but that’s where it ended. Staring past the man, he exhaled in frustration.

An enterprising light flickered in the man’s eyes. “I don’t much wanna be here, either. I got goods ta buy and coin ta--anyway, maybe we...” Another upward glance at Ertemis and the man stopped.

“Begging your pardon, master elf...I best be off.” He shifted his gaze down to the alley and tried to back away.

Ertemis tightened his fist in the man’s cloak. “Speak.”

The man’s gaze darted to the alley’s entrance then back to Ertemis. “I know a way out.”

“I don’t need your help to ditch this slum.” He’d find a way on his own, after his head stopped throbbing.

The man frowned. “But I need yers, master elf.”

“Why? What’s in it for me?” Ertemis watched the alley’s entrance for company. He released his grip on the man’s cloak.

“I’m owed a favor from a rather shady fella. I reckon he won’t pay up without some persuadin’. The kind you could provide, if ya understand. It’s worth fifty silvers when we’re out.”

Everyone always wanted something, but Ertemis needed the coin. “Seventy-five and not a silver less. What’s your name?”

“Haemus Brandborne at yer service, fiber merchant, seller of the finest colored fabrics, yarns, and other textiles ya could ever want.”

He grinned, showing a few missing teeth as he extended his hand. “An yers?”

Marbled burn scars matching the one’s on the merchant’s neck covered the man’s hand and extended up his wrist and under the sleeve of his rich tunic. Ertemis crossed his arms over his chest. “Master elf will do.”

Haemus’s gaze went to the sword at Ertemis’s side. The merchant’s eyes widened in sudden recognition. “Ain’t you the...” His voice trailed off as if he no longer wanted an answer.

Narrowing his gaze, Ertemis finished the man’s sentence. “Black Death? And what if I am?”

“The Black Death.” Haemus breathed the words out like a curse. “I didn’t think ya came out during the day...ya in Slodsham for work or pleasure?” His eyes suddenly went wide and he shook his head. “Don’t answer that.”

With his scarred palms up, he stepped back. “I just want out of the city.” He swallowed. “We got a deal, then, right? And that makes us partners, don’t it?”

“We have a deal,” Ertemis nodded slowly, the pain in his head not yet subsided, “but we are not partners.”

* * *

On one last walk along the placid shores of Callao Lake, Jessalyne watched some of the resident herd of cervidae, the deer people, gather ahead. Fairleigh Grove had been home to the skin-shifters since long before Jessalyne’s father had brought her mother to this secluded vale.

A few of the young cervidae, in human form and dressed in simple linen tunics, played on a cluster of boulders, their mothers and fathers close by. The cervidae reproduced so slowly, each child became a carefully guarded treasure.

Her jaw tightened. How wonderful to grow up with adoring parents. A father to protect you. A mother to teach you.

One of the male cervidae kissed his companion’s cheek. Jessalyne looked away. The sight made her ache for something new, something she could never have. Who would love someone like her? Not even the cervidae dare touch her.

But then, they had good reason not to touch. They knew exactly why her father had left.

Her mother had been the cervidae's healer, caring for the deer people until her death. The skin-shifters had become Jessalyne's only family after her father abandonment. They were kind but never affectionate, and the hole left by her mother's passing widened with every season.

Jessalyne inhaled the crisp air, tipping her face toward the sun's buttery heat. A patchwork of fragrant wildflowers bordered the path along the shore. Honeybees and dragonflies buzzed by. In the distance, waterfalls tumbled from the jagged Wyver mountain range shaping the lake's furthestmost shores. Rainbows shimmered in the mist. A place this beautiful should bring happiness, and it did, but not in a way that felt like home deep down inside.

She sat beneath a tree, twisting a lock of hair around one finger. She scowled at the snowy strands and pale skin. I look as though I've been left in the sun to bleach.

She didn't belong here, didn't even look like she belonged here. In human form, the cervidae were so beautiful – slender builds with elegant bone structure, large russet eyes, sun-kissed skin, and tawny-gold hair.

A fish jumped and circles rippled across the lake's surface. She closed her eyes and rested her head against the trunk. If she packed this evening, she could leave at firstlight.

"Lady Jessalyne, come quick!"

Jessalyne's eyes snapped open. The alpha buck's daughter, Corah, was running toward her, panic distorting her pretty face.

"Orit fell and hurt his leg on the rocks. Come, please." Corah's hands clenched, as if she wanted to grab Jessalyne and pull her along.

"You should practice what I've been teaching you."

"I can't, not on my brother. We need you." Tears welled in Corah's eyes as she glanced over her shoulder toward the small gathering by the rocks. "Please, it looks bad. Very bad."

Orit was the alpha buck's only son. Jessalyne nodded. "I'm coming."

The cluster of cervidae surrounding Orit parted to let her through. She knelt beside him. The young cervidae's eyes were dark with pain, and he'd reverted to his fawn form, another indication of how badly he was hurt. She gently ran her hand over his warm dappled coat. A long deep gash along his rear flank exposed shattered bone.

"Oh, Orit..." Jessalyne held her pity. The child needed reassurance, not further hurt.

"Should I get mother?" Corah asked.

"Not yet," her father replied. "Your lady mother need not see this in her condition."

Jessalyne glanced up at Lord Tyber. Not once had her father held such concern for her in his eyes. “I can’t do this here. Bring him to my cottage, but move him as little as possible.”

He nodded and tenderly lifted his fawn-son. Orit bleated in pain at the movement. Tyber winced.

“It’s father, Orit. Rest now,” he whispered, moving quickly but carefully into the woods toward her home.

Jessalyne sent Corah to gather herbs before hurrying after Lord Tyber. Even with Orit in his arms, he arrived ahead of her. He settled Orit into the small second bedroom, then took up pacing the braided rug in her front room.

Jessalyne paused on her way to the kitchen. “Please, cease that. You’ll wear out my rug, and besides, I know what I’m doing.”

He stopped, resting one hand on the dagger tucked in his belt. “My apologies. I know you’re skilled, but I cannot help my concern for my son.”

“I’ll do my best to heal him.”

His expression was stony. “I expect nothing less.”

The words spun in her head but she shook them away. There was too much work to do to worry about what Tyber expected.

Into a kettle she measured valerian, skullcap, and nightflower to dull Orit’s pain and make him sleep, then asked Tyber to fill it with water and set it to brew on the stove.

Corah came in as the kettle trickled steam, her arms full of fresh herbs and roots. “How is he?”

“Hurting. Take a mug of that tea to him and see he drinks as much as possible. I’ll be in to clean the wound shortly.”

After adding the few last ingredients to the cleansing solution, Jessalyne grabbed some clean linen towels and joined Corah and Tyber at Orit’s bedside.

Evening approached, muting the light filtering in the windows. The muscles in her neck tightened. She didn’t want her fear of the dark to disturb her efforts to care for Orit. Nothing bothered her so much as the loneliness of night, the empty stillness when memories turned into nightmares and unbidden thoughts ruled her dreams.

At the cursory flourish of her hand, every candle and lamp in the cottage sparked to life.

Lord Tyber and Corah glanced at one another, a brief wordless communication, before returning their attention to the now slumbering Orit. Jessalyne ignored the look the pair exchanged. She knew what they were thinking. Their shifting magic was harmless. Her magic was not. She frightened them.

Just one more reason to leave.

Lord Tyber finally broke the silence. “Corah, go home to your lady mother and gently tell her what has happened. Let her know Orit is in Lady Jessalyne’s capable hands.” Jessalyne knew the cervidae called her lady out of respect for her as their healer, but now she wondered if their fear had prompted the title.

“But I want to stay with Orit.” Corah remained seated.

“Now.” Tyber’s stern tone put Corah on her feet.

She bent to kiss her brother’s head. “Yes, Papa. Good eve, Lady Jessalyne.”

Jessalyne nodded and went back to her work. Cleaning the bits of bone from the wound and setting Orit’s leg left her drained and aching for the beautiful fawn child. Although she had done her best to stitch the deep gash neatly, it would leave a scar. He would forever bear a reminder of the pain he’d suffered.

Hours later, Jessalyne perched on a short, carved stool near the bed sipping a cup of anise tea and watching Orit’s rhythmic breathing. Firstlight softly brightened the sky. She glanced through the doorway at Lord Tyber. He’d drifted off in one of the twig chairs by the fireplace. Would he be happy when she told him she was leaving?

Chilled by memories of her own father, she pulled her loosely woven shawl tighter around her shoulders. She pushed hair out of her eyes and pressed her palms against her forehead to blot out the thoughts of the day her mother died.

Those thoughts turned the sweet tea bitter in her mouth. She could count on one hand the times she’d seen her father since the day he’d left. Giving her a share of his merchant’s take seemed to fulfill what little paternal obligation he still felt, whether he did it in person or by leaving a sack of coins on her flagstone porch. Didn’t he know coin meant nothing here? Where would she spend money in Fairleigh Grove? She sighed.

Orit moaned but didn’t wake. She got up and smoothed the coverlet over him. As soon as he was well, she was leaving. Waiting for another worthless sack of coins held little allure.

* * *

Glass globes of phosphorescent angelmoss washed the cobbled streets with weak light. By the position of the crescent moon, Ertemis knew it was well past midnight. There was no sign of the merchant in any direction.

Ertemis exhaled in frustration. If he hadn't needed the coin, he never would have agreed to this arrangement. Even with Dragon, his warhorse, he could have gotten out of the city on his own. Somehow.

A rat scurried through the gutter. Ertemis cloaked himself in elven magic and merged into the shadows, disappearing against the grimy wall of the butcher's shop behind him. Once shrouded by the enchantment, only elven eyes could see him. There was safety and a sense of comfort in being hidden this way.

His fey blood had healed his throbbing head, but the hush night brought to the city pleased him. He relaxed against the wall and opened his senses. A full spectrum of sounds filled his angled ears.

The thump of his own heart, the soft snuffling of Dragon hidden in the alley behind him, the whoosh of wind through the streets, water dripping, the distant scutter of nocturnal creatures. The quarantine had made Slodsham unnaturally quiet. Focusing, he shut out those sounds and listened again.

This time footsteps echoed in the distance. Footsteps that had better belong to Haemus. Before long, the merchant arrived at the meeting place.

Ertemis reached out and gripped the merchant's shoulder. The man stiffened, his breath caught. Haemus whirled around, his face gnarled in fear.

Ertemis dropped the enchantment, stepped out of the shadows, and revealed himself. Haemus slumped with relief, then opened his mouth to speak. Ertemis put a finger to his lips and motioned for the man to follow him into the alley.

The dank lane stunk with the butcher's refuse. The fetor evoked memories he longed to forget – battlefields littered with sun-bloated corpses, puddles of blood dotted with flies. He forced the thoughts from his head. Dragon snuffled in recognition of his master, and Ertemis greeted the big grey with a hearty nose rub.

The shadows sculpted Dragon, magnifying his size. Haemus eyed the beast warily. "That's the biggest horse I ever seen. Whaddya pay for him?"

Ertemis focused on the merchant and bolstered his gaze with a dose of elven magic to set his eyes afire. The look had the desired effect, stifling the man's question and sending him back a step.

"You ain't gonna hurt me, are ya, now?" Haemus rubbed at the scars on his throat.

Ertemis ignored the question. "Is your contact in place?"

"Aye. We best go. I don't know how long he'll wait." Haemus coughed nervously.

The man needed be quieter. Ertemis checked the wraps on Dragon's hooves, a precaution against clatter waking any light sleepers or busy bodies. Killing someone would only complicate his night. The wraps were snug. He nodded his readiness.

Dragon's leads in hand, he followed the merchant through a series of back streets and side lanes, until they arrived in Slodsham's Stew. The mosslights here held devil's fire, the same lights used by the Legion for night patrols. The warm-water algae shed a red glow over the bawd houses.

Tonight, the regular bustle and hum of the Stew was silenced. The bawd house balconies stood empty of their usual painted faces. Even the pink skirts didn't work during quarantine. Only healers were allowed on the streets during a quarantine curfew.

Ertemis studied the rusted, rundown postern. Easy to see why it was the least used gate in the entire city. It looked barely wide enough for Dragon.

Lantern light shimmered through the dirt-streaked window of the dilapidated guard shack beside the locked passage. Haemus walked toward the shack and Ertemis hid himself and Dragon with magic. Might as well let Haemus have first go.

The merchant rapped twice, paused, and then rapped once. The door creaked open. A stunted creature with watery eyes and swamp-colored skin emerged.

"Haemusss," the goblin hissed through large, wet lips. "Twuag wasss about to leave."

"Good of ya ta stay since ya owe me," Haemus said.

"Perhapsss a little gold would help Twuag find the key fassster." The goblin offered up his warty palm suggestively.

Haemus sighed. "I thought ya might feel that way. Twuag, meet my banker." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder as he moved out of the way. "Ya want gold, ask him."

Ertemis dropped the enchantment slowly, revealing only his eyes at first. Experience had taught him just how effective the sight of two glowing, disembodied eyes could be.

Twuag shuddered and herked his bulk back into the guard shack, peering around the doorframe. “What givesss?”

Dragon slid his head over Ertemis’s shoulder. He dropped the enchantment altogether. Man and beast came into full view, outlined by moss glow, a glimmer of moonlight and the unmistakable sheen of elven magic.

An uneasy smile twitching on his lips, Haemus crossed his arms over his chest. Twuag whimpered, taking obvious notice of the high, tattooed ears. Goblins rarely fared well against the fey, be they half-blood or full.

The squat-legged creature dug the keys out of his pocket and scuffled toward the gate. Frantically trying each key, Twuag peered over his shoulder every few moments, keeping one bulging eye on the dark elf’s whereabouts.

Ertemis grinned slightly when he saw the smug look in Dragon’s eyes. By Saladan’s britches, that horse is full of himself. He stepped a little closer to the fumbling goblin. “Hurry, goblin,” he whispered into the creature’s knobby ear, “or Speckled Fever will be the least of your worries.”

“Twuag isss hurrying,” the goblin whined under his breath.

At last the lock popped open. Twuag dropped the keys and disappeared into the city.

Haemus grinned his gap-toothed grin. “I knew ya was goin’ ta be handy with that one.” Spinning on his heel, he sauntered through the gate.

Ertemis shook his head and began easing Dragon through the narrow space. He walked backward through the corridor, leads in hand, mindful of the limited room for his own passage. “Head down, one shoulder at a time,” he urged. “Come now, you can do it.”

He worried the beast would be caught at the hips. “Steady now, almost through -”

But it was not to be. Dragon stuck fast and fumed about it, snorting hot breath, nostrils flaring, eyes wild. Knowing the horse’s strength and persistent nature, Ertemis goaded Dragon further.

“Pity you haven’t the strength to get through, old friend. If you hadn’t gorged on that second helping of oats, you might be standing next to me—”

Dragon burst from the gate with enormous force, knocking his master back. Ertemis stifled his laughter as the beast pawed the ground indignantly, snorting and stomping his still-muffled hooves. “All right, hush, you’ve proved me wrong.”

He righted himself and shook the dirt from his cloak. He reached for Dragon's front hoof and stripped the wrapping off, working his way around until all four were freed. After stuffing the wraps in his pack, he adjusted the cinch on his scarred black leather saddle.

Haemus coughed again. "That's quite a piece of horseflesh ya got there."

"Do not refer to my fine equine friend as 'horse flesh', unless you prefer to deal with him directly." Humans were such bothersome creatures.

Dragon tossed his head and snorted.

Eyeing the horse, the merchant swallowed hard. "Does the beast understand what yer...never mind. My apologies. Dint mean any disrespect."

"Fine." Ertemis held his hand out. "My coin."

"About that..." Haemus rubbed his scarred hands together. "I have another proposition for ya."

* * *

Jessalyne awoke with a start, the remnants of the same familiar nightmare fading as she remembered her patient. Corah and her very pregnant mother sat at Orit's bedside. Elegant in a robe of pale green linen, Lady Dauphine held Orit's small hoof and whispered soothing words to her sleeping son. She gazed at her child with a tenderness that made Jessalyne's heart ache.

"I'm sorry, I meant to stay awake with him." She'd fallen asleep perched on the stool, head against the wall, the shawl still draped around her shoulders. She rubbed her neck.

Corah nodded. "I'm sure you needed the sleep. Papa left already to attend the morning council."

"Orit should have a mug of willow broth." Jessalyne arched her back, trying to wake up.

"I'll make it." Corah headed to the kitchen.

"He will be fine." Jessalyne tried to comfort Dauphine. "He just needs rest." The words rang false even to her own ears.

Dauphine kept her gaze on her son, her hand trembling slightly as she caressed his head. "He is very warm."

Jessalyne rubbed at the stiffness in her neck again. "It might be best if you gave me a moment to check his wound."

With a soft grunt and a hand under her belly, Dauphine pushed to her feet and joined Corah in the kitchen.

Once alone, Jessalyne pressed the back of her fingers against the little fawn's nose. Fever burned through him. She pulled the coverlet back and flinched. The gash on Orit's flank puffed around the stitches and oozed yellow fluid. A sick-sweet odor filled her nose and knotted her stomach.

No poultice or balm alone could fix this. Thoughts of the cervidae who'd been bitten last season by a water serpent filled Jessalyne's head. Tyber had forbid her to use magic. The elder buck had died. She recovered Orit and went into the kitchen.

"He isn't healing like he should. I need to...to try something else. Something Lord Tyber may not like." Something I may not be able to control.

Dauphine blanched in comprehension, more tears spilling. "I'll speak with him."

"I'll wait for his decision then."

"Nay," Dauphine's voice wavered. "Don't wait. I'll make Tyber understand."

She closed her eyes briefly. "Can you heal him, with your...gifts?"

"I can only try." Jessalyne wished she could promise more.

"Please do your best. He is our only son." She cupped her very pregnant belly. "So far."

Another tear slanted down Dauphine's cheek and Jessalyne started forward to hug her. Dauphine shifted back out of reach.

Jessalyne dropped her hands to her side. "I didn't mean..."

Sadness softened Dauphine's tone. "I know." Hesitantly, she put her arms around Jessalyne.

The rare contact nearly brought Jessalyne to tears. She inhaled. The scent of new earth and sun perfumed the expectant mother. She felt the faint kick of Dauphine's unborn babe. If the woman was willing to touch her, Jessalyne knew how desperate she must be.

Jessalyne pulled out of the embrace, knowing what the contact cost Dauphine.

"I will heal him." Jessalyne prayed her words weren't a lie.

Once Dauphine and Corah were gone, she checked on the sleeping fawn again. "I'll be back soon," she promised.

She headed through the garden and into the woods behind the house. There a grove of tall, fragrant rowan trees encircled a moss-carpeted patch of ground. A solitary stone marked her mother's resting place.

“I wish you were here, Mama. I need you. There’s so much I don’t know, and now a life rests in my charge. I wish you’d left me books to teach me about this magic. I know it comes from you.”

Her sigh disappeared on the wind. “I don’t know if I will heal Orit or hurt him, but I have to try.” The lingering sensation of Dauphine’s arms around her sharpened the pang of missing her mother.

She wrapped her arms around herself but it was a cold comfort. “I hate this useless, misplaced feeling. I hate it!”

Clenching her fists, she struggled to calm herself. “It can’t be this power is just for lighting candles and warming bath water.

“If I heal him, maybe the cervidae won’t be so afraid of me. Maybe they’ll be willing to touch me.”

Her voice quieted. “Not that it matters.”

She dropped to her knees in the grass. “Dauphine hugged me today, Mama. That’s the first time anyone’s held me since you died. I can’t live like this. I can’t. I have to leave, Mama. I need to. I need to go somewhere people aren’t afraid of me.”

Jessalyne knelt with her arms outstretched. She willed the leaf-filtered sun to melt her doubts and strengthen her spirit for the work ahead.

Orit showed no change when she returned.

There was no reason to delay. She waved her hand and lit the beeswax candles in the wall sconces. After easing the coverlet back, she stood at the footboard and blocked out all but the wounded child. Occasional moans punctuated his ragged breaths.

The room blurred as she focused on Orit’s innocent face, on his small body racked with fever and infection, and the angry seeping gash. Heavy magic prickled her skin as power flowed through her.

She closed her eyes and visualized Orit’s flank perfect and blemish free. In her mind, she saw him healthy and well in both his human and deer forms.

Holding her hands over him, she wished she could bear his injury herself. She imagined his wound as her own. Heat coursed over her in rippling waves, lifting the hair off her face. Sweat trickled down her spine. A shard of pain stabbed her side. Orit’s hurt was hers for one long, hard moment and then dissolved, extinguishing the fire within her as it faded.

The heat drained out of her and she wobbled, her balance gone. She opened her eyes but couldn't focus. She clutching for the footboard, as her knees give way. She dropped to the floor with a sharp crack. She gasped and her eyes watered at the jolt.

On all fours, she tried to catch her breath. She blinked, unable to clear her vision. Then she heard a child's voice.

"Lady Jessalyne?"

She tipped her head up, the action spinning another wave of dizziness through her.

"Lady Jessalyne, are you sick?" A blurry Orit stood before her, in his human form.

Small hands wrapped around her waist trying to help her up. She laughed weakly.

"Orit, Orit..." Her voice trailed off as she pulled the boy against her and hugged him, kissing his little cheeks. He squirmed out of her embrace.

She studied him, searching for a mark. Nothing remained of the wound.

"What's wrong, Lady Jessalyne?"

"Nothing...absolutely nothing." Cool relief filled her as she collapsed to the floor.

* * *

End of Excerpt

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Kristen Painter likes to balance her obsessions with shoes and cats by making the lives of her characters miserable and surprising her readers with interesting twists.

She currently writes paranormal romance in the Sin City Collectors series and award-winning urban fantasy for Orbit Books. The former college English teacher can often be found all over social media where she loves to interact with readers:

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