

Marriage by Mistake



Alyssa Kress

MARRIAGE BY MISTAKE
by Alyssa Kress

Published by 4 Dolphins Press
Copyright 2011 Alyssa Kress

Cover Design Copyright 2011
by <http://DigitalDonna.com>

Discover these and other titles by Alyssa Kress at her webpage,
<http://www.alyssakress.com>

[The Heart Heist](#)
[The Indiscreet Ladies of Green Ivy Way](#)
[Asking For It](#)
[Love and the Millionairess](#)
[Working on a Full House](#)
[Your Scheming Heart](#)
[I Gotta Feeling](#)

Thank you for downloading this free ebook. Although this is a free book, it remains the copyrighted property of the author, and may not be reproduced, copied and distributed for commercial and non-commercial purposes. If you enjoyed this book, please visit the author's webpage where you can discover other works by this author. Thank you for your support.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the members of the ever-evolving critique group, all of whom have given immense support and help in creating this and other stories: Julie Woolley, Kathy Bennett, Cathy Yardley, Rose Murray, John Lovelady, and to Ruth Barges of blessed memory.

Dedicated to David

This is an authorized free edition from www.obooko.com

Table of Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Other Books by Alyssa Kress available at Amazon](#)

[Preview of The Heart Heist](#)

CHAPTER ONE

On a sidewalk in downtown Boston, two thousand miles from home, Kelly Williams should have been standing on the brink of sweet success. Instead, she caught the distinctive whiff of failure.

Jet-lagged and dazed, Kelly braced herself against the people jostling to get to work, her cowboy boots and snug jeans at odds with the tailored suits and designer outfits of the crowd. She peered up at the big, glass office building matching the address of the business card she clutched in one hand. At the roof, huge metal letters spelled out SINGLETON INDUSTRIES.

Please. She was supposed to believe the building was named after *Dean*? Dean the devil-may-care, Dean the definitely *not*-at-all-serious Singleton? This big, fancy office building, not to mention the corporation it housed, was named after the casual smile of a man she'd met sliding quarters into a slot machine in time to the song he'd been whistling?

The man she'd foolishly allowed to become her lover, and more, two nights ago?

"Drat," she muttered, wishing her upbringing allowed her to use a word that was much, much stronger.

The whiff of failure was becoming a positive stench. Here Kelly'd thought she was going to do something strong for a change, take action when a man walked out on her, instead of sit huddled in her apartment, crying.

So she'd begged off work and maxed out her credit card—only to end up at this phony address Dean had put on his sham of a business card.

She was no closer to the bum than before.

With a furious groan, Kelly spun away. She tried to calm down, but it was so...stupid. Indeed, she'd been so stupid since three days ago when Dean had looked up from the slot machine and into her face, his easy grin fading. She'd been sucked in by his seemingly awkward, apparently sincere, charm.

Oh, he'd been an operator, all right. He'd got her, a seasoned chorus girl, to believe every honeyed word and warm look he'd tossed her way. He'd acted like he understood her desire to desert the life of glitter in order to build a real home, a home with a man who truly loved her. Kelly supposed he *had* understood that part, for he'd used it. He'd sweepingly declared he was that man. He'd said they were made for each other.

And she'd believed him.

She'd *married* him.

Just so he could have a one-night stand.

An awful pain constricted Kelly's chest. She'd been in *love*, while he'd—he'd— She gritted her teeth and shook the pain away. Uh-uh. No matter what he'd intended, she wasn't going to cry.

She was going to seize her self-respect.

Kelly brushed a windblown strand of hair from her eyes and straightened her shoulders. She would declare to Dean, the world, and herself that she deserved to be treated better. She didn't deserve to have a man marry her, and the very next morning sneak out on her.

Her smoldering anger burning once more, Kelly narrowed her eyes and turned back to the black glass office building. Her gaze traveled up to the huge metal letters and her brain began to function again.

Okay, so the building wasn't named after Dean, but he'd known about it. He'd put this address on his fake card. There was a good chance he was related to whoever actually did run Singleton Industries.

Yes, maybe he was related. Maybe someone inside the building knew Dean.

Better yet, maybe someone knew *where Dean was*.

The possibility galvanized Kelly. She strode toward the busy revolving glass door at the base of the building and joined the crowd filing into the lobby.

A gleaming black elevator took her to the top floor, the one indicated on the phony business card. Kelly's jaw set as she took in the expanse of elegant marble, the partitions of polished oak paneling, and the humming professionalism.

Dean, the man who didn't even wear a watch, wasn't going to be found here.

But she didn't expect to find him, Kelly reminded herself. Just her next clue. An address—a real address—would be nice.

Her cowboy boots clicked on the smooth wood floor as Kelly approached the closest cubicle, one that looked like reception. The fringes of her lucky faux-deerskin jacket flicked over the marble countertop as she held out the well-worn business card. "Do you— Well, have you ever heard of this guy?" she asked with a polite smile.

The woman on the other side of the marble counter skimmed Kelly's smile and looked down at the card, the one Dean had given her the night they'd met. The incandescent lights gleamed on the receptionist's sleek chignon as she gave the card a good, long stare. Then she looked up to give Kelly an even longer stare. "That's his personal card," she finally said, sounding suspicious.

"His—?" Kelly blinked. "You mean...it's real?"

Confusion now tinged the receptionist's earlier suspicion. "Of course."

Of course. Kelly drew her hand back to look at the card, herself. It was real. It was *real*. That meant— Her breath rushed into her lungs. Her head jerked up. "Then he's here."

"Excuse me?"

"He's here." Heat immediately flooded Kelly's veins. He was *there*. She'd found him. Broad smile, gleaming eyes, aura of sincerity and acceptance. Handsome. Oh, handsome as all get out. Something inside her convulsed with an emotion that felt a lot like longing.

Kelly instantly pulled herself back from that brink. Not longing. None of his sincerity stuff had been real. He hadn't loved her. He'd *left* her. "I see, the card is—ahem. What I mean is, could you tell me where to find him, please?" Kelly did her best to disguise her riotous emotions behind another polite smile.

The receptionist tapped the end of her pen on her desktop. "Well, since you have his personal card..." She turned to glance at a computer monitor looming at her side.

"According to this, Mr. Singleton is in a conference right now."

"Mr. Singleton? Is in a *conference*?"

"That's right." The receptionist turned back to Kelly, stone-faced.

Kelly looked back at her—and laughed. Apparently Dean was a close enough relative he'd been put in a job that rated a 'Mr.' from the company receptionist, but had to pay for it by sitting through a business conference. She could just see him, lounging in the back of the room and folding paper airplanes. Oh, it was a sad fact that despite the many choices of men available to a dancer in a glamorous Las Vegas production, Kelly always managed to pick the goof-offs, the dead-beats, and the lying bums.

The receptionist glanced back at her computer. "The conference is supposed to last all day, but there will be a break for lunch."

"Lunch!" Kelly's eyes went wide.

The receptionist regarded Kelly thoughtfully. "You do have Mr. Singleton's personal card, so I suppose it would be all right if you waited."

Kelly gaped at the woman. She was supposed to wait for Dean, the scum-sucking slug, until *lunch*? The horrible part was that she could feel the 'good girl' part of herself starting to agree to this delay. She didn't like to make trouble. Why not wait?

And then Kelly remembered Dean had used the very same word yesterday, right before he'd left her.

Wait.

Pressure built behind Kelly's forehead. The memory was painfully clear. *Wait*, Dean had said, while strolling with a smile toward her front door. He would only be gone for a minute, to pick up donuts and coffee. Be right back, he had said.

And Kelly had believed him. Of course she had. She'd *loved* him.

And now she was supposed to wait? In the wake of her deep pain over the betrayal roared a powerful combination of anger and fear. If she sat back, obliged—waited—for a man who'd done *that*, what would it make her?

Kelly looked straight at the receptionist. "I'm not waiting."

"What?"

Before she could chicken out, Kelly sidled around the marble counter.

"Now, just a minute," squeaked the receptionist, rising from her seat.

But Kelly was already stalking down one of the polished halls. Reason told her it could take a while to track Dean down in this big office building. Common sense screamed she was stepping out of bounds, but she couldn't stop now. She was determined to retrieve her self-respect.

"This way?" Kelly twirled to face the receptionist, who was scuttling after her down the hall. "You might as well tell me, honey, or I'll be opening every door in the place."

"Now, really, you can't—"

"Oh, can't I?" For once in her life, Kelly *would*. Heart pounding, she twirled forward again, groped for the first closed door she saw, and whipped it open.

She found a glossy wood table and a dozen black leather chairs—all empty.

"Wait—" the receptionist squealed.

There was that word again. The worst part was Kelly *had* waited. She'd waited amid the tousled bed sheets, a stupid smile on her face, expecting to see Dean come back through the door. She'd waited long after it had become clear he'd gone farther than the corner donut joint. She'd waited until she'd had to admit she'd done it again, let herself get used. Even despite the extraordinary precaution she'd taken. Even so!

But this was it, the last time.

"Call security," Kelly heard someone order behind her. She felt alarm, an amazed shiver at her own gall, but her rage, and a kind of fear, overwhelmed everything. If she stopped now, she'd never be able to look herself in the mirror again.

He'd promised her love, then sneaked out. She could not *wait* to deal with that.

Kelly wrapped her hands around the knob of the next door down the hall, telling herself she was going to keep on trying if it took all day, if it took all night—

Kelly flung the door open and stopped dead. A dozen business-suited professionals seated around a convex table stared at her in shock.

But the business-suited professionals filling the room were not what stopped Kelly's heart. What did that was the one man standing at the head of the table, a pointer in his hand and a fancy Italian designer suit stretched across his broad shoulders.

"Dean," Kelly breathed.

Or was it? He looked so odd in that suit, as if he were born to it. His jaw was unexpectedly clean-shaven and the dark curls Kelly had loved to tousle were ruthlessly tamed.

Most peculiar of all, he stared at her in the same manner as the rest of the people in the room. As if he'd never seen her before in his life.

Kelly felt a hard bump in the progress of her quest. He was supposed to shrink back in guilt. He was supposed to crumple in shame and panic. And for heaven's sake, he was supposed to look like *Dean*. Faded blue jeans, crooked grin, come-get-me eyes.

This man looked like he'd been carved from a slab of Massachusetts granite. His lips were a straight slash of severity and his glacier-blue gaze was steady. Indeed, not a single part of him moved as he stood there, pointer upraised. Strong and cool, he looked like—a king.

He looked like he could be the actual, real-life head of Singleton Industries.

Kelly felt a shiver run down her spine. Her rage slipped. *Was this Dean?*

But a commotion behind her—security?—propelled her back into action. "Okay," she said, and straightened. "Okay, so you didn't feel anything, the way I did. That's no crime. But—" She drew in a steadying breath against a sudden upwelling of pain. Two days before she'd hoped for so much, been so happy. "But why'd you have to go and make promises?" she whispered.

That's when she caught it, finally, his reaction. He flinched. Five hours flying and maxing out her credit card—for a flinch.

The next instant strong arms seized her from behind. Security. It was almost laughable. He was the dirty rotten crumb, but she was about to be thrown from the premises.

"Let her go."

The words emerged from Dean. Yes, he heard himself say them, but he felt like he was watching the whole drama from the end of a very long hall. Or as if he were in the type of nightmare where one needed to escape dire disaster, but could not move one's arms or legs.

It had happened. The fallout he'd been dreading, the consequences of his 'lost weekend.'

But staring at the woman who'd interrupted his annual meeting of vice-presidents, Dean could not believe the fallout was this bad. In skin-tight blue jeans and a jacket that strained at her breasts, all under a kittenish face framed by a great quantity of blond, upswirled hair, she looked like she'd stepped out of some adolescent boy's wet dream.

Or out of one of his father's. Yes, the woman standing at the door of the conference room looked exactly like one of Dean's father's ridiculous, inappropriate women; a showgirl, an actress, or a lingerie model.

As if that weren't bad enough, Dean had no idea who she was.

Jeff and Frank, the two security guards, stopped to look at Dean, their gazes questioning his odd command.

The woman looked at him, too, her full lips parted.

She might have been his father's type, but she was not his. Desperately, Dean assured himself of this fact. He was a sober man, a responsible one. A throwback to good, old-fashioned New England stock. This woman's presence before him, her knowledge of his name, her—her outrageous assertion he'd made her promises simply could not be.

But a deep abyss opened inside him. He'd also thought it impossible he could have been sitting in the leather chair of his study at home one minute, and wandering a seedy neighborhood he didn't recognize the next—a neighborhood clear across the country, no less.

But it had happened.

He had to believe now that *anything* was possible.

"Let her go," Dean repeated quietly.

The guards released her. As Dean saw her go free, he realized that any kind of chaos could ensue.

It was a moment that begged the mettle of a man who'd created his own billion-dollar, cutting edge biogenetics company, someone who could make a decision despite a flurry of wild and contradictory stimuli.

So Dean made himself move. Through the heavy fog that surrounded him, he put down his pointer and strode across the room. With a smooth, efficient gesture he took his own hold of the woman.

As he made contact, his arm muscles jumped. To give himself a better grip, Dean told himself.

"We're going to talk," he affirmed, looking down at her. "Alone."

Her brows pulled together.

He didn't want an argument about it, so Dean didn't wait for one. Turning to his vice-presidents, he made a brisk apology, something far too terse to make up for ending this important annual meeting. Then he led the woman from the room.

She did not acquiesce, but neither did she resist. Dean could only hope she didn't realize his hand was trembling where it connected with her fake leather jacket.

He had no idea who she was, no memory of her face, and not an inkling of her name.

But Dean kept a bland expression on his face as he directed the woman down the busy hall to his office. It wouldn't do for any of the employees they passed to guess there were a good forty-eight hours missing from their meticulous chief's memory.

Two days gone. Completely vanished.

Dean nearly reeled every time he thought about it. How could he have lost that much time, just *forgotten*?

Okay, so he'd been hypnotized. Dean shuddered to think of how easily *that* had been accomplished. But no matter how deep a trance he'd fallen into, he should have been able to remember his actions. He should have been able to know, one way or another, if he'd followed his stupid cousin Troy's suggestion.

Do what you want, instead of what you should.

Dean could feel his hand start to tighten around the woman's forearm. With an effort, he relaxed it. Surely even if he had followed Troy's idiot suggestion, it couldn't have involved this woman, stumbling beside him in her too-high-heeled boots. It simply *couldn't*. She wasn't— He wasn't— No.

"Please hold my calls," Dean requested his assistant, as soon as they entered his anteroom. Ignoring Mrs. Barnes' startled glance, he ushered the other female through. Whatever was going on, Dean wanted to hear about it in private.

Therefore, smiling inanely, he closed the door to his inner sanctum in his executive assistant's face.

And then it was quiet. They were alone.

Dean released his hold on the unknown woman with a deep, silent breath. He took a discreet step to the side. She rubbed her arm where he'd been holding her. And their eyes met.

She was still angry. Dean both saw and expected that. What he didn't expect was the punch it delivered to his gut. It was almost as if...he felt responsible.

Either that, or he was getting aroused.

Dean drew himself up. He was not getting aroused. Well, yes, he could see now that she was pretty, on top of the obvious sexual stuff. Her eyes were an extraordinary shade of green, and...appealing. Her complexion was peaches and cream. And there was a certain healthy vitality about her.

But that didn't mean he was attracted to her.

Nor was he responsible for her mood.

"Please," he said, at his most government-grant formal. "Have a seat."

She narrowed her eyes. "You must be kidding."

Her tone was a slap in the face, but Dean didn't let it show. He was an expert at not letting emotions show, especially pain. "Suit yourself," he replied mildly.

She crossed her befringed arms over her chest. "You don't seem too surprised to see me."

"I...wouldn't say that."

Her eyebrows raised. "So you *are* surprised." She sounded oddly bitter about it. "You didn't think I'd have the nerve to come after you even—even after what you did."

After what he did? Dean calmed another guilty sinking in his gut. He *couldn't* have done anything to feel guilty about.

No, not even if the longer they stood together alone in his office the more he became...aware of her; of the way her lips curved up at the corners, of the silky look of her hair. A small, hot ball began to form deep inside him.

But he refused to believe he'd done anything irresponsible, anything reprehensible.

He was in no way like his father.

Meanwhile the woman's fingers visibly tightened on her upper arms. "And now I come here and—and, my *God*, Dean. This office. Your name on the—on the *building*. And that

suit—" She paused, as if overcome by this last item on the list. She lowered her arms and snorted. "Is there *anything* you told me that was the truth?"

Dean stopped breathing. She glared at him, as if she had no idea of what she'd just said. In, out. Dean made himself breathe again. "I do not lie," he said, very softly.

Her eyes widened.

He made his voice even softer. "I *never* lied to you."

"Huh." Her gaze turned derisive. "How about 'wait?'"

"Wait?"

"Oh, come on." She laughed. "You aren't going to pretend you *forgot*."

Dean stared at her.

"Well." She put her hands on her hips. "Are you?"

You forgot. The ball of heat inside Dean should have winked out then. She'd just given herself away. But it didn't wink out. In fact, it was no longer a discrete ball but an

over-arching sphere. He *was* reacting to her, vigorously, but not because there was any history between them.

Oh no, it was all becoming crystal clear. Her presence here, his reaction to her—it was all beginning to make sense.

"You know too much," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"I forgot.' You know too much. How to get my goat. What to say. It's too damn convenient."

Her eyes widened. "Ex-cuse me?"

Dean took a step back. A man who'd lost two days of his memory was in a vulnerable position. An unscrupulous individual could take advantage. Or merely a mischievous one, one without any sense of propriety or limits.

And Dean happened to know just such an individual. "Troy sent you."

"What?"

She seemed incredulous, too much so, and Dean felt all the pieces come together. Her arrival at his important annual meeting, the impression of sex kitten she exuded, his reaction to her.

"Troy, my beloved younger cousin." Dean wanted to make it clear the jig was up.

"He was there during the hypnosis, he gave me the suggestion. Now he thinks to turn the screw even further. Send some blond sex goddess to my office during the vice presidents meeting. Very funny."

The woman stared at him. "Sex goddess?"

An incredible burden rolled off of Dean. He was so relieved he laughed. "You nearly had me there, for a minute."

"I—I beg your pardon?" She managed to sound both indignant and incredulous.

"You must be an actress." Dean smiled at her. "You've obviously been trained to express and elicit emotion."

She merely stared at him, open-mouthed.

Sighing, Dean turned for his massive office desk. "When I called in after being missing for two days, Troy claimed he'd been frantic, looking for me, that he regretted the hypnotic suggestion, his little joke, but I guess that didn't last. He sent you."

Behind his desk now, Dean paused and threw the woman a cutting glance. "And I have a good idea what he wanted me to think about you."

Finally, the woman closed her mouth. But she wasn't ready to give up the game. "Hypnotic suggestion?" she repeated, very slowly. "Are you saying...you *don't remember* meeting me?"

"No." Dean met the little actress's eyes. "I'm saying I have never met you at all."

She was looking at him as if he'd just grown another head. "You deny it?" she finally asked, whisper soft. "You deny we even met after my show on the Strip?"

She'd been in a show? On the Strip? Dean's heart plunged. But no, no— She was an actress, a plant of Troy's. Of course. That's how she knew it was in Las Vegas he'd finally 'woken up' from his trance. It's how she knew the type of woman his father brought home, the type who'd happily prance naked on a spotlit stage.

He cleared his throat, doing his best not to envision this particular woman prancing naked. "Surely Troy explained everything to you, but for the sake of argument, I'll say it again. For two days I was following a hypnotic suggestion. I don't remember anything that

happened. Which makes it easy for someone like you to help my cousin play this little trick on me."

The fringes over her chest began to rise and fall with her alleged emotion. "I don't believe this," she muttered. "I finally go to the trouble of tracking down the lout, confronting him, and he claims he was 'hypnotized.' Doesn't even *remember* me. That's cute. Convenient. And original."

"I'm not 'claiming' I was hypnotized. It's true." Dean nearly bit his tongue. He didn't need to defend himself. She *knew*.

She took a step back. "I'll tell you what's true. You're a lying...Casanova!"

Dean's fingers clenched into fists. Was she saying—? All right, he'd admit he was attracted, maybe even aroused, but that was just from...surprise, and her acting ability. She wasn't his type; not understated elegance, sophisticated or genteel. And besides, she was only Troy's friend. Dean had never laid eyes on her before that morning. "We did not sleep together," he told her, low.

She shot him a gaze replete with scorn. "Oh, right. You forgot."

Dean's jaw tightened. He could not have, would not have, slept with a Las Vegas dancer. No, not even if watching the fringes rise and fall on her jacket was raising the temperature beneath his suit to about four hundred degrees.

But the woman wasn't done. With one hand, she pointed to a finger on the other. "How do you intend to forget *this*?" she wanted to know.

Dean forced his gaze from her chest. "Excuse me?"

She began pulling on the indicated finger, then held up an object that was too small for Dean to see. She shook it at him. "Our wedding ring, Dean. So please tell me, did you intend to 'forget' we were married, too?"

Dean felt his heart stop right in its place. *Married*? Right before he passed out from lack of oxygen, he dragged in a breath and reminded himself this was just Troy. Really playing hardball, even for a joke. He wasn't *married*. Not to *her*.

And yet—and yet—he couldn't remember those two days. Amnesia hadn't been part of Troy's suggestion. Why the hell couldn't he remember?

Slowly, Dean shifted his gaze to meet hers.

Her eyes glittered with anger and insult. It was hard to believe even an actress could pull it off.

"Here," she said, and threw the ring hard. It made a small thud as it hit the carpet behind Dean's desk. "So much for your promises," she whispered hoarsely.

Dean watched, immobilized, as she whirled and threw open the door. He saw a flash image of Mrs. Barnes and a lot of swinging fake leather fringe before the automatic spring returned his abused office door to its frame.

It should have become quiet then, but Dean's ears were ringing. For a long time he could only stand there, eardrums vibrating. Then he turned. His gaze went down to the floor.

The gold band lay behind the back wheel of his chair. Like a snake, waiting to strike.

Married, to a dancer on the Strip. Impetuously, foolishly tied to a woman with whom he had not a thing in common, who could only be charmed by his money, who made a living controlling the passions of others, and who could have no real feelings for him at all.

Married to the very kind of woman his father always married.

Dean stared at the ring and frowned. No. The ring was just a prop. Easily obtained. Interchangeable. Hardly proof of anything.

He bent and picked it up. The metal was still warm from her finger.

Dean felt a large area hollow out in his stomach. His fingers tightened on the ring. Prop?

Or evidence of what he'd actually done those two missing days?

The hollow in his stomach grew. *No*, Dean told himself. He was *not* his father.

But his eyes squeezed closed as he set the ring against his forehead. If only it all didn't make a horrible kind of sense.

CHAPTER TWO

Kelly was still burning as she braced for liftoff in the crowded jet out of Logan. Hypnotized! How—how outrageous could a man get? Claimed he didn't even remember her! Glaring out the plane window, Kelly thought of the hours they'd spent together, the outpourings of their souls, so fast, so deep.

She'd told him everything; from her strict, but loving, upbringing as a preacher's kid in a small town outside of St. Louis, to how she'd nearly flunked out of school but had won every dance contest around. He knew how lucky she'd felt to get the Las Vegas gig, but how frustrated she was in finding a man who was serious about a relationship, and not one who simply wanted an affair with a dancer.

He was going to *forget* all that? Her soul stripped bare?

And what about the other parts of her she'd stripped bare? What about the hours they'd spent in her bed, hot, entwined, pleased? Was he going to 'forget' that!

Throughout the plane flight Kelly nursed her anger, although every so often a stray thought crept in. Why *had* Dean looked so strange? With that grim slash of a mouth and corporate demeanor, he'd seemed like a completely different person. And a whole building was named after him?

That was when, for one tiny, wing beat of an instant, Kelly would wonder if he'd been telling the truth in that big fat office of his, if he'd really been hypnotized and had done everything while in a trance.

But the instant of such credulity would pass quickly. Her anger would burn through again. She wasn't *that* stupid. Oh, she'd let men feed her some pretty incredible lines, but she wasn't about to eat this one. Hypnotized.

And to think she was married to him!

In her cramped airplane seat, Kelly grimaced. Unfortunately, she had to recall that *she'd* been the one to bring up marriage. After her last disastrous relationship, with a musician who'd strung her on for months without committing, she'd decided to go back to basics, back to the values with which she'd been raised. She'd decided she could no longer go to bed with a man unless he was her husband.

Last Saturday night in the back seat of her car and locked in a hot, wet kiss with Dean, the temptation had been strong to abandon this quaint little policy. He'd felt so good around her; his arms so strong, his hands so clever.

But Kelly had forced herself out of her sensual haze. Panting, she'd pushed back from Dean. The look in his eyes then— Oh, not disappointed, not angry, but *stricken*. Yes, he'd looked as if her pulling away hurt as much as a blow.

So Kelly had explained the problem. She'd been terrified he would laugh. She was a Las Vegas dancer, after all. She wasn't loose, but hardly a virgin. So—holding out for marriage? She'd expected an argument, persuasions.

Instead Dean had given her one long, intense look—and then asked her to marry him.

At the time, oh!— Kelly had thought it so romantic. Sure, she hadn't believed him at first. But Dean had talked fast. He'd talked hard. And he'd truly seemed to be absolutely, positively serious. He'd been so serious he'd made Kelly feel that way, too. As if they were meant to be together, not just for that night but for forever.

Serious! All he'd been serious about was getting her into bed.

Kelly's anger kept her going through the plane flight, the landing, and a cab ride home. By the time she got to her apartment, however, it all began to catch up to her. She hadn't slept the night before, or the night before that. She was worn to the bone.

At the front door, her key wobbled in the lock. "Come on, come on," Kelly muttered. "Don't get picky on me now." The tumblers caught and she pushed the door open.

She nearly tripped on the pale green sweatshirt trailed across the threshold.

"Oh, no," she whispered. She could feel the muscles of her face contort as she kicked the sweatshirt to one side. She remembered, too well, how it had gotten there. After the wedding, they'd both been laughing, giddy with the gamble they'd taken. Married, after a courtship of only two days. Dean had pressed her against the door. "Now," he'd crowed, nuzzling her. His hands had lifted the hem of Kelly's sweatshirt. "Now I'm allowed to take this off."

Kelly fell back against the same door. Her purse dropped and she threw her hands over her eyes. She'd promised herself she wasn't going to cry over him, not over some rock-bottom worm like that, but she could feel the hot moisture building anyway, could feel the spasms starting in her chest.

What had she been thinking to fly out to Boston? Had she expected to get the better of such a super-class bum?

Well, yes, she had imagined that. And something even worse.

She'd imagined—oh, she hated to admit it, even to herself—but she'd imagined, deep down in the most naïve part of herself, that he was going to be *happy* to see her. Yes! She'd dreamed he was going to have some magical explanation to take away the hurt of what he'd done. His betrayal was going to vanish into thin air.

In one, secret, wishful part of herself, she'd envisioned him flying home with her on the plane.

Stupid. Utterly delusional and stupid.

All Dean had wanted in Boston was to see the back of her—forever. And he hadn't cared how much more he had to hurt her to achieve that result.

Kelly hiccupped painfully. Lord, she'd been brought up better than this, better than to accept less than complete commitment and respect. Her minister father and his devoted wife, her mother, had given Kelly a glorious example of a truly loving relationship. It certainly wasn't their fault Kelly was failing completely in the romance department.

She was almost—*almost*—glad they were no longer alive to see what a mess she'd made of her own 'marriage.'

Kelly allowed herself one last sob, then gave her head a brisk shake. All right. Enough. She'd made her mistake in insisting on a ring, and then compounded it by flying out to Boston. It didn't accomplish anything now to feel sorry for herself. All she could do was...move on. Put Dean Singleton and her bad judgment behind her.

Next time she'd be smarter. Next time she'd find out for sure whether or not the guy really loved her.

Kelly sniffled, rubbed her nose, and bent to snag the green sweatshirt off the floor. The simple act made her feel better. A crumb cake, Kelly decided. She almost smiled as she mashed the sweatshirt into a ball.

Tomorrow she'd ask the girls for the crumb cake. With her boots pinching, Kelly limped toward her bedroom. A good crumb cake ought to clean Dean Singleton right out of her system.

~~~

Seated in a rental car parked in a lot behind one of the biggest hotels in Las Vegas, Dean lifted his wrist and checked his watch. According to the private detective's report, Kelly—yes, that was her name, Kelly—would be getting out of her required workout just about now.

Dean lowered his wrist. He'd been surprised to learn the number of hours Kelly put in at her job. It was clear she was in a show that demanded real dancing and not a simple display of physical attributes. In fact, according the detective's report it was family oriented, no nudity. That made Dean feel marginally better.

Not completely better, of course. He still couldn't believe the cold facts of the matter, all he'd done his two lost days. The whole affair was so pathetically tawdry. But at least he was facing it now, dealing with the consequences. Part of that involved sitting here, waiting to speak to the woman who had not, after all, been hired by cousin Troy to interrupt his vice presidents meeting.

Dean looked out the car window and chewed the inside of his cheek. This was duty. The sooner he got to it, the better.

Suiting action to words, he clicked his car door open. Desert air hit him as he unfolded from the car. Cool for Vegas in May, but warm for a New Englander. He took a moment to adjust to the temperature, then shut the car door and straightened his tie. With a deep breath, he started through the parked cars toward the gym door.

His palms sweated and his neck felt stiff. Everything depended on his doing this right; his sense of honor, his self-respect—everything.

He slowed when he saw the crowd. About a dozen women, hair bands and sweat suits, gathered in the parking lot around the back of a car. They were laughing and excited. Among them Dean saw Kelly. That's when his feet stopped. Partially hidden behind a red Bronco, Dean stared his fill.

Kelly's hair was loosely bound in a ponytail high on top of her head and she was dressed just as sloppily as everybody else, in a sweat jacket with the sleeves pushed up, but Dean felt the wind knocked out of him all the same. There was something about her, the way she stood, an angle of head—it simply cried out: *sex*.

He hadn't expected that. For some reason, he hadn't thought the same reaction would assail him now that had hit him in his office on Monday. Dean drew in a deep, slow breath. He could handle this, get past it. He could still prove that he was *not* just like his father.

Meanwhile Kelly took control of the crowd. "Now, now," she called, raising her hands. "Calm yourselves, girls."

"But you said you were ready," complained a woman in a purple jogging suit.

"So blow him out," a redhead in shorts recommended.

Dean frowned, peering to see what they were talking about. A sheet cake was laid on the back of a car. Thanks to the angle of the car's trunk he could see the orange-frosted concoction was cut in the shape of a human figure. A single candle was stuck in just the right place to create an anatomically correct male figure.

The women in the parking lot laughed. A few jumped up and down. "Blow!" came the cry. That's when understanding finally hit Dean. His face went red.

Kelly, her attention on her comrades, was shaking her head, smirking, and clearly milking the situation for all it was worth.

"Blow! Blow! Blow!"

Kelly patted the air with her hands, then drew in a deep breath and blew the candle out.

There were cheers and a few whistles.

"Now slice him up!" someone shouted.

"Bloodthirsty," Kelly scolded, but she had no trouble accepting a huge kitchen knife that was handed her way. Indeed, she lifted it high.

Dean couldn't help flinching when her blade hit the cake man.

"And this one's yours." One of the women picked up the piece with the candle still stuck in it.

Kelly bit the tip of her finger. "Oh no, I couldn't."

"You already did," somebody called out.

There was ribald laughter and Dean felt a pull down in his loins as Kelly accepted the proffered cake. She eyed the half-melted candle. "It's true," she sighed. "The only part of the fellow worth remembering."

Heat suffused Dean then; embarrassment, he told himself. He moved, needing to make his presence known, even as Kelly plucked the candle from the cake and tossed it, laughing, over her shoulder.

Reflex. Dean lifted his right hand. Before he knew what was happening, his fingers closed mid-air around that damned candle. Worse, he was completely out from behind the Bronco. Everything suddenly went quiet.

"What?" Kelly asked, looking at her friends. "What is it?"

No one answered. Dean felt as conspicuous as the moon in a starless sky. Finally, Kelly turned. Her eyes were wide. Horrified, Dean thought. His own face remained flushed. He didn't know which was worse; that he'd just watched her complete a ritual to get rid of him, or that he still held that cursed candle in his hand.

"Miss Williams?" He flushed even more at the mistake. "I mean, Mrs. Singleton." Stupidly, he held forth the candle. "If it wouldn't be too anti-climactic—I came to offer an apology."

### CHAPTER THREE

The girls disappeared. They simply melted into the landscape of parked cars. No one stayed to back Kelly up, no one remained to lend support. And there was no one left to take that blasted candle but herself.

Kelly stared in dismay at the pink wax held out in Dean's long, tanned fingers. "Uh, thanks," she said, and plucked it from his grip. She was sure her face had turned as red as

Dean's. But that was nothing compared to the rapid-fire beating of her heart. He was here. Why was he here?

Worse, why was she so excited to see him?

"I have, you know," he said.

With no idea what he was talking about, Kelly fumbled the candle into the front pocket of her sweat jacket. "What?" she asked.

"Come to apologize," he repeated.

At that Kelly had to look at him again. His gaze was dark, focused entirely on her.

God, Kelly thought, whatever his sins, he was still the handsomest devil she'd ever seen. And he was also—still—so different. For half a second that bothered her, how different he was, not that she believed his story of hypnosis for one second. Frantically, she reached for some level of sanity. "You can't exactly apologize for walking out on me."

A muscle twitched in his jaw. "No, I can't make up for that."

Ha! Kelly thought.

"But I am sorry I didn't believe you when you came to my office the other day." His gaze sharpened on her. "I shouldn't have called you a phony. I shouldn't have assumed you were anything but exactly what you claimed to be." He paused. A different muscle twitched in his jaw. "My wife."

"Uh huh." Kelly shook her head, trying to digest it all. He was here. He'd flown all the way across the country to tell her...this? "So you're still saying you don't remember me," she declared, just to make it clear to both of them.

His lips thinned. "I'm not 'saying it.' It's true."

Their eyes met, and locked. Never had Kelly met a crumb who could look so sincere. Sincere? He looked positively annoyed.

"Uh huh," she said, confused. Why was he annoyed?

His next remark answered that. "Believe me or not, Miss Williams, but we are legally wed. That gives us matters to discuss." He looked at her, implacable.

Kelly stared back at him, uncomprehending. Then it hit her. *The divorce*. "Oh," she said. He was sincere, all right. Sincere in his desire to get rid of her. She squelched a ridiculous little pang beneath her breastbone. This fellow wasn't the man she'd once believed him to be, not the sweet and tender love of her life. It was okay, it was *good*, to put an end to this.

"Matters," she said. "Fine. *Wonderful*."

His gaze averted. "I have a place we can be private."

~~~

Kelly had to admit herself impressed. He was all prepared. In the hotel, he'd reserved a conference room for their little meeting, with scattered sofas, end tables, and lamps. Formal, impersonal, and the message clear: neutral territory.

She strode in ahead of him, reassured. Neither emotions nor passion would get involved here. This was, indeed, simply business. And simply business was all Kelly wanted it to be. Handsome as he was, the man still wasn't admitting he even knew her. A crumb to the end.

"Please," he said, indicating a pink-striped sofa. "Have a seat."

Kelly glanced at him. His expression was cool, calm, even pleasant. A crumb with impeccable manners. With her fists clenched in her jacket pockets, she sat.

Dean moved with easy grace to a red floral chair to one side. He picked up a briefcase and set it on the coffee table between them.

So, Kelly thought, he already had the papers drawn up. Quite...foresightful. And quite unlike the man she'd known. That, apparently, had been one big, fat masquerade.

But whatever. All she had to do was sign. She did not lean back against the sofa cushions. Why, she'd be out of here, done with the whole humiliating episode in minutes.

Dean set one hand atop the leather briefcase. "I understand you don't believe me about the hypnosis, or about forgetting everything that happened during the ensuing two days. But I wonder if you wouldn't mind...humoring me for a few minutes."

"Um. What?"

He opened the clasps of the briefcase with a simultaneous click. "I'd like to know what I did for two days. You could help with the answers to a few simple questions."

Kelly chewed the inside of her cheek. She was supposed to humor him? To what end? "Well, I don't— What's that?" He'd drawn some sheets of double-folded paper from his case.

"This is my credit card report, starting with the plane tickets I bought Friday evening." He shook it open. "The first item I don't understand is a place called 'Nat's.'" He looked over at her.

Kelly looked back. Did he really think she wanted to play this game? And why? She wasn't going to fight a divorce.

His brows rose. "Bar?"

Kelly's breath rushed out. She didn't go out to *bars* with men she met after the show!

He tilted his head. "You're just humoring me, remember? Not admitting my story's true or anything."

"It's a diner," Kelly blurted, as if he didn't know that perfectly well himself. They'd sat over the same pair of free refill coffees for three hours. He'd smiled at her as they'd talked and talked, a smile all slow and tender. She'd begun to melt, thinking he really cared. Yeah, right. Just showed how much *she* knew.

Dean's eyes went back down to his sheet. "A diner. That sounds pedestrian enough. But what about this sailboat? I rented a sailboat in Las Vegas?"

"No, that was Lake Mead." Kelly snapped her mouth shut. What was she doing? He had to know they'd spent the day on the lake, just lazing and looking up at the blue, blue sky. He had to remember they'd shared their first kiss in the shadow of a narrow river canyon. The boat had rocked beneath them. And so, she'd thought, had her world.

"Pardon me. Lake Mead. That should have shown up on the printout." He frowned down at the paper. "We got there awfully early."

"We drove through the night."

He shot her a penetrating look. "I...see."

Kelly felt her eyes widen. "We drove," she said firmly. "Besides, we weren't married yet." But she supposed he'd 'forgotten' that, too. Forgotten her stammered explanation of her no-sex-without-marriage policy, forgotten his serene acceptance of her restriction, followed by his own, incredible proposal.

Apparently so, for his gaze went back down to his paper printout and his voice went dry. "Oh, yes. Our wedding, held at the Little Chapel of the Dawn. My investigator confirms: all perfectly legal. I even bought you a ring and—" His implacable face suddenly reddened. "Party favors."

Kelly found herself blushing, too. On the way out of the chapel, laughing, he'd bought a pair of handcuffs. "It was no big deal," she now claimed. They'd been fur-lined and hadn't even had real locks—nor had they ended up getting used.

His face resumed its normal color as he set his printout to the side. "You're right. Not much of a big deal, compared to what is conspicuously missing. Miss Williams—" Slowly, he clasped his hands and set them around one knee. His dark lashes lowered. "Miss Williams, nowhere on this credit report is there a record that I bought protection. Condoms. Anything of that nature."

Kelly stared at him.

"I assume we had sexual relations and so I need to ask." He lifted his lashes enough to give her an amazingly direct look. "I have to ask: were such relations unprotected?"

Kelly continued to stare. His eyes were steady, his mouth flat. "We didn't use protection," she heard herself admit.

His stare went into laser-mode. "Then you could be—"

"No."

"But—"

"I'm not pregnant." Her gaze averted and she found herself blushing all over again. "I already know."

"Oh," he said a moment later, and released a deep breath.

"God." Kelly jumped from the sofa, stalked to the nearest wall, and crossed her arms tightly. She glared at a painting of a beach. "What a thing to have to tell a rank stranger."

They both stopped. A heavy silence descended on the room. As she stared at the beach, Kelly felt a prickling all over her skin. Slowly, she turned.

He was watching her, very alert. Waiting.

Kelly's heart started pounding. Was it possible—? Could he actually—? That is, she'd considered the scenario for half an instant here and there, but could it actually be true? *Was* he a rank stranger, someone who didn't remember meeting her...or anything?

Kelly swallowed. She didn't want to believe it. It was too outrageous. It smelled like getting bamboozled again. She cleared her throat, intending to tell him she wasn't fooled when, even as she looked at him, he transformed.

Not physically. No, physically he was the Dean she remembered; dark hair, wavy, left a little too long, blue eyes like a midnight sea, body like a panther. But behind the eyes—

Behind the eyes was someone she'd never met before, herself.

Kelly had to think in order to breathe. Her knees felt shaky. "Oh," she said. "Oh."

The new man, the stranger, got to his feet. "There is one other document. Would you, please?" He indicated the sofa with his hand.

Kelly shifted her gaze to the sofa but didn't dare move. She tried to go back to skeptical mode, but it wouldn't work. He wouldn't be the other man again, the one she knew. He was...somebody else. Somebody who'd been hypnotized, who didn't even remember meeting her, let alone remember falling in love.

Apparently giving up on the idea she would sit, he plucked up something from his briefcase. It was a tiny piece of paper, only about an inch square and soiled, as by kitchen oil. He held it out to her.

The insistence in his gaze finally made Kelly move. She took a step, close enough to see he was holding a receipt. "Duncan's Donuts," she read aloud. The prickling sensation returned, sweeping over her tenfold.

"Does that mean anything to you?"

Kelly could feel a bubble of hysteria inside. "You got the donuts."

"I was holding a bag of them when I 'woke up.' For you, I presume. I never eat such things, myself."

The bubble of hysteria inside Kelly expanded. She started to laugh. "But you were the one who noticed the store, who wanted them—" She stopped. Biting her lip, she looked at him, looked at the man behind the eyes. "No," she corrected. "That wasn't *you*." Kelly felt a chill replace her hysteria. "Was it?"

He turned. Delicately, he returned the little piece of paper to his briefcase. "Miss Williams, I can only repeat my heartfelt apology that you got mixed up in this...little accident of mine. The hypnosis—well, I never actually expected to go under, and then my cousin Troy had to get in on the act with his amusing 'suggestions.'"

"Suggestions." Kelly's chill grew. She'd seen men, dignified, elderly men, bark like dogs under the suggestion of a stage hypnotist. She could make the logical deduction. "In real life you wouldn't have done any of it, what we did together. You wouldn't have given me the time of day to begin with."

He didn't say a word. He just looked at her, looked at her with cool, unfamiliar eyes.

Kelly whirled. A part of her wanted to laugh. Here it was, the magical explanation she'd been hoping for. Dean hadn't abandoned her, after all. He'd even bought the donuts.

Yes, he'd bought them, and then vanished into thin air. Her easy-going, sweet and charming Dean Singleton didn't even exist!

"Miss Williams."

Kelly clenched her fingers on her upper arms. Inside she was reeling. This wasn't the man she'd met Friday night. Of course, she'd already seen as much in Boston. Her Dean was blue jeans and tee shirts. This man was English wool and silk. Her Dean smiled. This man looked like he hadn't cracked a grin in the past ten years.

She'd seen it, she just hadn't wanted to believe it.

"Miss Williams," he asked. "Are you all right?"

The question was both ludicrous, and valid. She gave a soft laugh. "Sure, sure. I'm all right." She was just peachy. It was no big deal to discover the man she'd fallen in love with didn't even exist in real life.

Instead he was an illusion, a dream, 'suggested' into being by this no-good cousin Troy.

Her fingertips dug into her sweat jacket sleeves. She was used to falling in love with an illusion, the pretty picture of the guy she'd paint in her mind, but this was ridiculous.

She sensed the other man, the real one, take a step in her direction. Grimacing, Kelly turned. Their eyes met. A funny quiver went through Kelly's stomach. He still had those amazing blue eyes, the elegantly chiseled features, the whole aura of vital, healthy male.

But on a stranger. The man she'd known—even the man she'd loathed—was nowhere.

She tried a smile. "I guess it's my turn to owe you an apology."

His brows knit.

"I didn't believe you when you said you'd been hypnotized."

He grunted. "Under the circumstances, understandable."

Kelly sighed. "Yeah, well, it did sound pretty incredible. Add to that, the tendency of the male to slink off once he's got what he wanted. That's why I—" She stopped and waved a hand.

His gaze was steady. "That's why you made sure I married you first."

Kelly looked away. She nodded. Neither of them said anything then. There was a peculiar tension in the air. They were strangers—but not quite. They'd been physically intimate. He understood that by logical deduction, but Kelly actually remembered. Lord help her, but she remembered far too well.

While Kelly felt the air in the room stretch tight, he cleared his throat. "Well I guess we should finish our business, if that's all right with you?"

"Business?" Kelly's voice came out too high. "Oh yes, right, of course." She nodded vigorously. "The divorce. You've more than convinced me. I'll sign on whatever dotted line you say." She wanted to get out of there. The situation was even more humiliating than she'd imagined. That whole, dramatic scene in Boston— God.

His chin jerked. "Yes, well, thank you very—But that isn't the business I mean."

Kelly blinked. "No?"

For the first time, his steady gaze slipped. "I mean," he said, staring over her left shoulder, "we need to talk about your move to Boston. Closing your apartment. Quitting your job."

"Wha—? Excuse me, what?"

His gaze drew back to her. "We are married, Miss Williams. Usually that involves living together."

Kelly stared at him. "What?" she asked again.

Dean raised a pair of haughty eyebrows. "I've come to take you home with me."

Kelly stood rooted to her spot.

He had no such mobility problem, turning and strolling toward the coffee table. "I'm afraid you will have to move to Boston." His voice was impossibly matter-of-fact. "There is no practical way I could relocate to Las Vegas."

Still staring in his direction, Kelly blinked. "You mean—you think we're married?"

He sat on the floral chair and looked up at her. "Aren't we?"

"No." She waved a finger between the two of them. "Didn't you just get through explaining that to me?"

"What I explained was that I do not remember the event. I am convinced, however, that it did indeed happen."

Kelly made herself breathe. "Well, yeah, it happened but—you weren't *you*."

"Oh? Who was I then?"

"You were hypnotized!"

His jaw tightened. "The hypnosis could not force me to do anything against my will."

"Please. Don't tell me those old men *wanted* to bark like dogs."

"Pardon?"

Kelly waved her hands. "*You* didn't want to marry me. You were under the influence of something—Troy's suggestions. You didn't intend to do it."

On the floral chair, he went still. "A part of me did," he said softly.

Kelly paused, digesting that. "A *part* of you?"

The tops of his cheeks went pink. "A part of my *mind*. I knew what I was doing. I knew I was making a promise, and now I intend to fulfill it."

He seemed utterly serious. But—he couldn't be. Shouldn't be. This whole thing was like the dog-barking. A joke.

He heaved a deep sigh. "I'm the man who married you. I am."

Kelly inhaled. "But—"

"No 'but's. I *am* the man you met five days ago in Las Vegas, the one who did...everything I did. I simply don't remember it."

Kelly frowned hard. "No."

His gaze was crystal blue. "Yes."

"No, no, no." She took a step back. "I know the man I met. He was—" She stopped and flapped a hand. "He wasn't *you*."

The Dean in front of her raised a pair of dubious brows.

Kelly huffed a breath. "He was...fun, mellow. Personable. And he wouldn't be...doing what you're trying to do."

Those supercilious brows dove downward. "He wouldn't be trying to honor his marriage vows?"

"No! I mean—" Kelly stopped, frustrated. In fact, she had suspected just such craven behavior of 'her' Dean.

The present Dean looked satisfied. "Consider that you knew me for less than forty-eight hours."

"But—"

"You were bound to discover I wasn't exactly the man you had imagined."

"Well yes, but this is something else—"

"The intensity of emotion that prompted us to the altar could not possibly have lasted." He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back in his chair. "Were you planning to give up on the marriage at that point?"

Kelly found she had to look away from his questioning gaze. "This isn't the same thing at all."

"Why not?"

Kelly felt her heart pick up speed even though she *knew* there was a difference. "You. Were. Hypnotized. You don't even remember me. It's like—an accident. You said so yourself!"

He paused, then spoke with careful enunciation. "I don't walk away from accidents."

Kelly's heart beat faster. This was a crazy argument. Of course they weren't married, except in the most technical sense. And yet he sounded grimly earnest. "Divorce wouldn't be walking away. It would be...taking care of the accident."

He gave a sharp shake of the head. "Divorce is a coward's way out. I've always thought so. Once a vow is made, it should be kept."

Kelly's heart beat now at the rhythm of panic. These were words she might have spoken herself, a bare week ago. "This is different," she insisted, her voice hoarse.

"A promise is a promise," he stated calmly.

"You weren't yourself." To put it mildly.

His lips thinned. "I wish I had the luxury of discussing this further but other matters press. I need to resolve this tonight."

"Tonight!"

He uncrossed his arms. "My flight home is at eight. You can be on it. My wife, with all the rights and privileges thereto."

Kelly's mouth opened and closed. She started to laugh. "Tonight."

"Don't worry about the time crunch." He shifted his attention to his briefcase, closing the lid. "You'll only need to pack for your immediate needs. With the exception of giving notice to your employer, my people can handle all the details at this end; closing your apartment, storing your things, et cetera, et cetera."

She laughed harder. "You've got to be kidding."

His gaze centered back on her. "Marriage. Fulfilling promises. That's my offer, Miss Williams. Take it or leave it."

Her laughter died as she met his unwavering gaze. He was absolutely serious. He actually meant to fly her home with him. He didn't know her, he couldn't possibly like her, yet he was that committed to keeping his word.

Kelly swallowed. She'd only met one man in her life as committed. Her father, the minister, who'd taught her from the cradle the importance of integrity.

Dean snickered closed the latches of his briefcase. "A call to me here at the hotel by seven will get you a ride to the airport in time."

Kelly licked her lips. She wouldn't do it. She wasn't married, not really.

"Think it over, Miss Williams. I'll be in room 814."

"No," she said, but her voice cracked.

"You need to think it through." He stood.

"No." What was there to think through? "You don't love me. You don't even know me. We're in Nevada, we should get a divorce."

"Room 814," he said. "Just in case."

~~~

Five hours later, Troy's lazy voice crackled over Dean's cell phone. "So, has she called you?"

Seated at the mini-office he'd created on the table in his posh Las Vegas hotel room, Dean turned another page in the quarterly report he was reviewing. "No, she hasn't called. Apparently neither my money nor my social position were sufficient incentives." He paused. "Lucky for you."

"Lucky for me?" Troy guffawed. "This was all your idea, Dean. I didn't tell you to go marry a showgirl. All I said was—"

"Yes," Dean interrupted. "I know what you said."

Troy barreled on anyway, gloating. "What I said was for you to do what you wanted for forty-eight hours, instead of what you should."

Dean closed his eyes. His stomach twisted, the way it did every time he recalled Troy's misbegotten hypnotic suggestion. *Do what you want instead of what you should.* Ridiculous. How could he have *wanted* to fly off to Las Vegas? How could he have wanted to strike up with some—some show dancer? And marry her!

Still, it had happened. It was fact. And Dean had had to deal with the consequences of his actions; soberly, responsibly, and completely. He'd had to offer her his name and his home.

"So you're coming back a single man, after all." Troy sighed. "I suppose that'll make Felicia happy."

"Felicia?" Dean frowned, unable to fathom what this young woman, a distant relative on his mother's side, had to do with anything.

"Never mind," said Troy, with a chuckle.

Dean decided to heed Troy's advice. He had enough problems without worrying about Felicia Thurgood, whatever might be wrong with her. She was blessedly not his responsibility.

So Dean turned his attention to the one person who might, at a stretch, be deemed his responsibility. "How's Robby?" he asked Troy.

"Better," Troy returned promptly. "Or at least your little half-brother will be better, now that I can tell him you aren't on the hook any more."

Dean's fingers worried the sheet of paper he'd been turning. "So he's still there."

"Where else would he be?"

Dean stifled a sigh. Robby, nine years old, really shouldn't be one of his responsibilities. *Dean* hadn't married a European rock star less than half his age and gotten her pregnant, despite the obvious inability of the woman to deal with real life, let alone a child. It was almost a mercy Robby's mother had killed herself by skiing drunk in the Alps a few months after his birth.

Now Dean frowned. "I thought Robby's father might have put in an appearance by now."

Troy made a scornful sound.

"I sent a telegram," Dean protested.

"To a yacht in the Mediterranean? Besides, even if he got it, your father isn't about to interrupt his pleasure for your convenience."

Dean rubbed his forehead. This was most certainly true. Kirk had never interrupted anything, ever, for Dean's convenience. "I'll send a personal messenger," he told Troy. "It's the third time Robby's been suspended from school this year, and it's almost summer vacation. Kirk is going to deal with this."

"Kirk is, huh?" said Troy.

Dean ignored the disbelief in his cousin's tone. "Keep an eye on the brat. I'll be home first thing in the morning."

"Not a problem." Troy sounded aggrieved. "Little pest dogs my every step."

Dean spent a pleasant moment imagining his half-brother dogging Troy's every footstep. It was precisely what his trust-fund cousin deserved. "My condolences," he said dryly, and rang off. Then he drew in a deep breath and, no longer diverted, let his gaze wander to the clock radio on his hotel nightstand.

Seven-thirty, the red numbers announced.

Seven thirty. Half an hour past the deadline. She hadn't called. She wasn't coming.

Dean felt a sinking in his gut. Guiltily, he realized the sensation was relief.

She hadn't called, she wasn't coming. He didn't have to be married to her. He didn't have to live with her. He didn't have to—to—

Dean leaned his head back on the chair and huffed a sigh. He didn't have to live with her tempting tail in front of him. He didn't have to resist her dangerous allure. He didn't have to be reminded, over and over, that he was more his father's son than he'd ever wanted to admit.

His eyes closed tight. It was a hard lesson to learn at thirty-eight years of age, that he was completely vulnerable to his hormones. The whole time he'd been alone with her in the conference room, he'd had to struggle to keep his mind on the matter at hand. He'd had to work like mad to keep her from guessing his true thoughts.

*Was she as soft under that sweat suit as he imagined? Would her skin be as silky, her flesh as giving?*

Dean opened his eyes and released a rough laugh. Oh, he liked sex as much as the next man, but on his terms, and under appropriate conditions. These were not his terms, nor were conditions the least bit appropriate. It was all too much like one of his father's tawdry misalliances. He and this Kelly had absolutely nothing in common. There was nothing on which to build a true and mutually respectful relationship. He didn't even

know her, for God's sake. But that didn't matter. In the conference room with her he'd still wanted—

Dean jerked himself forward in the chair. All right, enough. He knew perfectly well what he'd wanted. He didn't have to dwell on the unexpectedly crude side of his nature. She hadn't called, she wasn't coming. He didn't like the idea of divorce. It was a sin Dean had promised himself he would never commit, but in this case it was for the best.

Quick and clean. Before things got too embarrassing.

Dean gathered the papers on the table. He'd waited until the last minute to leave for the airport, afraid his eagerness to escape his fate might interfere with his duty. Now he'd have to rush if he wanted to make his flight.

He stuffed his papers in his briefcase, jerked into his jacket, and hoisted his carry-on over his shoulder. Before he could reach the door, however, there was a knock.

Dean froze. No. It was just...room service, yes room service, with that coffee they'd never delivered. Breathing again, he put his hand on the knob and swung the door wide.

It was not room service. His wife stood in the hall, her nose in the air and an array of mismatched suitcases laid around her feet.

Dean's heart did a staggered double-beat.

"Two months," she said crisply. "We'll give it a two month trial period. I keep my apartment and take a leave of absence from my job. I can manage that—barely."

Dean could hardly hear her for the blood rushing through his ears. Black pants hugged her hips like a second skin. A stretchy top did the same for her ripe, perky breasts. "Two months," he croaked.

"You were right," she said. "A promise is a promise." She rolled her shoulders. "At least, it's a promise if you're the man I made it to."

The words brought Dean's gaze up from her body. "Who else would I be?"

"I don't know." She shrugged again. "*That* fellow loved me."

The blood, so hot, went cold in Dean's veins. "Pardon me?"

"You don't." Her eyes averted. "So I'll give it two months, two months to figure out who you are, to see if there could be love."

Dean felt a growl, low in his throat. "I never said I loved you."

She looked over at him, surprised. "Sure you did."

"When?" Dean challenged.

She looked down her lashes. "Well, for one time, right there in our wedding vows."

He stared at her.

"So what do you say?" She hitched her purse higher over her shoulder. "Two months, that's my offer. Take it or leave it."

Dean was still staring. She was right. He had uttered the words. He must have, but—he couldn't have *meant* them.

"So?" She narrowed her eyes. "Are you taking or leaving?"

Just looking at her, even now, Dean could feel the lust pull, low down in his gut. Lust, not love. It was never going to be *love*, not in a million years.

The fierceness of her expression began to wilt. "You could say something."

He looked at her. Yes, he could say something. *I lied to you. I would have said anything to get you into bed. To get what I wanted.*

"I'll call a bellhop." Dean turned. "We'll need help if we hope to make that flight."



## CHAPTER FOUR

As Kelly walked up the jetway, faux tiger-skin purse clutched in one hand, she reminded herself this was only going to be two short months of her life. She'd fly to Boston with the guy, cohabit with him in some safe fashion, and then be done with the whole moral quagmire. She started down the aisle of the plane.

A dark voice rumbled behind her. "We're here."

Kelly suppressed a shiver at the timbre of that voice, and its false familiarity. "Here? Oh, you mean the row." She stopped to glance at the number above the seats. "Four?" They were barely inside the plane.

"That's right," Dean said. "Would you like the window or the aisle seat?"

Kelly looked down at the spacious upholstered seats and the little table between them. Oh, she realized, first class.

"Um, I like to look out the window," she answered. Hugging her purse to her chest, Kelly shouldered her way to the seat. She didn't check to see what Dean was doing. So far she'd managed to get by without looking him square in the face since their conversation outside his hotel room door. It was all too bizarre. He shared Dean's name, he owned Dean's body—but he wasn't really Dean.

She wasn't really married to him.

At least, that's what she planned to prove. There was no connection between this man and the one to whom she'd made holy vows. She'd satisfy her conscience, the voice in her head that had been shouting she was a hypocrite, that she couldn't live up to her own standards.

A promise was a promise.

Kelly sank into her seat. Dean—or whoever he was—lowered into the seat beside her. Little shivers ran up and down Kelly's arms. All right, she responded to the guy's body, but they weren't properly married. In fact, she didn't think it would take as long as two whole months to prove it. That's what she'd told her boss, Rudy, in persuading him to hire a temp to fill her job on the chorus line. She'd also reminded Rudy that she'd pulled him out of more than one hole of his own. Now it was her turn to get pulled out of a hole. And she *would* get out of it. A mere two months and she'd be back in her own life, no worse for wear.

Kelly sniffed, pretending she didn't notice every single thing the man beside her was doing. He did not appear to be at all aware of her. As more passengers filed past them, he settled his briefcase on his knees and drew from it a thick sheaf of papers. He immediately began paging through them.

Kelly wished she had something to do, too, but even if she hauled out her paperback novel it wouldn't have been polite to read it now, not when she was sitting right next to her brand new husband. She tapped her fingers on her knee. Apparently this guy—Dean—didn't realize what was polite.

She stopped tapping her fingers and cleared her throat. "Uh, do you think we'll have a nice flight?" She didn't quite look at him as she smiled pleasantly.

He drew his stapled bundle of papers closer to his eyes. "I have no idea."

And that was that. He frowned at his papers while Kelly felt her face burn.

Two months—or less.

Meanwhile the plane bounced gently. They were leaving the gate. Dean actually looked up from his papers, but only to shoot Kelly a disapproving glance. "You need to put on your seat belt."

"What? Oh." Kelly looked down. Her lap was, indeed, unrestrained. Before she could do anything to correct the situation, he was leaning over her, reaching for the metal tabs. Mr. In-Charge.

His knuckles brushed her stomach as he shot the metal tongue home.

Kelly pressed back in her seat. Dean's breath drew in sharply. But neither one of them seemed able to avoid it: their eyes met. A spark arced between them, white-hot electricity, a moment of stripped-bare awareness.

Dean straightened abruptly and turned, grabbing up his sheaf of papers. Kelly hissed out slowly and craned her head to gaze out the window.

All right, so there was a physical thing between them. No big deal. Physical attraction didn't make the man her husband. Kelly blinked out the window and struggled to even her heart rate.

Only love could do that.

~~~

They arrived in Boston two hours late. That meant Dean had been sitting beside the woman for seven hours straight. In that time they'd barely exchanged a dozen words. What was he going to talk to her about? The stock market, free trade problems? Or perhaps the number of sequins she could sew on a single costume?

Meanwhile, he noticed every time she crossed her legs, every time she shifted in her seat. He did his best to distract himself, delving deeply into the quarterly report, but it didn't work. He still noticed. Worse yet, he still responded.

It was embarrassing. Never had Dean experienced physical desire so unrelenting. His fingers actually itched. As they deboarded the plane, he decided he had to get away from her. Oh sure, he'd have to bring her home, settle her in, but following that duty some office emergency could take him back to the city. He could get out of her sphere.

Eager to put his plan into motion, Dean shepherded Kelly through the busy, early morning airport. He was careful to keep his hands off, though those hands longed to touch and lay claim. Thank God, Jackson and the car were already waiting at the curb. The porter was there as well, loading their luggage into the trunk. Dean only had to spend the time it would take to drive home with the woman. He could manage that.

"Oh, my word," Kelly muttered.

She was staring. Dean saw nothing but Jackson and the car, with the porter loading the trunk. "What is it?" he asked.

She shot him a glance. "That doesn't look unusual to you?"

"Doesn't what look unusual?"

She merely raised her brows.

Dean didn't get it. Hadn't she seen limousines in Las Vegas? Indeed, she must have viewed outfits far more ostentatious than his. Meanwhile, Kelly pulled from the shadow of his control and approached Jackson, hand outstretched. "Hi! I'm Kelly. How do you do?"

Jackson flashed a quizzical glance in Dean's direction, then turned to accept the lady's handshake. "Uh, how do you do?" He released Kelly's hand to open the back door. "Sir," he said to Dean.

"Jackson." Dean ushered his wife into the car, still wondering how she'd expected them to get home.

In the car, Kelly settled onto the seat and turned to face Dean. He immediately forgot his limo question in view of her obvious intent to converse. His hand jumped to his inside jacket pocket. "Excuse me." He withdrew his cell phone. "I have some calls to make."

The way she stared made him fear she was going to have the moxie to object. But she only pressed her lips together and turned to look out the window.

Dean managed to busy himself with the phone all the way out past the suburbs. But when they arrived at the wrought iron gates of the family estate, he found himself perversely curious about her reaction. What would she think of the home he was providing her? He pocketed his cell phone as they drove through. Fortunately, she was too intent on the twisting drive to notice his attention. He could see her strain to see the lines of the house in the distance.

When the place finally appeared through a break in the trees, her brows shot way up. She turned to him. "*This* is your house?"

Dean stared at her. He could swear she was implying the place was deficient. With fifteen bedrooms, twenty bathrooms, and thirty thousand square feet of premium interior decoration, the house was hardly deficient in any way. At least, that's what Kirk's third wife had said, the one who'd needled Dean's father into tearing down the ancestral manse to build the place. "It's supposed to resemble a Roman villa," Dean informed Kelly stiffly.

"Well, it doesn't."

Dean was at a loss. Every one of his father's brides had gushed over the house. But Kelly looked at him with a trace of...pity?

Dean's brows dove. Oh no, he wasn't going to take *pity* from the likes of her— Then a glance out the window told him it didn't matter what Kelly thought. Jackson was pulling into the circular drive before the front entrance. Dean was about to see the back of her, at least for the time being. Yes, in just a few minutes, with some well-placed commands to his staff, he would be quit of her.

Dean was sure he'd regain his customary equilibrium once out of her presence.

But as soon as he stepped out of the car, Dean knew it wasn't going to happen the way he'd planned. He squinted. "Where is everybody?"

Jackson cleared his throat. Dean turned around, still squinting.

"Ahem," Jackson said. "I was instructed not to alarm you, sir, before you got back home, but the child is missing. Again."

Dean said nothing. He was too completely dismayed. It wasn't that Robby had taken off; the kid did that too often for panic. But he wasn't going to be able to deliver his set of well-thought-out orders. He wasn't going to be able to sink back into the car and depart from the woman now standing by his side, her hands on her hips.

"Who?" she asked. "Who's missing?"

Dean kept his gaze on Jackson. "Troy," he snapped. "Where is he?"

Jackson coughed into his fist. "Uh, where you would expect, sir."

"Who is missing?" Kelly asked again. But Dean wasn't paying any attention to her. Of course not. He'd barely addressed a word to her since they'd lifted off from Vegas. He'd kept his nose buried in his papers or his ear to his cell phone. Now he turned on his heel and started for the monster double doors set in the center of the monster house.

Truly, it was the most hideous house Kelly had ever seen. Big, square, and blocky, it looked like a mausoleum. She couldn't believe he chose to live in this pile, but there he

was making for the building. It must really be his. She spent half a second thinking about it, then hustled after him.

What child was missing?

As soon as she stepped in the front door, she had to stop. Open-mouthed, she turned in a circle. There was marble from here to everywhere and a rainforest of crystal falling from at least three stories above. Just like the limo: nice, if you were in a casino in Vegas, but a bit much for home sweet home. Kelly shook her head and looked around for Dean. He was moving fast down a carpeted hallway. She hurried after.

Looking stern, Dean pushed open one of the many heavily paneled doors lining the hall. Kelly caught the edge of the door and slipped in after him.

They were in a study, the furnishings heavy and dark. There was a huge desk at one end of the room, and a bar at the other. It was at the bar that an athletic-looking young man lounged. Dark hair fell onto his forehead and a highball rolled between his palms. To his credit, he didn't appear to have been drinking. The glass looked more a prop against anxiety.

Dean came to a dead stop. Kelly nearly bumped into him. The young man looked up. "Ah," he drawled, "I see you've heard."

Kelly could tell Dean was holding on to his control with the greatest of difficulty. But he was holding. When he spoke, his voice was calm.

"One thing, Troy. I asked you to do one thing."

The other man's nonchalance dimmed. "Don't blame me. Kid's a regular escape artist."

"You said he was dogging your steps."

"He was." Troy's gaze flitted to Kelly. "Which is how he must have heard you were on your way home—with wife, after all."

Dean didn't glance around, which told Kelly he'd been aware of her behind him the whole time. "I told him that it wasn't his fault."

Troy swished his drink. "Guess he didn't believe you."

"Who?" Kelly had the temerity to ask yet again. "Who is missing?"

"Robby," Troy said. "Didn't Dean warn you about his little demon?"

"Yours?" Kelly's eyes widened as she turned to Dean. "You have a son?" Not even *her* Dean had told her that!

Dean's gaze flicked to Kelly. "Not my son. My brother. Half-brother, actually."

"Oh." But her Dean hadn't told her *that*, either. "How old is he?"

"Nine." Dean pressed his lips together.

"Nine." Kelly knew her eyes were widening again. "And you're how—?"

"Credit a very active, very healthy sire," Dean said dryly. "Too active and too healthy, in fact, to come home and deal with his troublesome progeny." Turning back to Troy, Dean sighed. "If you've already tried all the usual places, then we'll have to try some unusual ones."

Troy set down his highball. "Whatever you say. I'm ready to call the cops."

"I doubt that will be necessary." As Dean spoke, he went toward a set of French doors and opened them wide. A lot of trees were revealed. "Robby never goes all that far."

Kelly wasn't officially invited on the expedition that then charged into the woods, but she went anyway. A nine-year-old boy was missing. And besides, she was curious about

Dean, watching him as they tramped over the pine carpet floor of the forest that grew behind his house.

Just exactly who was he? For all they'd shared during their two-day courtship, he'd not told her anything substantial about his life. She hadn't heard about the building with his name on it, the huge house, his trouble-making cousin—and certainly not a word about a nine-year-old half-brother. It all seemed to confirm her hypothesis. This was not the man she'd married.

But at the same time...he was no longer the block of stone she'd been sitting next to on the airplane. He stalked through the forest with his brows drawn in real concern. There was an outside chance he might be human.

Sunlight filtered through the branches overhead and rustling noises sounded in the undergrowth. Kelly heard the gentle burbling of a brook. "Some backyard," she muttered. Huge, like everything else about the place, though she had to admit the hugeness of the outdoors was beautiful, a tamed slice of nature.

They'd gone quite a ways before Kelly saw the tree house. A platform of plywood supported scrappy two-by-fours. A dingy canvas stretched above this collection as a roof.

"What the—?" Troy stuttered. "Where did that come from?"

"Robby made it last summer," Dean replied. "He thinks no one knows about it."

But Dean had known, Kelly thought, and glanced toward him.

Dean came to a stop at the foot of the tree. "Robby! If you're up there, come out!"

The canvas roof flapped in a passing breeze. Dean's gaze concentrated on the makeshift structure. Kelly's gaze concentrated on Dean. He was looking more and more human with each passing minute; concerned and frustrated. He shrugged out of one sleeve of his suit jacket. "I'm going up to take a look."

Troy's mouth twisted. "Of course you are."

Dean peeled out of the rest of his jacket and tossed it to Troy, who caught it with a sigh. Loosening his tie, Dean stalked toward the pegged-in ladder nailed to the tree trunk.

Kelly bit her lower lip. Mr. Chill and Correct had taken off his jacket. He was going to *climb a tree*. Who was he?

With spare efficiency, Dean climbed the ladder. At the platform, he lifted the dingy canvas and crawled in.

Down beside Kelly, Troy released another sigh. "Trumped again."

Kelly switched her gaze to Troy. "Excuse me?"

Troy nodded toward the tree house. "I've been looking for Robby for hours, but it took *Dean* to find him. Yup, saving failed corporations, finding lost kids. Whatever the task, old Dean-o can do it."

Kelly frowned. "But we don't even know if Robby is up there."

"He is. Dean never makes mistakes. Ah—" Troy glanced at her. "Present company excepted."

Kelly blinked. "Present comp— But I'm *your* mistake."

"Mine?" Troy looked genuinely baffled.

Kelly was getting baffled, herself. "Yes, you were the one who gave Dean the 'amusing suggestions.'"

Troy regarded her through narrowing eyes. His mouth opened, but before he could say a word, the flap of the canvas lifted. Dean emerged, looking disgusted.

"He's not there," Kelly guessed.

"Oh, he's here." Dean dusted his hands, then reached for the tree-trunk ladder. "But he won't come down."

Kelly's lips parted. Troy had been right. Dean *had* known where to find Robby.

"Oh, come on," Troy expostulated. "He won't come down?"

Dean spoke toward the tree trunk as he descended the ladder. "Claims he wants to talk to Kelly first."

Kelly choked. "Me?"

"You." Dean turned at the base of the tree and reached for the suit jacket Troy was handing him.

Kelly opened and closed her mouth. "But— Robby doesn't even know me."

"I know." Dean shook out his jacket. "And I'm sure you have no intention of climbing any trees. I told him that. Never mind. He'll come down when he's hungry enough."

"It has nothing to do with climbing the tree. I just don't understand what I have to do with it."

"Nothing." Dean shoved an arm into his jacket. "Don't worry about it."

She wasn't supposed to worry about it? He could find lost kids and, reportedly, save failing corporations, but *she* wasn't supposed to 'worry about it?' "All right," Kelly proclaimed. "Robby wants to talk to me, he can talk to me."

Dean froze with his jacket hunched over his neck. "What?"

Kelly marched toward the tree. Noting the well-worn polish on the pegged-in ladder, she kicked off her sandals and began to climb.

"Miss Williams—!"

She paid no heed. In fact, Kelly enjoyed the note of panic in Dean's voice. She wasn't supposed to *worry about it*. At the top of the ladder, she stepped onto the platform and shoved inside the canvas door. In the sudden dimness, she squinted.

"Oh, God," a small voice breathed.

It took a few seconds for Kelly's eyes to adjust enough to spot him, a pudgy boy sitting cross-legged at the far end of the platform. His brown hair was uncombed and his clothes were dirty. With a pug nose and freckles, he looked like every misfit, un-cool kid she'd ever taught in her father's Sunday school. Kelly's heart immediately melted.

"Hey." She lowered to sit on her heels. "Heard you wanted to talk to me."

Maybe he had once, but he didn't look like he wanted anything of the sort now.

"You're *her*," he breathed.

"Um, if you mean your brother's wife, well then yes, I'm the one. Kelly Williams—er, well yeah, Williams—at your service." Kelly smiled and held out her hand.

The boy didn't make a move toward it. "Troy was right," he said hoarsely. "You are a dish."

Kelly kept on smiling, though she wondered where Troy could have gotten such an idea.

The boy swallowed. "So, what are you going to do to me?"

"Do to you?" Kelly lowered her outstretched hand.

"You're really mad, aren't you?"

"Mad?" Kelly blinked. "At you?"

Solemn, the child nodded.

"But why would I be mad at you?" Kelly hadn't even known he existed half an hour ago.

"You know. The hypnosis. Because of the hypnosis." Robby's gaze went from vulnerable to suspicious.

Kelly stared. "What?"

Robby spoke clearly. "Because I hypnotized Dean."

Feeling like an idiot, Kelly closed her hung-open jaw. "You," she said. "You did it. I—I thought it was Troy."

"Oh, no. Troy just gave Dean a suggestion, once he'd gone under. *I* was the one who hypnotized him." Robby sounded, briefly, proud. Then his eyes narrowed. "Didn't you know?"

Kelly shook her head.

"Oh, great." Robby slapped his forehead. "She didn't even know, and I had to go and tell her."

"It's all right. I'm not mad at you, even so," Kelly rushed to say. But she was floored. Dean had been hypnotized—by a nine-year-old boy?

One look at this nine-year-old boy, however, and Kelly knew she couldn't ask how he'd managed it. He needed reassurance, not interrogating.

"Why should I be mad?" She lifted a shoulder. "It wasn't your fault Dean married me. The hypnosis couldn't force him to do anything he didn't want to do." Hadn't Dean spouted such a sentiment to her the day before?

But the boy looked unconvinced by the argument. "He's still mad about it," he claimed.

"Yes, but not at you. I think...he's mad at himself."

"Huh. That doesn't make any sense."

It did, but Kelly didn't belabor the point. "The thing is *I'm* not mad at you," she told him, and waved a hand. "Anyway, the whole thing was just an accident."

It was another limp contention of Dean's from the day before, but this one put a light of hope into Robby's soft eyes. He shifted weight. "Really?"

"Really." Kelly paused a beat, then gestured toward the canvas flap door. "It must be breakfast time, or past it. I'm pretty hungry, and I don't even know where the kitchen is in that great, big house. How about you? Wanna come down and eat?"

He hesitated, searching her face for sincerity.

Kelly made sure to relax her expression, letting it show what she was truly feeling: liking, interest, the desire to make a connection. She'd grown up learning that every human being had something unique and worthwhile to offer. She had a feeling Robby hadn't discovered this was true of himself yet.

But he did appear to conclude she wasn't angry at him. "Oh, we don't eat in the kitchen," he said.

"No?"

"There should be a meal laid out in the morning room." Robby started on all fours toward her. "I'll show you."

Feeling awfully pleased with the situation, Kelly moved aside for the boy, but Robby waited for her to precede him down the ladder. High-bred manners. And breakfast in the 'morning room.' Excuse me. She smiled to herself as she moved out the canvas door.

Dean's eyes hit her as she emerged first. They narrowed. Then he saw Robby come out of the tree house behind her. He couldn't hide his surprise. Surprise and, Kelly saw, relief.

But of course he was relieved. He'd been worried. He cared.

He was human.

She felt a little light-headed as she hopped to the ground. This was stupid. So, Dean was human. Most people were. Nothing to get excited about. Then she turned and found him looking straight at her.

"Thank you," he said.

That was when, for an instant, just a split-second, Kelly saw something she'd never expected to see.

Her Dean.

As if alarmed he could have been anything of the sort, he threw the mask back up. Abruptly, he turned to Robby. Scanning the boy, and apparently finding him undamaged, he declared, "You're filthy."

"I'm hungry," was Robby's retort.

Kelly started shivering. *Her Dean!* Not any more, but he *had* been there; in the eyes, the tone of voice...the vulnerability.

"You'll bathe before you get anything to eat," Dean told his half-brother sternly. "And then we'll talk about this habit of running away."

Robby's brown-eyed gaze went to Kelly. "I promised her I'd show her where the morning room is. I have to do that first."

Dean stilled. He seemed transfixed by something Robby had just done. Kelly, meanwhile, was transfixed by a startling, new idea. Had her husband been telling the truth back in that conference room in Las Vegas? *Was* at least a part of him 'her' Dean?

Could it be *true*?

"Ahem, well." Dean seemed to come out of his brief distraction. He went stern again. "Fine. If you promised, then you have to fulfill your word. But then you bathe." Dean made this very clear. "No eating anything yourself until you're presentable."

"Okay." Robby sounded like he would have agreed to anything right then. Completely trusting now, he grabbed Kelly's hand. "Come on, this way."

"Wait. My shoes." Kelly leaned the other way to slip into her sandals. Furtively, she glanced toward Dean as Robby pulled her in the other direction.

Dean was not furtive at all about the way he was looking at Kelly. He wasn't a rock now, but a glacier, cold enough to freeze lava. His eyes focused on her like twin lasers of ice. If Kelly hadn't just retrieved Robby for him—and he hadn't admitted gratitude—she'd have said he was angry.

Enraged, even.

"Enjoy your meal," he told Kelly, in tones of frost. Before she could reply, he turned and stalked swiftly away.

"Well, I'll be a monkey's..." Kelly murmured. It was as if that other man, the human one, had never been.

CHAPTER FIVE

Dean swept through the open French doors and into his study. He paced the Aubusson rug, his hands clenched into fists. If only an expenditure of energy would release some of the fury he felt.

Being nice, ingratiating herself. To Robby! Who did she think she was? Who the *hell* did that Kelly female think she was?

Dean whirled toward a rustling sound by the French doors. Troy halted on the threshold, his hands raised. "Hey," he mock-begged, "don't shoot."

Dean exhaled slowly. "What?" He made it cool. "Not joining the happy party?"

"Oh, why do that when I can enjoy your cheery company?" Troy sauntered into the room.

Dean tried to even out his breathing and stalked over to his desk. He made a show of looking for something on its surface. "Pardon me very much if I don't believe you. You want something, I presume?" His cousin, like every other male of the family, had no visible means of support. He had plenty of invisible means, however. Not that Troy didn't run into financial trouble every couple of months, anyway.

And, indeed, Troy now heaved a deep sigh. "I do want something."

Dean resigned himself to a beg for a couple thousand dollars as Troy ambled toward the desk.

"I want somebody to tell me what's wrong with me." Troy's voice went whimsical. "I'm actually here to lecture you."

Dean glanced up sharply.

"Now don't jump all over me." Troy hitched a hip on the edge of Dean's desk. "You know you deserve one."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Come on, Dean. You haven't told her the truth, have you?"

Dean raised a brow. "The truth?" Surely Troy didn't expect him to tell Kelly what he really thought of her just then, which was pure dirt.

Troy sighed. "The hypnosis, Dean. You haven't told her the truth about the hypnosis."

Oh, that. Dean lowered his brow. He sat down and opened a desk drawer. "Of course I told her. She knows I was acting under hypnotic suggestion when I met and married her. That's why she's here."

"But she doesn't know what the hypnotic suggestion was."

Dean frowned at the contents of the drawer. "So?"

"So?" Troy straightened off the desk. "So?"

"She doesn't need to know."

Troy's eyebrows shot into his hairline. "Like hell she doesn't! She thinks you were tricked into marrying her."

"I was."

"Bull."

Slowly, Dean stood up. Troy was off base here, completely off base. That had to be why Dean's heart was galloping. "She doesn't know anything about hypnosis. She would misunderstand."

"Or maybe understand all too well." Troy set his palms on Dean's desk. "You *wanted* to marry her."

Dean clenched his jaw and placed his palms opposite Troy's. "I *wanted* to have sex with her."

"You did both."

"Yes," Dean hissed. "Because I couldn't get the one without the other."

That gave Troy pause. His eyes narrowed. "I told you to do what you wanted, instead of what you should. You wouldn't have married her unless you'd wanted to."

Dean snorted. "Sure I wanted to—that night."

The two men's gazes locked. Dean's breathing wasn't as steady as he'd have liked. He hated what he'd done, the stupidity and impetuosity, and now he had to stand here and confess it all to Troy. But that was better than having anyone think he'd *wanted* this marriage, for God's sake.

Slowly, Troy straightened. His expression turned quizzical. "You're telling me the marriage was only a means to an end?"

Dean rolled his eyes. "Elementary, my dear Watson."

"But—"

"Troy. Do I share a single interest or value with this woman?"

"But—"

"Do I?"

Troy's brows tangled. He didn't bother trying to answer Dean's question. "Only a means to an end. You're saying you were considering divorce, even as you were pronouncing vows?"

"No." Dean wasn't ready to condemn himself that far. "I'm saying I wasn't thinking about the consequences. I wasn't thinking about anything but what I wanted at that moment." Namely, sex. Completely uninhibited sex. Dean didn't have to remember to figure out that much.

"Oh." Troy's frown eased. "You mean, you were acting like the rest of us."

Dean looked away. "Not all men are completely irresponsible."

"No, just the ones in our family." Troy laughed.

Dean's jaw set. "I don't intend to carry on that tradition." And so far in his life, he hadn't. He had a trust fund, too, but that hadn't kept him from making his own way in the world. He'd worked hard about things that mattered. Last year the FDA had approved a drug for multiple sclerosis that his company had developed.

But Troy was still smirking. "Mm hm. You're responsible, straight and narrow—which is why you choose to conceal the truth about the hypnosis from your wife."

Dean's teeth crunched together. "It's not concealment."

"Then what would you call it?"

"I'd call it—intelligence. Kelly came home with me for one purpose only: to find out 'who I am.'"

"And—?"

"And—I don't want the waters muddied with some fantasy I'm something I am *not*."

"Uh *huh*."

Dean only barely kept himself from slapping his palms on his desk. "I don't want her to create a fantasy of something I am not, and never could be. Or even want to be." *Love*, she had said.

When hell froze over.

But Troy's brows arched. "It's rather unclear, though, exactly what you *want* to be."

Dean glared at him. "Not in the least—to me. But apparently it's unclear to you, and very probably would be to her. Please realize she's already confused by how I behaved for two days—behavior I can't even *remember*!"

Troy's amusement sobered. "Another mystery," he murmured. "I didn't suggest for you to forget."

The men's eyes locked again. A feeling like panic crept up Dean's throat. It was a mystery, indeed. How could he walk out of a donut shop and suddenly realize he didn't

know what city he was in, how he'd gotten there, or how long it had been since he'd patted Robby on the head and wished him better luck next time? How could that happen?

"Well, I did forget," Dean said now, his voice carefully controlled. "Probably because I didn't *want* to remember. It was all too embarrassing."

Troy raised his brows. "Or too much fun."

Dean's throat felt even tighter. "Sure." He closed his eyes. "Fun."

~~~

*Well.*

Troy walked out of Dean's study and into the quiet hall feeling as if he were stepping out of an alternate universe. Dean had stood behind his big desk playing the part of the defendant—for the first time ever. And in arguing for the defense—to Troy, of all people—he'd blatantly bent his hitherto iron-clad integrity.

Troy rubbed a hand over his eyes. What was the world coming to? Dean was lying, and Troy, well—he felt as beat as if he'd spent all night at one of his friends' unbridled parties. In actuality, he'd spent the night looking for that little brat, Robby—terrified he'd actually lost him this time. He'd been acting almost *responsible*.

Egads.

Troy yawned and made for the wide, carpeted stairway at the end of the hall. Well, he'd had more than enough of being responsible. Right now his bed was calling. Loudly. Thank goodness it turned out he didn't need to feel responsible for that Kelly woman, too. No, she looked like she could hold her own. Troy felt a grin spread over his tired face as he trudged up the stairs. Yeah, she looked like she could take Dean. Troy would be willing to bet she'd have his cousin all wrapped up in a nice little divorce settlement before you could say 'boo.'

Which meant that Dean was, indeed, turning out to be a prime example of Singleton male.

Troy was still smiling sappily as he swung open the door to his bedroom, a bedroom he'd slid into fifteen years ago when no one had been paying much attention and in which he'd squatted ever since. The curtains, rugs and furnishings had been chosen by some long-ago housekeeper in varying shades of brown, purple, and gold. Troy had no actual ownership of the bedroom, which was fine by him. Owning things required work. Troy never worked if he could help it.

He yawned again, and as he pulled his Cashmere sweater over his head he thought about the tennis match he was missing by crawling back into bed. Thinking about tennis led to thinking about the Club, and thinking about the Club led to thinking about Felicia, not that Troy spent much time thinking about the five foot seven, svelte, blond and blue-blooded, twenty-eight-year-old Felicia Thurgood. No, not much time at all.

Troy dropped to a seat on the thick counterpane of the bed and toed off his shoes. Felicia, Felicia, Felicia...so much female glory encasing so much female warrior. The formidable woman had had Dean in her matrimonial sights for years. So when Dean had called Troy that second time to say that he was bringing his wife home with him, after all, Troy had immediately wondered how Felicia would take the news.

But now that Troy had seen Kelly, he wondered if Felicia was even going to *find out* about the marriage. The whole thing might be over and done with before the rumor mill got a chance to sink its teeth into it.

Instead of standing up again to take off his pants, Troy simply fell back onto the bed. With his arms resting above his head on the bed, he gazed at the coved ceiling. It would

certainly be more *merciful* if Felicia never discovered Dean's utter perfidy in selecting a mate other than her perfect self, but Troy couldn't say it would be more...entertaining.

Troy's eyes closed and he smiled. Entertaining, yes. He'd dearly love to be a fly on the wall.

All of Felicia's commendable and upstanding expectations—trashed. She, the high and mighty, would be brought down low. She'd be so low she might even fall down to Troy's level. Oh, yes, if she ever did find out Dean was married...

To a Las Vegas dancer!

Still wearing both the smile and his pants, Troy fell asleep.

~~~

An hour after the rescue in the forest, Kelly was still alone in the morning room. She leaned her head on one hand and tapped her fingers on the polished sheen of the dining table. She'd long since consumed a plate of scrambled eggs, buttered toast, and hash browns—all complete no-no's in her usual diet—and then washed the whole criminal feast down with some excellent Colombian coffee.

Discipline, at least for her diet, was usually strong, but she'd gotten thrown way off balance. Had she or hadn't she seen 'her' Dean out there in the woods? One minute she'd been so sure, the next she had to wonder if she hadn't made the whole thing up. Yes, made it up out of a pathetic wish that she *could* have seen him.

Because, darn it, she missed 'her' Dean.

At the table, Kelly sighed. Who wouldn't miss that slow smile, that easy drawl—and okay, she'd be honest—the great sex? More than anything, though, she missed how he'd *liked* her.

And for an instant there, a brief blink of time coming out of the tree house, she'd thought she'd seen him.

Kelly's fingers abruptly halted their dance on the table top. She turned.

Dean stood in the archway to the hall. He looked showered, freshly shaved, and was wearing a different Italian suit from the one he'd worn on the plane.

Kelly's heart staggered. He was that handsome. Admittedly, he was handsome in a vastly different way from the man she'd married. The fellow who stood before her was cool, collected, and quietly powerful. 'Her' Dean was definitely not looking out of this man's eyes. His gaze was as cold and remote as the North Pole.

He nodded toward the empty dishes on the table. "I trust your breakfast was satisfactory?"

Kelly cleared her throat. "Uh, yeah. It was great."

"Good. You'll find lunch in this room as well, but dinner is in the dining room. We dress."

"Oh, hey, I'm very glad to hear it."

He shot her a sharp look. Kelly didn't know whether to be amused or insulted that it seemed to take him a full minute to realize she was joking. "Yes, well." He smoothed his tie. "In any event, I came to say goodbye, and to tell you that if you need anything, ask Maggie. She's the housekeeper."

"Goodbye?" Kelly startled upright. "You're leaving?" But of course he was leaving. He was all dressed up in a suit and tie and there was a building in downtown Boston with his name at the top of it. She shook her head. "Sorry. I suppose you've got a million things to do."

"Yes, well, perhaps not a million, but my presence is required."

Kelly nodded, wondering why she felt let down. Surely she hadn't expected, or wanted, him to dance attendance on her.

"So." Dean inclined his head. "If you'll excuse me?"

Kelly bit her lower lip. Yes, he had to leave, but on the other hand, they needed to get the getting-to-know-him business out of the way. And there was one thing she very much wanted to know. "You have time for one question?"

Dean halted his retreat in progress. Turning halfway around, he raised his eyebrows.

"Uh...how did a nine-year-old boy manage to hypnotize you?"

Dean went very still. "He told you."

Kelly huffed. "What do you think we were discussing in the tree house, the weather? So, how did it happen?"

Dean tapped a thumb against his thigh. "It was an accident, as I already explained to you."

"An *accident*?"

Dean's thumb kept tapping. "Robby was doing a science project, to make up for missing school. I didn't want to discourage his initiative."

"A science project," Kelly repeated. "You mean he just got this out of a book or something?"

"Mm. And I was his 'test subject.' Nobody expected I would actually go under." His lashes lowered. "It just...happened."

Kelly could only stare at him, more baffled than ever. Robby was just a kid, and a kid who'd only been fooling around, for heaven's sake.

Dean waved a hand. "An accident."

"Yes," Kelly said. "I believe you." It certainly hadn't happened on purpose. But how had it even happened by accident? Dean didn't seem like he'd easily fall under the influence of anything, much less a nine-year-old horsing around. If he'd fallen into a trance, a deep one, it could only have been because on some level, deep down...he'd *wanted* to.

But why would he want that?

Kelly frowned, trying to puzzle it out. Meanwhile, Dean took a step back. "About Robby," he said. "Since you bring up the subject."

Kelly blinked.

"You're only going to be here for two months." Dean's jaw tightened. "Leave him alone."

The words were so unexpected that it took Kelly a moment to understand. Her eyes widened. "Excuse me?"

Dean's gaze was cool. "You'll only hurt him."

"Excuse me?" Kelly said again, louder.

"You know you will." Dean said this as if it were a foregone conclusion.

"Stepmothers— Anyway, you'll be gone in two months."

"I will?" queried Kelly, and hastily changed her question to a statement. "Oh, yeah, you bet I will." She'd be gone in two months—or less. "But so what?"

"So what?" He appeared nonplussed.

"As if that has anything to do with—" Kelly rose to her feet. He'd accepted her two-month deal, only to inform her now that the outcome was predetermined. And he topped it off with this insult. "It would hurt Robby more if I ignored him." Indeed, how *could* she ignore that needy child?

"No." Dean gave a sharp shake of the head. "With all due respect, I know more about this type of situation than you do."

"You do." Oh, yeah, he was the big expert. His clear thinking about children led to Robby running away on a regular basis.

"I do," Dean insisted. "Furthermore, Robby is my responsibility, at least for the moment. So I would appreciate it if you would—"

"If I would use my own good judgment in the matter." Yes, *he* understood children, the man whose first words to Robby had been, "you're filthy." The man who she now realized was responsible for Robby not coming to join her for breakfast.

"I mean—"

"Yes," Kelly bit out. "I *know* what you mean." He thought she was completely insensitive, an idiot.

Dean's eyes narrowed. Kelly met his gaze directly. He'd done it, made her angry, and she didn't mind if he saw it, the jerk. He assumed she couldn't figure out how to behave toward Robby. Who did he think she *was*?

They stared at each other, the air practically crackling between them. Despite his utter wrongness here, he projected power with his gaze, and surrounded himself with an aura of inner strength. Facing him, Kelly felt her own strength hum in response, felt a novel exhilaration. Typically she backed down in the face of male anger, but not with Dean, not with the most powerful man she'd ever met. Against him she stood strong; heart pounding, nostrils flaring, blood tingling...

And turned on, she realized suddenly. Passionately so.

Kelly stopped breathing. In the middle of this nasty dispute she was feeling...sexual? But she couldn't deny it. Heat was flooding all her interesting parts.

She saw Dean swallow, saw his eyes darken, which told her he was feeling it, too. Something dangerous and unexpected.

This was too weird. And yet, Kelly couldn't look away from him. No, she just kept looking into his intense blue eyes, feeling angry and...sexual.

Finally, he took a big step back. "I'll...tell Maggie to put your things in the Lilac Suite."

Kelly didn't have to ask to know the Lilac Suite would be at the opposite end of the house from his own bedroom. "Yes," she murmured, "you do that."

But he turned on his way out the door. "About Robby," he said softly. "Don't cross me."

Kelly thought it best not to attempt a reply.

CHAPTER SIX

"No, no I understand. Thank you." Carefully, not to indulge any of the frustration he felt, Dean set down the telephone he'd been using at his downtown office desk. It was already May, he'd just been told, too late in the semester to enroll a new student.

Dean rubbed a hand over his mouth. He should have started this process a week-and-a-half ago, when Robby had first dropped on his doorstep, but he'd resisted being the one stuck with the task.

Now...? Well, all morning he'd been hearing variations on the same theme: too late in the semester, Robby's grades not up to par, the obstacle of a good recommendation from his last school, and so on and so forth.

Dean leaned back in his chair. It seemed his half-brother had burned his bridges when it came to decent boarding schools. That was a problem in more ways than one. Not only was Robby missing out on some much-needed education, but Dean couldn't get him out of harm's way.

Instead the kid was stuck at home, stuck in the same house with that woman.

A helpless snort escaped Dean. Hell, *he* was stuck in the same house with her. In his own way, he was in just as great danger as Robby. Dean pushed out of his chair. He paced across the scrupulously white carpet toward the windows where downtown Boston stirred beneath him.

He barely noticed the city bustle, pondering instead his reaction to his wife. Whenever he was around her, something like a drug shot through his system, arousing his body and scattering his brain cells. He couldn't *think* straight when near her.

He'd never experienced lust this strong. Almost...out of control. Almost enough to make him do something...stupid.

Dean hated acting like a coward, yet he'd been doing just that. A coward, he'd stayed at the office until late that first night, until he could be sure Kelly had retired to her bedroom.

Much good that had done. He'd gone up to his solitary room and dreamed about her. Wild, erotic dreams. They'd been like nothing he'd ever experienced, the sex unlike any he'd ever had. No holds barred, skin and teeth and tongues. Animal, frantic—

Satisfying.

Dean drew in a deep breath. God, had it been satisfying. Too satisfying. And so he couldn't help wondering: was the dream based on memory? Had the sex between them really been that good?

Dean's breath hissed out. No. He couldn't let himself wonder. He'd go crazy. He'd spend every waking moment scheming how to get her into bed, how to achieve that satisfaction in reality.

He'd act like a damned fool.

Cars and people hurried past each other on the street below. Deliberately, Dean relaxed his tight jaw. First of all, it had been a dream, not a memory. Secondly, he was his own man, heredity notwithstanding.

He didn't have to act like a damned fool.

Even if he might want to.

~~~

Kelly was thrilled to find Dean's basement gym. She could stay in shape and be ready to go back to work the minute this trial period marriage was over.

On Monday morning she jumped onto Dean's state-of-the-art equipment, ignoring the voice chattering inside her head that after four days in his house she was doing absolutely nothing about learning who 'this' Dean really was.

It wasn't her fault, though. Dean was avoiding her. He left every morning super early and came home super late. Not her fault.

In the plain-walled gym, Kelly pumped away on Dean's stationary bicycle. Well, all right, truth be told, she was glad Dean was avoiding her. She felt very confused about him. He was cold, disapproving, way too authoritarian. He didn't even *like* her.

And yet—and yet—she couldn't help feeling there was something there, some *thing*—

On the stationary bicycle, Kelly shook her head. What was there was pure lust, a simple physical attraction. She wanted it to be more than that. God knew, she *missed* the man she'd married, but a girl had to face reality.

He wasn't there. In fact, he'd never been 'there.'

Kelly worked out for two solid hours, really getting into it every time she started wondering about 'her' Dean again. Finally, exhausted, she wiped her face, threw the towel around her neck, then used one last burst of energy to hop up the stairs.

A light flickered from an open door on the second floor hall. Sounds of explosions drifted forth. Panting from her jog up the stairs, Kelly stalked down the wood paneled hall to investigate.

Past the open doorway, Robby sat cross-legged on a carpeted floor. His tongue peeked out of one corner of his mouth as he concentrated on his joystick and a TV screen. Toys littered the room beyond him, the windows of which were covered by a set of heavy curtains.

Kelly crossed her arms over her chest and leaned one shoulder against the door jamb. She hadn't ignored Dean's little brother, but she hadn't sought him out, either. It seemed best not to rock that boat. Though, darn it, she wanted to.

*Look at the kid.* His every brain cell was concentrated on what Kelly could now see was a battle between chaps-wearing cowboys and scantily clad women. Both sides were armed to the teeth. Kelly dabbed her still-dewing forehead with her towel. This was not right. A child shouldn't be spending his time this way, self-absorbed and sedentary. "Hey," she heard herself say.

There was no answer to this greeting. Just a kapow from the TV set, followed by the sound of shattering.

Kelly drew her thumb along her lower lip. Yes, the boy needed attention, but if she gave him any, it would only make trouble for her in an already difficult situation.

Kelly bit her thumb. On the other hand, what was more important: taking care of her own comfort, or helping another in need? Kelly straightened from the door jamb. She spoke again, louder. "Hey!"

Robby started. Instead of an explosion from the TV set, there was a thud. He turned, looking outraged. "For the love of—! Oh, it's you." His look of outrage turned to something bashful. It was all the confirmation Kelly needed that she was right to interfere. "Uh, hi," Robby said.

"So." Kelly skirted a field of checker squares as she approached Robby. "Good game?"

"It sucks." Robby's attention drifted back to the TV set. His fingers crept toward his joystick.

"But you've got a good score there." At least Kelly thought the numbers lit at the right of the screen represented a score, and it looked high.

Robby shrugged. "I've had plenty of time to practice, since I got expelled."

Expelled? "Oh." Kelly cleared her throat. She hadn't realized...though she supposed she could have guessed. He should have been in school. "Uh, what happened?"

Instead of answering he started pushing the button of his joystick. Explosions burst onto the TV screen. Then, abruptly, he admitted, "I ran away."



Kelly thought of the recent tree house business and wondered just how ingrained this habit was. "Oh."

Robby turned to glare at her. "I hate living in a *dorm*. With a *roommate*. Roommates are the *worst*."

Kelly's eyes blinked wide. A roommate? Why, that meant boarding school. Good heavens, he was only nine. They were already farming him out to boarding school? Not giving him a family life?

"Um..." Since Kelly didn't dare express the outrage she was suddenly feeling on Robby's behalf, she switched back to her original goal. Expelled or not, Robby needed something social and constructive to do. "I...well, listen," she said. "If you're bored with the video game, then...see, I am so bored, too, and desperate to get out of here. Would you—?"

"What?" Robby sat up straight. He stared at her, little-boy appalled. "You're going to leave? Already?"

Kelly was taken aback by his expression of distress. "Well—"

"You can't leave," Robby stated.

"Anywhere?" Kelly blinked.

"No. I made a bet with Troy that Dean could keep you at least two weeks."

Kelly's jaw dropped.

Robby jumped to his feet. "Look, I know he seems a drag, all stuffy and 'should' and 'shouldn't'-ing, but he's a straight-up guy, you know. Always there when you need him."

"...Always there."

"Right. Like when they kicked me out of school. Dad was nowhere to be found but Dean came to get me." Robby's gaze skittered sideways. "He always does."

Kelly spoke very slowly. "I'm...not leaving Dean." *At least not yet*, she added silently to herself. At the same time, she thought: Robby and Troy had made a bet? And Troy hadn't thought Dean could keep her two weeks?

Robby visibly relaxed. "Good. I mean, not even my Dad has had a marriage that lasted less than two weeks."

Kelly stared at him. *Was that so?* "Yes, well." Carefully, she cleared her throat. "All I'm asking is to get out of the house. You know, like to a park."

"A park?" Robby's look of relief changed to one of bewilderment.

"Yeah. Grass, trees, maybe a swing set or a baseball diamond, you know the kind of place."

Robby looked even more bewildered. "You don't have to go anywhere for that. We have it all here."

Kelly rolled her eyes. "You do not have *everything* here." Like other boys to play with, for one thing. "Let's ask Jackson."

Kelly put Robby's bet and his disconcerting description of Dean out of her mind as she located Jackson and talked him into driving them to the nearest public recreation facility. Her goal was to get Robby doing something worthwhile, outdoors and physical. But in the car, luxuriously ensconced in the back seat, Kelly found the Dean problem return to mind.

*Always there when you need him.* Was that the flip side of Dean's heavy authoritarianism, that he was always there when you needed him, totally reliable?

She felt peculiar even considering the question, so she latched onto Troy and Robby's bet, instead. They assumed she wasn't going to stay with Dean. Rather, they assumed Dean wasn't going to be able to keep her.

Just like his father couldn't keep any of his wives.

Kelly chewed on a finger and stared out the car window at the pristine country estates flowing by. Wives, plural. Very plural, if Kelly'd understood correctly. She wondered if 'wives' was the way things had been in Dean's youth, too. Had a succession of stepmothers passed through his childhood?

*I know a lot about this type of situation* he'd told her. Kelly frowned and kept chewing her finger. Had Dean given his boyish heart to one after another of his father's multiple brides? Was that what made him now so cold? Why he'd warned Kelly away from Robby?

In the car, Kelly lowered her bit finger. All right, so maybe Dean had had a lousy childhood, a lonely one. That didn't make up for his arrogant and unfriendly manner. He was a big boy now. He chose how he behaved.

But it could explain some things. Yes, Kelly had to admit, looking out the window. It could explain a lot.

~~~

The sun was high, the sky was blue, and the ball Troy sent over the tennis net whizzed with vicious accuracy to a corner just beyond his opponent.

"For the love of— You *killed* me. Again!" Emery Stanford Hunsington, III, panted as he turned to watch the ball bounce from the carefully maintained Club tennis court and fly into the fence. "That's game *and* match," he groaned, but he smiled ruefully as he came up to the net to shake Troy's hand.

"It was just good luck," Troy replied. He was always modest about tennis, even though he spent enough time and effort on the game to deserve the number of wins he collected every week at the Club.

Lately, he'd been spending even more time at the Club than usual. It was too hard to hang around the house, watching Kelly get ignored by Dean.

Now Emery shook his head of thinning blond hair. "If that was luck, then you ought to go to Vegas."

Troy's easy smile faltered. He retrieved it quickly, however, before the other man could guess he'd rippled Troy's equanimity. "Maybe," he agreed. "Maybe I should do just that."

Emery jogged off toward the showers, running late for some board meeting or other. Troy, who had nowhere to be late to, followed at a more leisurely rate, strolling down the hedge-bounded walkway and thinking about Las Vegas and the marriage his cousin, Dean, had entered into there. As far as Troy could tell, that marriage was going exactly where he'd predicted: south, and in a big hurry.

It was too bad, really. Having gotten to know Kelly a little over the past few days, Troy was starting to like her. She was nice, she was genuine, she was...all right. She could probably warm up that cold house of theirs. But Dean? Oh, Dean had the vision of a mole sometimes.

Troy reached the end of the hedge-bordered path where the courtyard opened in front of the gym and showers. He idly gazed down the path that led to the other set of tennis courts. There, as if thinking about Dean could conjure the woman, was Felicia. Felicia, wearing a blindingly pink tank top and a short, white tennis skirt. Though she walked

toward the gym, indicating that she, too, had just finished a match of tennis, she looked cool and unruffled, without a hair out of place or a drop of sweat. She strode toward the courtyard with the walk debutantes practiced and she had perfected; cool, refined grace, entirely stripped of the sexual.

Troy scuffed to a halt. He felt an instantaneous, and unfortunately familiar, urge to heat up and ruffle her. He'd like to see a few of her silky blond hairs out of place. He would absolutely love to see her sweat. And look sexual.

His response to her made no earthly sense. The woman was interested in *Dean*, for heaven's sake. Why was Troy attracted to a woman who was not only a do-gooding, whip-cracking ice queen, but who preferred *Dean*?

He didn't know the answer, he only knew how hard it was to drag his gaze up from her long, thoroughbred legs. "Felicia," he said, since she was nearly in front of him and some kind of salutation was required.

"Troy." Her tone could have frosted a volcano. But still, it was somehow polite. Felicia could do that, put you in your place while skirting the correct side of good manners.

The problem was that the more politely frosted she got, the hotter Troy became. And the angrier. He didn't *want* to be turned on by her. Curving his lips into an insolent smile, he balanced his tennis racket on his shoulder. Then he did what he usually did with Felicia: got mean.

"Fancy meeting you here," he drawled. "I would have thought you'd be too busy to play tennis during the day, what with all those heartbreakingly good works you do." He swept his gaze from the bright pink curve of her breasts to those long, slender legs. "But I suppose we have to keep our girlish figure somehow."

Felicia's eyes were snapping when Troy looked up again, just as he'd planned. Her ice looked, for a minute, hot.

If only he didn't like her looking hot so much, this conversation might not go the way all of them did. Asinine.

Meanwhile, she recovered her sang-froid quickly, calming the heat in her eyes and giving Troy a brilliant smile. "A healthy life is a balanced one." She rested her tennis racket on her shoulder, mirroring Troy. "Which reminds me, since you mentioned good works, I wanted to talk to Dean about the Boston Family Aid Foundation. We need to hire a professional fundraiser. If you get a chance—" Felicia's casual smile widened—"will you ask him to call me?"

Troy squinted. Yep, it was going asinine, and she wasn't helping. She knew damn well he wasn't going to be her messenger boy. "Why can't you call him yourself?"

"I have." Felicia's wide smile dimmed. "But I haven't been able to get through to him."

Troy's eyebrows jumped. "No!"

Swiftly, Felicia commenced damage control. "Oh, I'm sure he's just fabulously busy, running that huge, multi-national corporation of his." She was smiling again, and twirling her tennis racket on her shoulder. "You know, the one in the building downtown with his name on it?"

"Yeah, I know the one." Surely she wasn't trying to get his goat with *that*? Troy wasn't jealous of Dean's big company. "Even if Dean is so busy in his big building, he still should have returned at least *one* of your half a dozen phone calls," Troy insisted.

Felicia's twirling tennis racket halted. "I did not call him half a dozen times."

"Only four or five then?" Troy laughed.

Oh, he'd done it, then. Troy could practically see smoke streaming out of her nostrils. He might have enjoyed the sight more if it didn't stir him so, down below. He lowered his tennis racket and grasped it, two-handed, in front of himself.

"On second thought," Felicia said, eyes blazing and voice more frosty than ever. "Perhaps it isn't Dean I should be speaking to about the fundraising job. Perhaps it is you."

"Me?" Now, that came from left field. Troy's name and the word "job" were never linked together. "What are you talking about?"

"You know..." Felicia's eyes were sparkling dangerously now. "You'd be perfect for it."

"For a job?" Troy choked.

"That's right." Felicia resumed twirling her tennis racket. "You have all the necessary skills, in abundance. You're outgoing and even charming, in a sleazy sort of way. You know all the right people and—" Her smile turned positively wicked. "And you have extensive experience in convincing people to part with their cash."

Troy could feel his face redden. He didn't borrow money from his friends...very often. Needless to say, he'd *never* put the touch on Felicia. "Gee, thanks for the offer, but I think I'll pass." Thank goodness that had come out just right. Casual and a little snotty.

But she didn't seem to care. Still smiling malevolently, she shrugged and started to turn away, toward the women's part of the gym. Troy had the unhappy feeling she'd just won this match, or would, if he didn't manage to one-up her.

"Oh, Felicia?" Troy called.

Still smiling, she stopped.

Troy smiled back at her. "Actually, it just occurred to me... I might have an idea why Dean hasn't managed to return any of your calls."

Felicia raised a questioning, haughty eyebrow.

Troy felt a surge of impending triumph. He'd been holding his ammunition, deeming it unsporting to discharge, but she'd asked for it. "See, the fact is it'd be kinda hard for Dean to call his former lady friends, even one so very close as yourself...since he just got married."

Felicia's face froze. It simply went on pause; smile, haughtily arched eyebrow and all. The only thing that changed was its color as the blood seemed to drain from her skin. If Troy had hit her with his tennis racket, he couldn't have achieved the shock he now saw evident in her very attempt to disguise it. Clear proof, assuming he'd doubted, of how deeply Felicia was infatuated with Dean.

"Married?" she finally asked. Troy could tell she'd meant to say the word in a normal tone, but it came out in a whisper.

He sank his weight onto one hip, somehow hanging onto his smile though he wasn't feeling so triumphant any more. "Yeah, he got married about a week ago. Nice lady." Which was true, Troy told himself. Kelly *was* a nice lady, even if it was unlikely she was going to remain Dean's wife much longer.

God, he hadn't *had* to tell Felicia this news. What had gotten into him?

Meanwhile, Felicia was doing an admirable job of retrieving her self-possession. "A week ago," she said, and cleared her throat. From somewhere she produced a parlor-room smile. "Why, then, you must give him my congratulations. What a—ahem—Why, what a wonderful thing for him. Married!"

Troy crushed his teeth together. He'd been a pig, as usual, and she was rising to the occasion, saying the right things, in the right way. "Yeah," he said, once he managed to pry his jaw apart. "I'll give him your message."

With one last, utterly appropriate smile, Felicia turned and strode into the women's locker room. High class all the way.

Troy swiveled to slash his racket at an innocent hedge. He hadn't intended to open his trap. What was it about the woman that brought out the absolute worst in him? He scowled at the hedge and wondered *what* it could be.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A disturbing report brought Dean home in time for dinner. He'd called Maggie, the housekeeper, from the office to check in, and could scarcely believe what she'd told him. Kelly knew exactly what Dean thought about her spending time with Robby.

Five minutes before the dinner hour, Dean drove his Lexus into the estate's multi-car garage and rehearsed the set-down he intended to give Kelly. But as he got out of his car, he wondered if he was over-reacting. Robby had spent enough time with his father to have discovered for himself the disappointing nature of stepmothers.

On the other hand, there was something about Kelly that invited a person to believe she was different from all the rest. Something...well, *inviting*.

As the automatic garage door closed behind him, Dean shook his head. The woman was a menace. She had to be stopped. That was all there was to it.

Approaching the house from the side, Dean used his normal route in of an evening, through the kitchen.

Roberto, the cook, was alone in the room. He spoke before Dean could attempt a greeting. "It's what they said they wanted."

"Excuse me?"

"Hamburgers with French fries. It's what they said they wanted." Roberto turned to slap his spatula on the stove.

The cook apparently wanted exoneration. "Hamburgers are fine," Dean said. Who cared what was being served? What he needed was something to ease the nerves tightening his stomach. He was going to see her. She was going to do that thing she did to him—to his hormones, that was.

Determined to overcome his unruly nature, Dean spent another moment in the kitchen, straightening his lapels and taking in a deep breath. Then he pushed through the swing door to the formal dining room.

The room was empty. But Dean heard the sound of laughter and a boy's chatter. If he wasn't mistaken, Troy's tenor was involved, too.

Outside.

Frowning, Dean went to the French doors of the dining room and pulled them open. On the stone walkway that abutted the house, a wrought-iron table had been set for dinner. Kelly, Robby, and Troy, all wearing shorts and T shirts, sat around it in animated discussion.

So much for dressing for dinner. In the span of four short days Kelly had dispensed with that family tradition.

Dean felt his righteousness return. And then his eyes met hers. Righteousness departed as his heart took a drop, and then sped.

Dean lifted his chin. "Good evening, everyone."

Troy and Robby turned to look at him then, and Dean heard how stilted he'd sounded, particularly compared to the casual style of conversation he'd interrupted. Kelly reacted first, a wide smile spreading over her face. Laughing at him, no doubt.

"Hi, yourself!" she said. "Are you hungry?"

He stared at her. Her legs were bare and long, and she wore something soft and drapy on top. Then, *hamburgers*, he realized. She was talking about hamburgers. His face warmed. "No, I...ate on the way home from the office."

"Too bad." Robby reached to grab a handful of fries. "This is way better than the grub Roberto usually fixes."

Before Dean could reply, Kelly tapped the back of Robby's hand. "Enough carbos there, my friend. Have a carrot peel."

Dean saw Robby's expression change and braced himself for the boy's nasty retort. Instead, turning utterly complacent, Robby plucked up a carrot peel.

Dean blinked. He knew Robby made an effort to control himself when he was living with his big brother, but this was something else again.

"Well, pull up a chair, anyway," Kelly offered.

Dean hesitated, still wondering about Robby's behavior. It reminded him that he wasn't here to socialize. Hardly. At the same time, he couldn't chew Kelly out right in front of everyone. So he shrugged and walked up to their happy table. Trying not to seem too awkward, he lowered into one of the wrought iron chairs.

Kelly crunched down on a lettuce leaf. "We were just talking about what to do over the weekend."

"Is that right?"

"Oh, we understand that *you'll* be working, of course." Troy hooded his eyes at Dean.

Dean hooded his eyes back at Troy. "A fair assumption. I usually do work on the weekends—unlike somebody else I know, who doesn't work any day of the week."

Immediately, Dean was stunned by his own words. He never goaded Troy about his lack of employment. For one thing, it never worked. Troy would merely laugh and toss back some flippant reply.

Today, however, a dusky color crossed Troy's face. As if he actually cared. He dropped his gaze to pluck up his own carrot peel. "Ah, now I wonder who that worthless fellow could be?" Despite his faint blush, Troy was grinning again when he lifted his eyes to meet Dean's.

Dean frowned. Despite the grin, he could swear Troy was embarrassed.

"Yes, we know Dean will be working," Kelly spoke up. Her smile was wry. "We've gotten to know you that well, anyway."

Dean looked at his wife. She smiled back at him with too much innocence, meanwhile crunching down on another lettuce leaf.

Troy coughed, hiding a smile.

Apparently indifferent to this byplay, Robby interjected, "I liked the park. We could do that again."

"The park?" So that's where Kelly had taken the kid. Maggie hadn't mentioned specifics.

"Basketball." Robby gestured a hook shot. "Those guys were all right."

"Normal children," Kelly murmured, not quite under her breath. "Living in normal houses."

Troy did his best to suppress another cough, or perhaps it was a snicker. In any event, Robby went on, enthusiastic. "And Kelly, she's got quite a jump shot. You should have seen her, Dean. Whammo! She knocked their eyes out."

Dean could well imagine she'd done exactly that. He frowned meaningfully at Kelly. "It sounds like you two had quite a day together."

"Yup." Robby nodded vigorously. "We did."

But Dean kept his gaze on Kelly. She was supposed to have used her 'good judgment.' She was supposed to have listened to him, dammit, and left the boy alone.

Kelly had the gall to smile sweetly. "You shoulda been there."

"Indeed, I think I should have been." He sent her another killing glance, but she remained complacent.

"Maybe next time," she said, as if there would ever be such a thing. "Hey, we bought watermelon for dessert." She smiled directly at Dean. "Want some?"

Despite his acute annoyance with her, a bolt of heat shot through him. *Want some of what?* His body posed the question, lascivious, before his brain caught up. She was talking about watermelon.

"No?" Kelly queried.

"No," Dean replied, then added a reluctant, "Thank you." He pushed up from his chair. "I would appreciate a few minutes of your time, Kelly, when you've finished dinner. I'll be in the study."

"Sure, Dean." She plucked up another leaf of lettuce. "I have nothing but time these days."

~~~

Kelly knew Dean was furious. She also knew she hadn't done anything wrong, or at least not much wrong. How could it be wrong to give Robby some much-needed attention, to get him out of the house and playing with other boys? Nevertheless, she dawdled at the outdoor table as long as she possibly could. She waited until the watermelon had been eaten to the green. She waited until Robby, himself, decided it was time for a bath. She was waiting for Troy to leave, too, but instead he arched a brow and leaned over the wrought iron table.

"You aren't afraid of him, are you?"

Kelly shot him a glare. "Who, me? Afraid?"

Troy's smile broadened.

Kelly crushed her teeth together. "I think it's *you* who's afraid of him."

"Oh, absolutely." Troy had no problem confessing. "I was afraid of Dean even before I had to attend the same school with him and live up to—or fail to live up to—his example." He laughed. "And it's only gotten worse as I sink lower and lower to my true level."

Troy was smiling, but his little laugh hadn't sounded happy. Kelly suddenly wondered what might be going on at Troy's "true level." Before she could ask, he laughed again, in a tone more like his carefree self.

"But recently I've been able to relax." He grinned. "Seeing that Dean's got you in his sights, instead."

Kelly went from worried about Troy to scowling at him. "For heaven's sake, Dean doesn't have anybody 'in his sights.'"

"No? A few minutes ago I could swear I saw his finger on the trigger." Troy was still grinning as he got up from his chair. "Have fun."

Huh. Kelly remained at the patio table as Troy walked away. She didn't believe Dean had his finger on the trigger, or at least she wasn't afraid of that. She *was* afraid because the mere sight of Dean coming out to the patio had...stirred her so. She'd felt her heart beating and her lungs struggling for air. Sexual, again.

It made no sense. The man had been avoiding her, he looked down on her, but that didn't seem to matter. Her body kept acting like he was the tender, loving friend she'd made beside a casino slot machine. No, worse than that. Her body acted like this fellow would do just as well as the other—if not better.

The sun was starting to descend into the tops of the trees. Kelly shook her head and pushed out of the chair. Friend or foe, it was time to face him down.

~~~

At the desk in his study, Dean sifted through his papers, not really seeing any of them. All he could think was: *you asked her in here, to be alone with you, you idiot. What were you thinking?*

Dean slapped his hand down on a perfectly well-conceived business plan. He was thinking about Robby, that's what he was thinking. Robby was the reason he'd asked Kelly into his study for a good talking-to. She was going to break the child's heart, carelessly, recklessly. Dean wasn't about to stand around and let that happen.

Dean stared at his hand on the desk. It occurred to him that Kelly might not intend to do wrong. She might sincerely want to be kind. Tapping his thumb on the papers, Dean discarded the idea as irrelevant. No matter her intentions, in this case it was not kind to be, well, kind. In fact, kindness could be the worst sort of cruelty. He had to get that through to her.

The door cracked open. Kelly's face peeked round the jamb. "You wanted to see me?"

Dean let out a long, slow breath. His skin heated at her mere presence. He had to struggle to recover his equanimity as he stood. "Yes, please come in."

She slipped through the doorway cautiously, gracefully, like a deer. Her gaze swept the papers set in piles all over his desk. "I don't even know your job title. President, CEO?"

"Chairman of the Board." Of several boards, in fact, but even the one sounded pompous, suddenly.

"Family business?" She tilted her head.

Dean paused. "You could say." He'd founded the genetics research company himself, then added to it by the judicious merging with innovative competitors. He didn't feel like explaining the lone nature of the enterprise to Kelly, however. He was part of a family, wasn't he? So that made his business a family business, even if no other member of his family had ever had anything to do with it. "Please," he ordered. "Have a seat."

She thought about it, then moved toward the chairs. Intellectually, Dean understood the discipline it took to create her sinuous stride. Viscerally, he wanted to stop that stride and pull her under him onto the Aubusson rug.

Lord. He fought to bring his body under control. Robby, he reminded himself. His brother's welfare. That was his purpose here. Nothing else.

Kelly halted and rested her hands on the back of one of the brocade chairs. "I know why you called this little meeting," she admitted, "and I don't blame you one bit."

Dean raised his brows. She was going to make this easy for him?

"It's time we stopped fooling around here," she said.

"Excuse me?"

"We have less than two months now." She strolled around the armchair. "Clearly, you're a busy man, but you're going to have to find some sort of slot to fit me into your tight schedule."

Dean went very still. *A slot to fit her in?*

She was directly in front of his desk now, close enough to bang her thighs against it.

"I need to get to know you," she said.

Dean's brain went cock-eyed. She needed to *get to know him*? Only by looking at her face and seeing the utter sobriety there, did her real meaning penetrate.

She needed to get to know him, him as opposed to the man she'd married. This had been her avowed goal as his temporary wife. He wanted to talk about Robby, he needed to talk about Robby, but...she had a point.

"Well?" She crossed her arms.

Dean raised his chin. "Of course. You do need evidence if you are to reach any conclusions. I understand that." But damned if he wanted to spend ten minutes in her company.

On the other hand, he had to spend time in her company. Implicitly, he'd given his word. Flustered, Dean heard himself blurt, "What about the opera? Saturday night."

She stopped her gentle banging against his desk. "What?"

'What,' indeed. It was a ridiculous idea. But Dean had gone too far to turn back. He adopted a lofty tone. "Come with me to the opera on Saturday night. A date. That is the conventional means by which couples get to know one another, is it not?"

"A date," she murmured.

A date at the opera. He was an idiot. Yes, he had tickets for the special benefit performance Saturday evening, but he'd planned to forego them. His showgirl wife would hardly appreciate *La Bohème*, and in his present circumstances he could hardly invite somebody more suitable.

"The opera," Kelly went on, speaking louder. One corner of her mouth curved thoughtfully. "Sounds...great!"

"It does?"

"That's a whole evening, right? Dinner, the show, at least three, four hours?"

"Closer to five." Dean was regretting his impulsive invitation more by the second. It would be five hours of temptation, five hours of physical affliction.

On the other hand, maybe a date with his wife would be a means to extinguish this inappropriate lust, once and for all. Seen against the backdrop of his real life she would have to look less attractive... Wouldn't she?

"Five hours," Kelly breathed. For an instant Dean thought she turned uncertain, too, but that had to be his imagination. What would she have to be uncertain about?

And, indeed, she gave a decisive nod. "Saturday night," she said. "It's a date."

~~~

A date with her husband. It had to be the worst idea in the world, Kelly decided. Why? For one thing, she didn't have a thing to wear.

Kelly stood inside the Olympic-size walk-in closet of her bedroom suite on Saturday afternoon, her arms crossed over her chest and one hip locked. No, not a single, solitary thing hanging in that closet was appropriate to wear to the opera. Not that Kelly knew

what was appropriate to wear to the opera, but she was certain she didn't have it. And it was too late to go shopping. Besides, she needed to save her money, not working for two months.

Kelly scowled and fit one of her fingers between her teeth. All right, she wasn't worried about what she was going to wear; she could always figure out something. What had her all hot and bothered was being roped into this 'date' at all.

Five hours together with Dean Singleton.

Oh, it was her own fault. In Dean's study, knowing he wanted to blow up at her about Robby and not wanting to back down about her involvement with the kid, she'd reached wildly for some way, any way, to distract him.

So now they had to spend time together, five hours worth of time. Together.

Kelly let out a deep breath. Well? So? Wasn't it her goal here to spend time with Dean—'this' Dean—to get to know who he was? She needed to put the question of this marriage firmly behind her.

But there was one small problem. Every time she saw Dean there was the heart beating, the blood rushing, and the sensation of butterflies in her stomach.

Worse, he was clearly hot for her right back. Meanwhile it was only becoming more and more clear how very wrong they were for each other. Their values, goals, and lifestyles were all at extreme odds.

Dean claimed that part of him was the man Kelly had met in Las Vegas, but she hadn't seen an ounce of evidence to support such a theory. He was cold, remote, and judgmental. And he'd been avoiding her ever since she'd moved in here.

Kelly lowered the finger she'd been gnawing and frowned. On the other hand, Robby had said things: about their absent father, about Dean's own youth spent shunted away in boarding schools, and about the endless stream of stepmothers. She could almost see why Dean behaved the way he did. He practically didn't have a choice. If no one had treated him with warmth, how could he know how to treat anyone else with warmth?

She'd noticed his abruptness when he'd met them out on the patio the other evening. It had been as if he'd wanted to join in, but had no idea how. As if, maybe, he were shy.

Kelly combed her hair back with one hand. Heck, maybe a part of 'her' Dean *was* inside there, trapped.

With her hand in her hair, Kelly halted. She blinked at the colorful array of her clothes.

Whoa! No. Stop. *Maybe* Dean had suffered a lonely childhood, *maybe* no one had ever showed him they cared. *Maybe* that made him wall himself away, in self-defense.

But more likely he was just a cold fish.

Slowly, she finished combing her hand through her hair. She had a habit of making up virtuous qualities in a man to support her attraction. She couldn't do that this time. She had to keep her eyes open, her judgment clear.

She had to see the man for who he truly was, and not who she wished he would be.

'Her' Dean, trapped inside. Kelly shook her head at herself. Not likely. The real Dean was utterly self-contained, an island unto himself, and happy to be so. He wasn't *needy*. She'd see that crystal clear after spending five hours at the opera with him.

She pursed her lips and reached out to toy with a cerise silk number. That's right. She could get rid of her ridiculously romantic vision of 'Dean' trapped inside of Dean by the end of the evening. She'd see that her husband was not at all the man she had married.

Hmph. Kelly swept the cerise aside to pull a purple spandex miniskirt off the closet rack. So actually, this 'date' might not be such a bad idea, after all.

~~~

On a Saturday night Troy had any number of parties to choose from, the host of which would have been glad for his witty, charming presence.

On this Saturday evening he wasn't getting ready to go to a single one of them. He was sitting in Dean's formal dining room laying out solitaire hands. As he dealt the cards, he listened for the descent of Kelly from her bedroom. That scary interview of hers with Dean in the study had turned into a date.

Not that Troy was worried about Kelly. She could obviously hold her own with Dean, which meant, coincidentally, that Troy didn't have to worry about the outcome of his little bet with Robby, either. She'd be gone in a week, more's the pity.

Troy heaved a gusty sigh as he flipped the cards in a game of Klondike. No, he wasn't worried about Kelly. He was sitting here all by himself because he couldn't bear to be with anybody he knew.

He couldn't bear to be with himself, for that matter. Specifically, he wished he could part company from the segment of himself that kept thinking about Felicia.

Since Monday and his altercation with her at the tennis court, he hadn't been able to get the woman out of his mind. He kept seeing the expression on her face when he'd told her the news about Dean. She'd resembled a delicate little bird, yes a delicate little bird that had just gotten shot between the eyes.

Considering how much Troy hated the memory of that expression, it was bizarre how often it kept popping into his head.

"Damn," Troy muttered. "Lost again." With a vigorous movement, he swept the cards into a pile.

All week he'd been trying to tell himself that Felicia's shot bird expression hadn't been his fault. Because, hey, was there anything wrong with telling Felicia that her wonderboy, Dean, had gotten married? All Troy had done was tell her the truth. Dean *was* married.

But all week his rationalizations had fallen flat. Even if it had been right to tell Felicia about Dean's marriage, Troy hadn't done so in a right way. He'd done it to let fall a drop of poison. And he'd been careful to let that poison fall at the precise moment to cause the most pain, embarrassment, and humiliation possible.

Troy pulled the cards into a tight pile and squeezed his hands around their corners. There was no rationalization for his behavior. He'd been rude. Deliberately, inexcusably rude. He breathed in and out slowly while admitting what that meant.

The knowledge was bone deep, ingrained young and repeated often. The proper thing to do. For all Troy's ne'er-do-well, good-time, occasionally-land-in-the-pokey ways, he never strayed from the "proper thing." Because it wasn't "improper" to live solely off a trust fund, or get arrested for speeding, or even fall into bed with somebody else's wife. But it was exceedingly improper to act rude. It simply wasn't done. And if it *was* done, then one had to apologize.

Hissing out a breath from between his teeth, Troy tossed the cards onto the table. He jumped from his seat and glared at the hearts and diamonds spread across the gleaming surface. There was no getting around it. He had to apologize. Good God. To Felicia.

~~~

On Saturday night Dean prowled the downstairs hall, shifting his shoulders in his black tuxedo. This date was going to work. It had to. Starting with the choice of clothes Kelly would make for going to the opera, he would see how completely wrong she was for him. The sexual attraction would diminish. The way she'd hold herself, treat the opera, the boredom he knew she'd exhibit—it would all work toward curing him of this embarrassing attraction.

Dean knew he could not continue to feel passionate about a woman who yawned at La Bohème.

Troy walked out of the dining room to drop into one of the hall chairs. He shuffled a deck of cards while gazing at Dean with something between curiosity and challenge. Robby was already waiting in the hall, swinging his legs over the side of a sofa and blinking at his half-brother. Dean scowled at the both of them. The pair took far too proprietary an interest in his bride, and Dean had a good idea why...

A rustling sound from above had Dean whirling. Dimly, he was aware of Troy halting his shuffling, of Robby freezing in his seat. But mostly he saw Kelly.

Kelly in a lipstick red pantsuit. The material hugged her figure, outlining every curve and angle with confidence and approval. Over this swirled a Chinese silk duster with giant red flowers splashed upon it, hiding and revealing the tight pantsuit. It was an unusual choice, somehow elegant, unexpectedly sophisticated.

And hot.

Dean couldn't swallow. He couldn't move. He was like a pointer who'd found his prey; taut, tensed, trembling.

Her lashes lowered. She started down the stairs. Toe down, heel down, sway of the hip. Dean felt his paralysis leave, replaced by the urge to meet her halfway, to press his body against hers and move her going up again, to the bedrooms.

How he would like to rip off that tantalizing pantsuit and engage in an activity quite different from listening to opera.

The abrupt vehemence of the thought snapped Dean out of it. He took a step back. His eyes narrowed as she slinked herself the rest of the way down the stairs.

Fine, she'd passed the dress test. Her choice of clothes made him want her more than ever. But she was going to hate the opera. He was certain of it. She would yawn, fidget, and thus display her utter incompatibility.

She stopped at the bottom of the stairs, looked him straight in the eye, and tilted her head.

*So, do you want me yet? Are you panting and begging on your knees?*

She gave him a little smile.

*Have I got you completely in my power?*

Dean tightened his jaw. Just a few hours, and then he could answer that question in the negative. Yes, he liked what she was wearing, but she was going to hate the opera. Discovering how very different she was, intellectually and socially, would set him free. This—this clawing need would depart for good.

"Well," she asked. Her voice was breathless, sexy. "Are we ready to go?"

His jaw relaxed. He even smiled. "Oh, we're ready." He took her arm. "Are we ever."

## [CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

"Well, if that wasn't the most—exciting—moving—tremendous piece of stage artistry I have ever seen!" Kelly fanned herself with her program as Dean channeled them through the milling crowd and toward the exit. "Really! The costumes, the drama. The music!" Kelly heaved a deep sigh. "I never knew opera was so *exciting*."

Dean answered not a word, just kept moving them with stoic persistence toward the side exit door. Kelly allowed herself to be tugged, fanning herself with her program and rather enjoying the man doing the work for a change.

She'd soon discovered that going out on a date with Dean was far different from her usual experience: that being where she researched the show times, where she found a method of transportation, and where, more often than not, she picked up the tab. With Dean, he'd been the one to do all of that, and more. He'd taken care of her, and Kelly couldn't help it. She liked it.

"It's good I self-parked and not valeted," Dean muttered, shoving politely through the crowd. "Or we'd never get home."

"Home?" Kelly's joyful smile faded. "We're going straight home?"

He turned back to shoot her a glance. "Where else would we go?"

Kelly blinked. "I don't know." Indeed, she'd thought five hours more time than she could possibly endure with her husband. Now she felt reluctant to come to the end of it.

He'd been warily attentive all evening. She wasn't used to attentiveness. And he'd come out of his shell for a minute or two there. Although he hadn't answered her rapt comments on the opera just now, his attention on the stage during the performance had been complete and genuine. Kelly could swear he'd been moved. She tilted her head. "I wouldn't mind getting some coffee."

"Coffee." Dean halted his progress through the crowd. Immediately, they were shoved from behind. He had to grab Kelly to keep them both from toppling. With his fingers gripping her shoulders and their bodies pressed together, they were in a sudden embrace. Kelly could feel the strength of his chest against her breast and the barely-there stubble of his chin on her forehead. She could feel the instant blaze beneath her skin.

He grunted and disentangled from her, immediately shooting out his wrist to look at his watch. "Coffee?" he repeated, and glared at the poor watch.

Kelly faltered. Was he glaring at his watch because he didn't want to spend more time with her? Or because his heart had raced just then, too, and he didn't want her to know? To back up a step, had he really been moved by the opera, or was she making up things about his personality again, things to support her own breathlessness in that brief physical contact?

Kelly gazed into the cool, impenetrable eyes that rose to meet hers. Well, perhaps she was making things up, but there was only one sure way to find out. She needed to get to know him, really know him. This evening offered the best opportunity yet. All she had to do was...be careful. She had to make sure to see only what was really there, and not what she wished would be there.

Kelly drew a deep breath and smiled. "Coffee," she insisted, and took his arm. "I'm sure we could find some place open."

~~~

Dean was appalled. She'd liked the opera. Liked it? She'd loved it! With her delicate fingers now wrapped around his forearm, she hummed *Mi chiamano Mimi* while keeping pace with his taken-aback strides.

She was supposed to have hated it, been bored, showed her true colors. He was supposed to have gotten free of this unhealthy attraction.

Instead, she was swaying to her memory of the music. Positively glowing with enjoyment, she'd prolonged the evening, insisting on *coffee*. And he didn't even mind. Mind? He was thrumming with excitement, simply to be near her. Pathetic, that's what he was. Truly pathetic.

During intermission they'd run into Felicia Thurgood, a distant relative and social acquaintance of Dean's who'd been very properly attending the production with her aunt and uncle. But had Felicia, with her modesty and refinement, done one single thing for Dean's libido?

Felicia was like an unlit match compared to the bonfire that was Kelly.

"Here?" Kelly now asked. She scuffed to a stop and turned toward a brightly lit café that filled the limestone corner of a building. "It looks kinda pricey but I have to admit, it's the only place we've seen that's open."

Dean looked up at the elegant café, a place he came often after the opera. He must have directed their steps this way out of habit. "This is fine." He was determined to escape Kelly's clutches yet. One place was as good for the task as another.

Inside, they managed to get seated at one of the plush banquettes by a window. Kelly looked around with a smile that suggested she wasn't seeing any of it; the elegant surroundings, the one-of-a-kind dessert creations, or the distinguished-looking crowd. She wagged her shoulders. "Oh, I'm still all shivery from the music. Maybe I should have herb tea instead of coffee, or I'll never get to sleep tonight."

Dean opened his menu and forced his gaze downward. "Please, order whatever you like." Meanwhile, he reflected that his usual type of companion—a Felicia Thurgood type—would have launched into a detailed critique of the production by now. She would have made astute comparisons between Maria Callas and Joan Sutherland.

All Kelly could say was that she was shivery.

Simplistic and uneducated. The very kind of statement that should have helped turn him off. Dean scowled at his menu and wondered why it didn't.

Maybe because she was just being honest and unpretentious, a voice whispered inside? Giving him her real feelings?

Genuine?

Dean slapped his menu closed.

Cued by the action, a nearby waitress turned her head. "Oh, I'm sorry, sir. Are you ready to order?"

Dean shook his head. Kelly was no more genuine than—than anybody else. "Oh, I mean yes, we're ready," Dean told the waitress, then shook his head again. "That is, are you ready, Kelly?"

His wife looked baffled. "Sure, I'm ready." Raising her eyebrows, she put on a smile and turned her gaze toward the waitress, who seemed a severe sort. "I'd like an orange spice tea, please. Oh, and no rush. I can see you're busy. "

The waitress visibly relaxed, the harsh lines smoothing from her face. "It's a madhouse tonight. Thanks. And what for you, sir?" She turned to Dean.

He blinked. He couldn't remember when he'd been with a woman who actually noticed, or cared about, the feelings of a waitress. "Ahem. I'd just like coffee. Black, please."

"Very good." The waitress made no comment on their lack of interest in the fabulous desserts, but collected the menus and hurried off.

Dean gazed past Kelly to a table with four chattering college students. So, his wife had been considerate. And she *seemed* genuine. That didn't mean she actually was either one of those things. He was not going to be taken in by the woman. He was not.

"So," Kelly said, "you haven't said what you thought of it yet."

"Of it?"

"The opera." There was a laugh in her voice.

"Oh, yes, of course." Dean pulled in his lips. Nobody had to indulge him. He was always on top of a conversation. "A respectable production. Naturally, I've seen better."

"Really?"

"Well, at the Met..." He waved a hand, remembering a particular version of Rigoletto, with Beverly Sills and Luciano Pavarotti. He'd felt transported—Shivery, perhaps.

He frowned. "It's hardly ever like that."

"I would think not," Kelly agreed. "Tonight was—fantastic enough."

Their eyes met. And Dean felt the strangest thing. Something like...connection.

No. He flicked his gaze away. There was no connection between them. Ridiculous. And Kelly hadn't felt shivery from the opera. She was just doing what her kind were good at doing, reaching in, calculating what would please. It was only for the purpose of gaining the upper hand, toe-holding an advantage. She meant to eventually place herself in a position to get what she really wanted.

Whatever that turned out to be.

Dean pressed his finger against the edge of his spoon. They would have their refreshment and go home. Evening over, mission accomplished. Not a complete success, but not a disaster, either. He was not entangled in her web.

The harried waitress returned with their drinks, set them down with a smile, and immediately hurried off. "Thank you," Kelly tried to call after her, but she was gone.

Kelly glanced over at Dean and shrugged, smiling. He pressed his finger harder against the spoon edge. She turned her attention to her miniature hot water kettle and peeked inside before glancing up at Dean again. "It's funny, you know. We've done this before."

"Gone to the opera?"

"No." She picked up a sugar packet. "Sat talking late at night over tea and coffee."

Dean stared at her and calmed a quick leap of dismay. Well yes, according to *her*, and his credit card report, they'd done this before. At 'Nat's'. Allegedly, they'd sat talking for hours. But he couldn't have divulged anything terribly intimate during that time; she would have used it against him by now, tried to pry further in. "I hadn't thought of that," he drawled, and leaned back in his chair.

She tilted him a smile. "You had coffee with cream, before."

Dean snorted.

"You did."

Dean shook his head. "Cream is full of cholesterol."

Kelly's smile curved. "You like it."

Dean slid her a glance. "Maybe." He told himself it was no big deal she knew this much about him, but couldn't help adding, "It isn't good for me."

At that they both stopped. Kelly's smile faded. Dean's face froze. He could tell she was thinking the same thing he was: about the other things he liked that weren't good for him; things like the acts that took place in his recent night dreams. Amazing, athletic, erotic acts. Acts that made him want far too much.

She caught her lower lip in her teeth. "Well, that was then," she said.

The hell it was. It was as if the thing were sitting right there between them, big as a pink elephant, the night they had spent together, the intimacies that had occurred. *She* could remember. Dean could only guess. But neither one of them was going to bring it up. At least, Dean hoped she wouldn't.

He cleared his throat and scrambled for another topic, anything, to keep the pink elephant from talking. "Since we have the opportunity, perhaps we should speak about Robby."

"Robby?" She appeared understandably confused. The topic came straight out of left field.

But Dean persisted. He was going to avoid the pink elephant and at the same time get back to a topic he'd completely dropped since Monday. "Yes, Robby. You have a problem with that?"

Slowly, she shook her head. "No. In fact, I'm glad you brought him up."

"You are?" Dean shot her a stern look. She shouldn't imagine he was going to let her off the hook. "You've been spending time with him," he accused.

"Yes." She looked down and smiled. "And I've gotten to know him a little bit, I think."

"Have you, now?" Dean was feeling better already. The pink elephant had nearly faded and he was on solid ground again. High ground.

"I don't know why anyone would complain about his behavior," Kelly remarked. "He seems to act pretty much his age."

"Yes, well." Dean laughed. "He always straightens up and flies right when he's living with me."

Kelly gave him a strange look. "Really?"

Dean tapped a finger on the edge of his coffee cup. "He knows I won't put up with any nonsense."

"*Really.*" Kelly lifted her hot water and poured. "I find that very interesting." She set down the kettle. "I imagine he doesn't get good grades at boarding school, either."

"You got that right."

"And yet he's smart."

Dean snorted.

"Hey, he managed to hypnotize you."

Dean's eyes narrowed. "Your point?"

Kelly sighed. "My point is that he just needs the right kind of motivation. If he could live at home I think it would make a huge difference." Saying which, she looked directly at Dean.

His brows curled. "Home? Living at 'home' would be a little bit difficult. Kirk has no permanent address."

"Kirk?" Kelly sounded baffled. "Who's that?"

"Who—? That's Robby's father."

"Oh." Kelly frowned. "You call your father by his first—? Never mind." She shook her head. "It's not like he has anything to do with it."

"He doesn't?"

"Oh, hardly. I meant with you. Couldn't Robby live with you?"

It took Dean a full minute, staring at her, before he grasped her meaning. Then his brows shot up. "With me? You think Robby should live with *me*?"

She smiled. "Uh huh."

Dean smiled back. It was so...nonsensical. At the same time, he felt the moral ground beneath him shift.

Meanwhile, Kelly leaned over the little table. "He needs a steady influence, a solid foundation. Someone he can count on."

"With me," Dean repeated, and laughed. But the ground beneath shifted some more.

"Granted, it would help if you moved," Kelly went on. "Into a normal house, you know."

"Excuse me?"

Kelly rolled her eyes. "Something under ten thousand square feet. Picket fence. Shaggy dog." She sighed. "Although I have to admit it's nice having someone else cook and clean."

Dean blinked at her. "You imagine me living in suburbia?"

"Why not?"

Dean just looked at her. Everything she was saying was absurd, and she had to know it. He was supposed to move to some tract house and play the doting father? To Robby? At the same time, he couldn't help wondering where she put herself in this picture. "No," he said, too loudly.

"No?" Kelly shook her head. "All right, forget the part about the normal house. It isn't important. What's important is that Robby can rely on you."

Dean's eyebrows jumped. "Exactly."

She smiled. "Then we agree."

"No." They agreed on nothing, and never would. The woman was—from another galaxy. Dean leaned forward. "The idea is that Robby has to learn to rely on himself. He can't depend on me—or on anybody else, for that matter."

Kelly's eyes widened. "He's nine years old!"

Dean leaned back. "So?"

"So?" Kelly's lips parted.

Dean crossed his arms. "There's no better place to learn self-reliance than boarding school. I started when I was six."

"Six," Kelly said softly.

"Right." Dean lifted his chin. He'd been sent off to boarding school at age six, right after Kirk had divorced his second wife, the one Dean had let himself grow fond of. Sending him away had been one of his father's few good decisions. Now Dean's jaw tensed. "Going to boarding school taught me self-reliance. Discipline. Self-control. The rewards of applied persistence." And it had kept him from growing fond of any future frivolous stepmothers.

"Oh," Kelly said. There was a lost look on her face.

Dean's eyes narrowed. "What?"

She gave a slow nod. "I think that's what *you* learned at boarding school."

"Right. That is—" He stopped short. "Oh no. Robby isn't so different from me. He can learn the same lessons from school that I did."

"Discipline, self-control, and the rewards of applied persistence."

"That's right."

Kelly shook her head. "I think you really believe what you're saying."

Dean's jaw clamped shut. She was acting condescending. Of him!

She looked up, an odd smile on her lips. "Tell me, Dean, when did you have a chance to be a little boy?"

His brows came down slowly. "Excuse me?"

"When did you ever get to let somebody else be in charge, take a break?"

Dean's frown turned into a glare. What was she talking about? Why on earth would he ever want somebody else to be in charge?

Kelly kept her odd smile. "When did you learn to let go?"

Let go? Dean scowled. But he couldn't deny that her words conjured up an image of Kelly herself, naked and moaning beneath him. He wrapped one hand around his too-hot coffee mug. "Let go?" he queried icily. "I wasn't aware one needed to *learn* to do that."

"Neither was I." Kelly looked down to dunk her tea bag. "Until now."

CHAPTER NINE

As she gazed out the car window on the drive home, Kelly supposed she could have handled that better. It wasn't diplomatic to tell a man that his entire life philosophy was lacking. It put rather a damper on an evening. But darn it, she didn't want Dean to think he could impose his terrible life philosophy on Robby! Discipline, self-control, and the rewards of applied persistence.

It was the philosophy of a man who'd had to make do as a child—a man who couldn't even see what he was missing: any real happiness.

Kelly looked out at the streetlights dotting the darkness and felt an ache in her chest. Sent away at age six! It was obvious Dean had never known a moment's emotional security. Nobody had ever taught him it was okay or safe to care.

Kelly snorted softly to herself. What Dean needed was someone to impose a new philosophy on *him*.

In the darkness, Kelly went very still. Oh, no. No, no, no. She hadn't just thought that. She hadn't. Yet she drew in a sharp breath.

"Something wrong?" Dean spoke for the first time since they'd left the parking garage in Boston.

Kelly cleared her throat. "Um, no. Nothing's wrong." And it wasn't! She hadn't just thought about trying to impose a new philosophy on Dean. Doing something like that—Well, for one thing, it wasn't her place. And for another, the man wasn't the least bit open to such a thing. He was quite satisfied with himself just the way he was.

Of course, he didn't even know who he was.

Kelly choked.

"Swallow the wrong way?" Dean looked over. Their eyes met briefly. Briefly, because Kelly jerked her gaze away.

Good Lord. *Dean* knew who he was. *She* was the one confused. She kept thinking she saw 'her' Dean under there.

Oh, but you have.

Kelly clenched her teeth. She hadn't. She hadn't! But the little voice inside chattered otherwise. She *had* seen moments, instants in time. There'd been moments of...connection.

No! Kelly scowled and shook her head to get rid of the tightness in her chest. All right, maybe there'd been moments. So what? They were only moments. Did she imagine she could string them together to recreate the gentle, caring man she'd known for two days in Las Vegas?

That would be delusional. Part of her whole self-destructive bit. Dean was the man she saw before her: stiff, cold, and formal. Annoyingly superior. Bossy.

Not exactly a soul mate.

Definitely not—and never would be—the man she'd met in Las Vegas. He was not—and never would be—the man she'd married.

Kelly's last thought echoed in her mind. She was just realizing its import when the iron gates of Dean's estate appeared in the car's headlights. She sat staring dumbly forward as Dean pushed a remote control button in the car and the gates swung open.

So she'd completed her investigation. This Dean was not the man she'd married. After only a little more than a week she'd figured it out. Decided.

Dean drove through the gates and up the winding drive toward the house.

Kelly felt heavy inside. The trial period was over. Her vows carried no weight. She could go home. She should go home. Immediately.

At a fork in the drive, Dean bore right. Five garage doors appeared before them. One began scrolling open. Dean moved the car into its slot, shifted into park, and turned off the motor.

Kelly bit her lower lip. She ought to tell Dean it was over. Now. Then leave in the morning.

Dean opened his car door with an expensively hushed click. Without looking at Kelly, he got out of the car. She sat there, depressed beyond words as he rounded the hood of the car—her exquisitely mannered, soon-to-be-ex-husband. He bent and opened her door with another classy hush.

Kelly pasted on a polite smile and turned to face him. He looked back, devilishly handsome, and utterly chill. His lips were beautifully formed, and perfectly straight, with not a smile or expression of any kind playing upon them. His eyes were the crystal blue of an angel, but they expressed not one ounce of human emotion. Oh, he was the most remote human being she had ever seen. Utterly alone.

Kelly's polite smile faltered.

Dean's expression, impassive as it was, seemed to freeze. "What?" he demanded. "You've been upset for the past five miles. For God's sake, what is it?"

Kelly couldn't possibly get her smile back in place. Yes, he was remote and chill, no doubt about it. Not 'her's' at all. But she'd suddenly remembered Troy's bet with Robby. Troy thought Dean wouldn't be able to keep her for two whole weeks. And he'd be right! The thought made Kelly's chest squeeze.

"Kelly," Dean's voice was warning.

She could barely breathe. God, she was going to do it, become the next person in the chain, the chain of people who had left Dean, making him the way he was, this way that could not be changed.

Don't fool yourself! An alarmed voice squawked in her head. *He'll be no worse off once you've gone.* Dean had grown too set in his ways, his defenses too established, for

her brief appearance in his life to cause a ripple. She'd be like a speck of dust that had gotten into his eye. She'd be like a bug that had been squashed beneath his shoe. Insignificant. Unimportant.

All the same...

"I'm staying," she heard herself say.

Dean's brows snapped down.

Kelly felt the oddest sensation, like weights being lifted from her shoulders. Part of her stood back and wondered what the heck she thought she was doing. This was absurd, futile, and possibly self-destructive.

But another part of Kelly felt lighter than air. She stepped out of the car. "I'm not going to give up on you, Dean, even if you are the most set-in-his-ways, unlikely-to-change man I have ever met."

Dean's brows relaxed. "Wha—?"

"He's in there somewhere, the man I married." Kelly winced. "All right, he's buried pretty deep, but that doesn't mean we can't try to dig him out. We *have* to try, in fact. We have to...get the real you out of there."

Dean's eyes widened.

Kelly closed the car door behind her. She had no idea what this thing was they were supposed to do, but she felt like she was floating three feet above the ground. There was a shimmering, wondrous excitement inside her. Something, *something* had to happen.

With a laugh in her throat, she stepped forward. In surprise, or maybe to set her away, Dean put his hands on her waist. The heat of his fingers through the silk of her pantsuit was all the instigation Kelly needed.

Her hands went up to his face, her feet arched to tiptoe, and her lips touched his.

Dean's hands flinched on her waist. He uttered a small sound.

Kelly uttered a sound of her own, a moan of sheer pleasure. Lord, he felt good, even better than she remembered. The slight scratchiness of his jaw was an erotic counterpoint to the civilized scent of his aftershave. No less provocative was the solid strength of him against her torso, and his taste— Her tongue grazed the closed seam between Dean's lips. He tasted like all of God's forbidden fruit wrapped into one. Her hands slid into his hair.

Dean didn't participate. But neither did he resist. He simply stood there, taut, and moaned again.

The sound, mingled with his continued immobility, brought Kelly back to earth. Wait a minute. Wait a minute. She was *kissing* him. She halted, stunned, then drew her lips away. Inhaling deeply, she took a step back.

She saw immediately she hadn't stopped a moment too soon. Dean looked as though he'd been pushed to some inner limit. His eyes were wide and his lips swollen. As Kelly watched, his expression of bemusement faded. Hard determination took its place. "Don't," he said, low, "ever do that again."

Kelly felt a quick spike of fear. He was right. She shouldn't have kissed him. He wasn't 'her' Dean. But such thoughts were washed away by pure satisfaction. She'd obviously made an impression. "Oh, good," she said, and tapped his cheek. "You're worried."

She was delighted to see his eyes blaze. Then, before she could do anything more, something that might worry *herself*, she turned and, as dignified as possible, wobbled out of the garage.

~~~

It was really not a good idea to be drinking. Nevertheless, Dean nursed a brandy as he looked out his bedroom window in the hours following his opera date. Behind him, the brown and gold silk counterpane on his bed lay untouched. He turned the glass in his hand.

They'd kissed. Rather, Kelly had kissed him. He had...resisted.

More or less.

Dean lowered his glass. More rather than less. But was he relieved? Was he proud of himself?

Not exactly.

What was the point of resistance, he was starting to wonder? What did he gain by turning away all that sex appeal? He could have kissed her back. He could have pulled her close and given her everything she'd been asking for. By now they could have been on the other side of the house, naked in her bed. And he'd have been satisfied. Finally.

Dean rubbed his thumb on the rim of his glass. On the other hand, perhaps he wasn't giving himself enough credit. He'd kept his cool down there in the garage. He'd remembered the long-range consequences. If he took Kelly to bed, if she could give him the satisfaction he'd experienced in his dreams, all hell could break loose. There'd be nothing he wouldn't do for her, no idiocy at which he'd stop.

He'd become a damned fool.

Dean took another swallow of brandy and narrowed his eyes at the reflection of his bedroom in the window glass, the somber wainscoting and dimmed lights. He didn't want to be a fool. So it had been smart to resist her. Oh, yes, he'd steered clear of the exact situation he'd been trying to avoid since Kelly had first burst into his downtown office. The situation where he handed her all the power.

The only part of her scheme he didn't get was this bit about 'releasing' him. What did that mean?

Dean swished the liquid in his glass. She spoke as if the man Dean had been while acting under hypnotic suggestion not only existed, but awaited liberation. As if Dean were keeping him under lock and key.

Dean stilled his glass. Even if a part of him was under lock and key—which it wasn't—what difference could that possibly make to her? Why should she care if Dean were 'free' or not? In fact, wouldn't it be more to her advantage if he were utterly caged?

A strange sensation shimmered through Dean. He frowned past the bedroom's reflection and into the darkness outside. For a moment he almost imagined— But, no. That kiss had been no more than what he knew it to be. Bait. He knew her type. Even if he couldn't plumb her every motivation, he understood the basics. She was out for herself, and herself alone. Whatever her ploy, he wasn't falling for it.

There would be no more kissing.

She would discover he was not as far gone as she had thought.

With a firm nod, Dean set his brandy on the windowsill. Then he went to take a cold shower.

~~~

All Felicia wanted was to be alone that Saturday night. But after her Aunt Hilda and her Uncle Garrett had brought her home from the opera, she had to sit in the living room with them and her mother, drinking coffee and discussing the production they'd just seen. The conversation had been an endurance test, since this particular performance of *La Bohème* was one Felicia would have liked to blot from her mind.

"Do you have a headache, Felicia?" Her mother, fully dressed and perfectly coiffed, though she'd merely been at home watching TV, regarded her daughter through narrowed eyes.

Belatedly, Felicia realized she was rubbing her forehead. She lowered her hand immediately. "Maybe I do have a headache." The excuse would certainly earn her an interrogation regarding her health the next day, but at least it would get her out of the room.

"Oh, don't let us keep you up if you're not feeling well," Uncle Garrett boomed. If Felicia had actually had a headache, his voice would not have helped.

"Thank you, Uncle Garrett." Felicia rose from the Italian sofa.

"Take some chamomile tea with honey," Aunt Hilda suggested.

"Think a couple Tylenol would be more effective," Uncle Garrett muttered under his breath, then smiled innocently at Aunt Hilda.

Felicia thanked her aunt and uncle for their escort to the theater—the theater she wished to God she hadn't attended—bade her mother goodnight and, finally, was able to go up the main stairs of the family mansion to her bedroom.

She closed the white paneled door of her room after herself and then turned to lean against it with a deep, quivery sigh. The royal blue and pearl cream furnishings of her bedroom swam before her eyes.

Troy had been telling the truth. Imagine that. Troy, that smug-smiling, smarm-dripping *slug* had been telling the honest-to-goodness truth.

Dean was married.

Felicia drew in and then released another quivery breath. Yes, Dean was married, and to whom? To a woman who looked like every man's sexual and emotional fantasy rolled into one. A real knockout; vibrant, warm, and inviting.

Everything Felicia was not.

With a sound that was part laugh and part groan, Felicia pushed away from the closed bedroom door. She hugged her arms as she paced the length of her bedroom, the thick carpet soft under her feet, the lacy curtains of her bed a subtle mockery.

Little girl. You're just a little girl.

Not a woman.

Felicia ground her teeth and went on pacing. Tears stood stupidly in her eyes. Dean had been her last, her only, chance. For years she'd thought of Dean as her way out. She could be married, own all the privileges and status of that condition—without having to deal with any of the disadvantages.

The primary disadvantage she'd wanted to avoid was a husband who cheated. Dean wouldn't have been one of those. He was completely honorable, completely unlike Felicia's father, who'd enjoyed one mistress after another the entire span of her parents' marriage.

The other disadvantage of marriage Dean would have saved her from, or so Felicia had thought, was having to satisfy a man in bed. She'd thought Dean was...like her. Driven by his work, sober and serious. Not distracted by the more basic elements of human nature.

Now that she'd met the man's oh-so-alluring wife, Felicia knew better.

Good God, what if they *had* married, only for her then to discover—?

Her eyes widened at the mere thought. Coming to a stop by the large, mullioned window, Felicia crossed her arms over her chest and turned her back to the window. She

didn't want the glass to show her a reflection of herself. She didn't want to see the deep deficiency so well hidden beneath a fashionable exterior.

She was frigid. She had to be. At twenty-eight years old, she'd never lain with a man. She didn't even *want* to lie with a man. She didn't want the physical or emotional vulnerability that would be involved.

Dean, she'd thought, would not have desired that from her. With Dean she could have been safe.

A laugh escaped her. Well! Not only was Dean married, but he was clearly *not* safe. That wife.

God.

And somehow...somehow...this disaster was all Troy's fault.

Felicia couldn't say exactly how. She only knew that Troy had given her the news about Dean's marriage with such obvious delight. With smug glee he'd made it clear he understood the dreams she'd had. And he *mocked* them. He mocked *her*. He *always* did. He was odious, a toad, slime.

Down below, outside the window, Felicia could hear Aunt Hilda and Uncle Garrett's voices. They'd come out the front door and were saying goodbye to her mother.

When Felicia heard the slam of their car door, she moved. If her mother saw her light on under the door she would surely come in and submit Felicia to her interrogation this evening, instead of waiting for morning.

Her mother wanted to know *everything* that Felicia did, everything she thought and felt. It was a constant challenge to satisfy her mother's curiosity and maternal concern, even while telling her nothing of genuine intimacy. Sometimes...sometimes Felicia considered moving out of her childhood home—even if it would mean leaving her mother all alone.

But for now Felicia stole on experienced feet to the switch beside her bedroom door. With a flick of her hand, she plunged the room into darkness. Later, after her mother had walked past and gone into her own room Felicia could turn the lights back on.

Meanwhile, waiting with hushed breath in the darkness, Felicia could see the red light on her answering machine blinking. Someone had called on her personal phone line while she'd been at the opera.

Dean? Felicia thought, with a stupid leap of hope. Stupid, because Dean wasn't about to call her, even if he hadn't been married. She barely crossed his mind. The message was probably from a fellow member of one of the many boards to which Felicia belonged. There was the problem of finding a professional fundraiser for the Boston Family Aid Foundation, a problem that was becoming more urgent as the purely volunteer efforts to raise money fell short.

Felicia bit her lower lip. The Family Aid Foundation was close to her heart. She wanted to give families—mostly single mothers—a chance to get their lives together, to become independent and self-sufficient.

So once she heard her mother's bedroom door close at the end of the hall, she moved across the room to her bedside table. There she switched on the small lamp and then hit the button for the answering machine.

But it wasn't one of her contacts at the Family Aid Foundation. No, of all things it was Troy's voice that came out of the pretty white answering machine which sat on her night table.

"Guess this is kind of a shock," Troy muttered.

He could say that again. Felicia stared at her answering machine, which had suddenly become an alien creature, allowing *Troy's* voice to be stored inside, and now letting it drawl forth, right into Felicia's most private space.

Troy was everything Dean was not. Troy *exuded* sexuality. He was like—a big tom cat, physically expert and deeply sensual. Even now, his mere voice was making Felicia's hair stand on end.

"Don't know if I've ever called you about anything at all," Troy went on. "But—that's not the point. The point is—" And here Troy sighed, deeply. "The point is I wanted to ask you out...to lunch, I guess. Yeah, lunch." Here Troy cleared his throat. "I, uh, believe I owe you an apology."

An apology! Felicia didn't know whether to fall over in a dead faint or scream. Troy wanted to *apologize*? To *her*? Good God, did he feel *sorry* for her?

"So please call me back," Troy said. He rattled off a phone number and ended by saying, "You may think I've already taken care of my obligation by calling and leaving a phone message to say I'm sorry about the way I dumped Dean's marriage news on you." Then Troy's voice got weird, almost stern. "But you and I both know that an apology recorded on an answering machine doesn't cut it. I have to *take* you somewhere, and you have to *come*. That is...if you intend to accept my apology." There was a pause before he said, "So that's it."

The answering machine beeped and a computer voice announced, "End of messages."

Great, Felicia thought, glaring at the miserable machine. *Just great*. Troy was right. If he was going to apologize, properly, and if she intended to accept that apology—which she was bound to do—then they had to meet, in person.

As if losing Dean hadn't been bad enough.

Felicia crushed her teeth together, because the urge to open her mouth and scream was strong. Oh, how she hated Troy. She hated him, hated him, *hated* him!

CHAPTER TEN

It took until the next morning for Kelly to regret her kissing impulse of the night before. In her baby-doll, she sat on the edge of her bed and rubbed her forehead. What had she been thinking? No. That was the trouble. She hadn't been thinking.

Kelly sighed, pushed off the bed, and dragged herself into the shower. What she'd done last night was try to rationalize what she'd wanted to do all along: kiss Dean. She'd let her physical attraction for the man overrule her senses.

Kelly stood under the shower with her head lifted toward the spray. Unfortunately, she'd made a promise down there in the garage. She wasn't leaving.

But that didn't mean she had to proceed with this insane idea of 'releasing' Dean. Why, every women's magazine in the country, every self-help book on the shelves would say as much. It was impossible to change a man. You had to accept him the way he was.

Kelly wasn't ready to accept Dean the way he was.

She stepped out of the shower, drew on a pair of shorts, and then wiggled into one of her colorful tops. She was stuck here then, she thought. Seven-and-a-half more weeks. But she wasn't going to try to help, change, or improve Dean during that time.

Hungry for breakfast now, Kelly went down the stairs. At the archway into the morning room, she stopped short. Dean sat at the table with Troy and Robby.

Dean? Kelly blinked. She'd been sure he'd skedaddle after that kiss in the garage. She'd been certain he'd avoid her now more than ever. He wouldn't want to have anything to do with her or her proposed mission.

But there he sat, reading a newspaper. He looked up, caught Kelly's eye, and nodded a greeting. As if there was nothing unusual about the situation, kiss included.

Suspicious, Kelly stepped into the room. She squinted and took a seat across from him. Pride aside, she knew Dean couldn't possibly consider that kiss ignorable.

"Morning, Kelly," Robby called from behind a bowl of cereal. "How was the opera?"

"Yes." Troy looked haggard, as if he'd woken much earlier than his wont. "How did you two enjoy yourselves?"

They were obviously checking up on their bet. Considering Troy's evident exhaustion, Kelly wondered just how high the stakes were in this wager. She gave them both a big, noncommittal smile. "The opera was fantastic."

"You were home later than we expected." Troy's eyes narrowed as he fingered the edge of the unused plate in front of him.

"You waited up?" Kelly felt an instant of embarrassment, then realized Troy couldn't have witnessed what had happened in the garage, even if he had waited up.

"I was...on the Internet," Troy explained. "You know how you can lose track of time."

"Oh, yes," Kelly agreed sweetly, only mildly annoyed now. "All those adult websites."

Dean snorted—the first hint he was even following the conversation—and Troy turned red.

"It's a legitimate user group," Troy claimed. "Besides, *Dean's* the one who needs adult websites."

Robby snickered, though Kelly couldn't imagine he knew what they were talking about. Meanwhile, Dean merely smiled and folded over a page in his newspaper.

Troy turned to him. "What's going on with you, Dean? I'm about to lose my bet here."

"Yes, I'm afraid you may lose that bet." Dean lowered his newspaper. "You see, Kelly thinks she's going to 'release' me. It's a project that may take some time."

Troy shot Kelly a confused look, while Kelly stared at Dean. So, he knew about the bet. And he casually told the others what she'd said last night in the garage, in his arms...as if it were some big joke.

Well, it had certainly been stupid, but it hadn't been a joke. At the time she'd been serious and sincere.

Now she felt her face go hot.

Over his newspaper, Dean gave Kelly a patronizing smile. "Where were you going to start this morning, Kelly? I'm planning on going to the office, yes, even on a sunny Sunday morning. What ploy will you use to try to stop me, to...save me from myself?"

The room went so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Kelly felt the heat in her face spread to the rest of her body. He was deliberately mocking her. It made no difference that Kelly had been mocking herself just a few minutes before.

"You think I can't do it?" Her voice came out low.

Dean didn't appear to realize that her question was genuine. He continued his smug smile.

A part of Kelly realized she was being goaded. Maybe Dean even thought he was going to scare her off. Well! He was having the opposite effect. She was making a complete about-face regarding his reformation. In fact, her opinion of the odds of success just leaped upward.

Not only could she reform him, she would. She'd wrestle 'her' Dean out of the guy if she had to pin him to the mat. She smiled very slowly. "All right, then. You're on."

"Excuse me?"

"You just issued a challenge. I'm taking you up on it."

Dean's expression managed to get more self-satisfied. "But I thought you were the one who was challenging me?" he purred.

"Is that how you see it?"

"Yes. You're the one who—" Dean stopped himself, the smugness suddenly gone and color brightening his face. Kelly smiled. She knew what he'd been about to say. *You're the one who kissed me.*

Dean cleared his throat and threw his napkin on the table. "It doesn't matter who's challenging whom. You think I need to be 'released.' I'm curious. How do you intend to do such a thing, particularly given there is no hidden personality caged inside of me?" Dean raised his eyebrows.

Kelly raised her eyebrows back. If that was true, then why did he bring it up?

Brows still raised, Dean stood from the table. "Troy's hypnotic suggestion had nothing to do with the 'real me.'"

"No?" She recalled Dean making the point that at least a *part* of him had been involved.

Dean huffed a sigh. "I suppose you'll be dropping in on me today, or providing some other, equivalent distraction?"

"Mm."

A flicker of worry crossed Dean's face at this non-reply, but he soon retrieved his obnoxious smile. "Oh, good," he said. "A surprise."

The unholy condescension—! Kelly felt her palm itch. She blinked, astonished at herself. She'd actually wanted to smack him.

At that moment Dean met her eyes squarely. Kelly's conquering high tripped on its way up to the clouds. He'd done that. He'd made her feel that way.

Out of control.

As Dean kept his eyes on Kelly, a gleam rose up in them. She could swear he'd come to the same realization she just had: that he had as much effect on her as she had on him.

"Good morning, then," Dean said. Like a man who'd accomplished his goal, he smiled, inclined his head, and walked out of the room.

Silence followed his departure, a silence broken only by the sound of Dean's footsteps receding down the hall. Robby waited until the footsteps could no longer be heard, then moved his cereal bowl aside. "So, what're you going to do, Kelly?"

"Yes." Troy sounded curious, too. "What now?"

Kelly absently massaged her palm. Huh. Like she was going to tell the two of them, assuming she had the foggiest idea. Besides, she was still shook up. This war was not going to be one-sided. Dean had his defenses; strong, wickedly intelligent defenses. She was going to have to respect that, to respect *him*.

"You could win me my bet," Troy suggested.

"Leave him?" Kelly frowned.

Troy grinned. "I take it that's a 'no'?"

"It would hardly accomplish what I'm after."

Troy rubbed his chin. "No, I guess not." He stopped rubbing and looked at Kelly. "For the record, I'm not a fan of you leaving."

Kelly's attention went from distracted to arrested. "You aren't?"

Troy's smile quirked. "Like I said before, you distract Dean. Plus—" His grin went wide. "I happen to like you."

Kelly's eyebrows shot up. Was that so? She switched her gaze to Robby. He wore much the same expression as Troy, restrained hope. Kelly felt a leap of her own hope. Well, what do you know? She had a pair of allies here. Or at least...sympathetic bystanders. She smiled. "Okay, then. We're all on the same page."

"What?" Robby asked.

"She means we all agree," Troy explained, but squinted at Kelly. "Though I'm not sure we do. I want you to stay, Kelly, but I don't think you can change Dean."

"Not change him." Kelly tsked. "Release him."

"Uh huh," Troy said, and squinted even harder. Robby bent on Kelly a very similar expression, one of confusion and concern.

"What?" Kelly asked.

"Nothin'," Robby claimed.

"Oh, not a thing," Troy agreed.

But they both kept looking at Kelly in a most peculiar manner until she got up from the table and, still wondering how to get at the *real* Dean, left the room.

~~~

Kelly did not surprise Dean at the office that Sunday. Alone on the executive floor, he found his concentration slipping. He kept expecting a call from the guard downstairs or a knock on the hall door. It never happened.

At the office, he ordered a salad for dinner, then went home about eleven p.m. He braced himself as he walked the path from the garage to the house. But no curvy female jumped out of the bushes. Except for the crickets, all was quiet along the country path.

Inside the house, it was even quieter. Dean held his breath to listen. But nobody lurked in the darkness of the kitchen, no tantalizing temptation came out of the shadows.

He went into the hall, still breathing shallow, straining his ears. But nothing, nobody. He went up the stairs.

*Maybe she's left.* He halted at the top of the stairs with a peculiar, sinking sensation. He'd taunted her that morning, deliberately mocked her. Maybe he'd gone far enough to make her quit the scene altogether.

No. Dean shook his head. The woman was stubborn. She'd made up her mind and she would act on her theory, baseless as it was.

Not that he *wanted* her to remain in his home, of course, but he was sure that she had. Dean hesitated at the top of the stairs. Well, almost sure.

In the midnight house, Dean stole silently toward Kelly's room.

He knew he was being ridiculous. Inconsistent. But he needed to know. Was she still here?

When he came to her door, he found it closed.

Dean stood in the dark hallway and fought an urge to open her door. Was she, indeed, inside her bedroom?

*I'm acting like a fool.* Dean took a step back. He couldn't open Kelly's bedroom door just to satisfy his curiosity, intense as it might be.

But he might open it for another reason. Dean tilted his head. He could open it to discover if she were willing to go through with her implied invitation of the night before in the garage.

Facing her closed door in the hall, Dean felt his body warm and swell toward arousal. He snorted softly. Why, Kelly didn't have to jump out at him from the bushes in the dark. He could do a bang-up job of getting seduced all by himself. Look at him.

He snorted again and took a deliberate step back.

She was inside the bedroom. Of course she was, or her door wouldn't be closed but open, ready for the staff to clean the room in the morning.

Dean felt a flood of relief at this reasoning. He didn't question the relief, but turned and strode cheerfully to his own bedroom.

The next morning he exercised in the basement gym and then showered, all at his usual hour. Or at least, it was his usual hour since Kelly had moved in and he'd taken steps to avoid her. Dressed and ready to drive to the city, he took a detour on his way out the door, however, poking his nose into the morning room. There he carefully counted how many plates had been set out for breakfast.

Confirming her presence in the house gave him a satisfaction that was no doubt absurd. Besides, she was going to confirm the matter herself soon—and outrageously.

Once at his office downtown, Dean alerted Mrs. Barnes to let him know immediately when his wife arrived. He made sure to sound as if he was eager for the occasion.

It was a busy day. But between the phone calls and the dictating, Dean kept half an ear open, waiting for Mrs. Barnes' warning.

It never came. Kelly didn't come. She didn't even call.

Okay, she'd be waiting for him at the house then, Dean thought. Dinner. She'd think to catch him at the family meal. He decided not to work late tonight. He could face the music. Accordingly, he came home ten minutes before the dinner hour.

Indeed, Dean was so early he decided to enter the house via the front door. He sauntered down the hall and leisurely climbed the stairs. But he saw no one. Perhaps they were already sitting at the table? In his bedroom, he quickly changed his clothes, putting on a polo shirt and slacks. He wouldn't be caught as the awkward, stilted one at dinner this time.

Moving leisurely again, he ambled down the stairs. He opened the door to the dining room.

It was empty.

Dean frowned, then remembered to check the patio outside. But the wrought iron table and chairs were uninhabited. Frowning harder, he went into the kitchen.

Roberto was eating at the counter. He gulped and stood when Dean walked into the room. "Sir."

Dean didn't bother with a greeting. "Where is everybody?"

Roberto wiped his mouth with a napkin. "Went out to eat, sir. I believe Chuck E. Cheese was mentioned."

"Chuck E. Cheese?"

"Yes, sir."

Dean waved a hand. "That video game and clown place?"

"Uh, I believe that's the one, yes."

Dean gazed at Roberto, bewildered. It wasn't the place so much as that they'd left without him. Wouldn't this have been on Kelly's list for his reformation, to dine at such an establishment?

"Have you had dinner, sir?" Roberto asked. "Would you like me to fix you an omelet?"

Dean shook his head.

"A crepe, then, sir?"

"No, no, I mean an omelet will be fine." Dean withdrew to let Roberto cook. Kelly hadn't even waited for him to come home—on time. She hadn't even given him a chance to see her.

Bemused, he ate his omelet alone in the dining room.

At nine that night, Maggie informed Dean that Kelly had called. She, Robby, and Troy were going to a movie. By eleven, the group had not returned home. Dean went up to bed.

For the next three days he saw neither hide nor hair of Kelly. He made no effort to avoid her, even returning to his normal morning schedule. Yet their paths did not cross.

It was...unsettling. Dean kept preparing for the surprise attack. None came.

What, he wondered, was she up to?

On the fourth day, he woke up later than usual. Purely accidental. But the upshot was he exercised later than usual, showered and went down for breakfast all later than his norm. For this reason, his unusual tardiness, Dean happened to be walking up the stairs after his breakfast when Kelly came down. Exuding good health and cheer, she was dressed in shorts and a grass-green cut-off top.

Dean's heart banged against the wall of his chest. A stupid reaction, but Dean thought he disguised it well. He nodded as if he'd only seen Kelly an hour before and not four days.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good morning," she replied, and smiled brightly.

Staying true to his conceit that he'd only seen her an hour before and this meeting was no big deal, Dean kept going up the stairs. Her step lively, Kelly continued down.

And that was that. From the top of the stairs, Dean could hear her sandals slapping down the hall in the direction of the morning room. She hadn't tried to stop him, she hadn't even tried to talk to him. Nothing. His skin tight, Dean stalked toward his room.

*He* wasn't going to turn around. *He* wasn't going to change his routine to seek *her* out. Why, then she would know he gave a damn whether or not he saw her.

And that's when he got it. Dean halted so abruptly he nearly stumbled on the second floor runner.

She was waiting for *him* to approach *her*.

He almost laughed out loud. Him, seek her out? Him, deliberately put himself in the path of temptation? It would be a cold day in hell. He was not weak. He had self-control. And he had no need whatsoever for Kelly or her silly, romantic games.

Letting out a breath, Dean smiled and proceeded to his room. He felt much better, having figured it out. Now he was back in control.

Dean drove to the city and his office as per usual. He made phone calls, he dictated memos. But at odd times during the day he found himself staring into space. Mrs. Barnes had to call him three times to answer his own phone. He began to pace.

Shortly after lunch he admitted he *was* weak. But he paced some more, determined not to give in to the urge that had seized him. He was not going to go home early to find her. He wasn't.

~~~

"Fishing?" Dean said.

Out by the limousine in the early afternoon sunshine of the front drive, Maggie smiled at him. "Where the stream runs along the north fence. Miss Williams thought they'd have the best luck there."

"Fishing," Dean said again. He didn't know why he was finding this so incredible. It was exactly the kind of thing Kelly would do. She'd probably go about it by tying string to a pair of sticks and baiting them with kitchen cheese. Then she'd probably believe she was actually going to catch something. And make Robby believe it, too.

"Were you going to join them?" Maggie asked.

Dean gave her a sidelong glance. "I came home to fetch a staff report." He closed the back door of the car. "I'll go inside and get it. Only be a minute."

Maggie smiled. Beside the car, Jackson nodded.

Dean went into the house. The staff report he wanted was in the study. Dean was on his way to get it. He really was. He had *not* come home to see Kelly. It was a plain, provable fact that he suddenly, urgently needed the report that he'd left here at home in his study.

As Dean made for the study, he saw Troy trotting down the stairs. Dressed for tennis, he was probably emerging from his room for the first time that day. Troy stopped and dropped his jaw when he saw Dean.

Really, Dean thought, mentally shaking his head. His cousin didn't have nearly enough to do if such a banal sight as himself at home during a weekday was going to shock him. Dean walked right past Troy staring after him—and past the study door.

Fishing, he thought. Kelly was sitting out there in the sun with Robby in some kind of Huckleberry Finn imitation. She presumed she was teaching his little brother how to 'have fun.' She thought Dean didn't know how.

Like hell he didn't.

With a snort, Dean went all the way down the hall to the game room. Around the other side of a covered, competition-size billiard table he opened the cabinet that held his fly-fishing gear.

He had to wipe a layer of dust off the tackle box. It must have been six years since he'd gone on that fly-fishing weekend with old man Harris. Being able to cast properly for trout had sealed the deal on acquiring Harris' R&D company. Dean blew a cobweb off the rod case.

All right, so he hadn't picked up the fishing gear in six years. That didn't mean he didn't know how to have fun. It didn't mean his life wasn't full enough, well-rounded enough. And he certainly didn't need to be 'released.'

Carrying the fishing gear, Dean opened the French doors that led outside.

He would show her.

~~~

Fishing. It seemed an appropriate activity to Kelly, considering that's what she'd been doing for the past four days with Dean. Casting her line and hoping. Now she leaned on the grassy bank, a baseball cap tipped over her face, and sighed.

She was having no more luck with Dean than she was with the jerry-rigged stick rod and cheddar cheese bait. Not so much as a nibble.

Lazing around on this warm, idyllic afternoon, she had to wonder if she'd made a terrible mistake.

After the challenge thrown down in the morning room on Sunday morning, Kelly had thought hard about her next move. In the end she'd decided to go with her original impulse, which was to leave the hunting to her quarry. She figured Dean's own secret desire for self-liberation would drive him to seek her out. She thought it would be better for him to face and acknowledge for himself that he wanted something different in his life.

That's what she'd thought.

Now she didn't know what to think. He'd passed her that morning on the stairs as if she were a piece of furniture.

Kelly bit her lower lip. All right, fine. She'd known success wouldn't happen right away. Dean would resist. He'd think he knew better than to go after the freedom he truly wanted. He'd think it was wise to avoid such a goal, using every ounce of self-sacrificing discipline he owned.

But Kelly'd been sure he'd have broken by now, or at least bent.

A few feet down from Kelly, Robby sat hunched over his own homemade rod. He stared fixedly into the stream. The fishing that had started as a whim on Kelly's part had gone over big with Robby. The sun beat down with a pleasant warmth. Even though her scheme hadn't panned out—yet—she could at least be enjoying the day. But as Kelly rested on her elbows, she felt grumpy and unsettled.

She missed Dean.

Kelly stared at the sparkling stream. She missed him? How could she miss him? He was grim, remote, unappreciative. They'd never had a conversation in which they'd actually agreed on anything.

But as Kelly half sat, half lay there, gazing at the stream, she felt an emptiness, a mild but unignorable yearning inside. She missed Dean's handsome, forbidding face. She missed the cool intelligence in his eyes. She missed his dry wit, his intensity, and the unfailing good manners with which he treated her.

Kelly blinked at the sunbeams shooting off the water.

This was crazy. Was she starting to like him? That is, was she starting to like 'this' Dean, unliberated, without any of the qualities of the man she'd married in Las Vegas?

"Hey, you're swishing the water." Robby gave Kelly an irritated look. "You told me we had to keep still."

"Still. Oh yeah, right." Kelly made an effort to calm the rod she held. "Sorry about that."

"It's okay." Robby went back to staring at his line. "Just don't do it again."

Kelly gripped her rod tightly. No, she wouldn't swish the water again. Because it was impossible. She wasn't starting to like 'this' Dean. That would be...fickle, on top of stupid, disastrous, and silly.

The only man she was interested in was the one she'd married and he, apparently, was nowhere to be found. He certainly hadn't tried to seek Kelly out. He hadn't...shown himself at all.

At that moment, the bushes across the meadow parted. A man incongruously dressed in a three-piece Italian suit and crisp red silk tie proceeded to push through.

"Dean," Robby remarked, with supreme indifference. He turned back to stare at his line. Dean, meanwhile, began stomping through the wildflowers and down the hill toward them.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kelly stilled even as her heart raced. She couldn't believe her eyes. Was this Dean, really Dean, marching toward her in the middle of a busy Friday afternoon?

And if so, just 'which' Dean was he?

Dean strode up to her position, dropped the cases he was holding, and sneered.

"Fishing," he said.

The usual Dean, Kelly decided, and he wasn't bending here at all. Quite the opposite, it appeared. But her heart kept on racing as she got to her feet. "Yeah," she said, and lifted her chin. "Fishing."

Dean put his hands on his hips. "You don't have the slightest idea how to catch a fish."

Kelly arched her brows and tried to calm her pulse. "So?"

He squinted at her. Slowly, he said, "*So*. Fishing is about catching fish."

"Oh, yeah?"

Only a brief hesitation showed he'd heard her answer. Then he was bending on one knee over his case to snap it open. "*This* is a real rod."

"No."

"Yes." He lifted an impossibly delicate-looking stick from the case. With a supercilious expression, he eyed her. "You have to use the right equipment, learn the correct techniques."

"Hmm." She'd been right. He wasn't bending. He'd only come to—to organize their fun. "Well, that might be true," Kelly told him, "if fishing were really about catching fish."

He blinked. "Pardon me?"

"I said maybe we'd need the proper equipment and the correct techniques if we were actually out here to catch fish."

She saw his nostrils flare. "You're not out here to catch fish?"

Kelly didn't dare glance toward Robby, who was staring at his line. "No."

Slowly, Dean rose. "Then what *are* you doing?"

Kelly crossed her arms. "We're...communing with nature. Taking it easy."

A muscle in Dean's jaw jumped. "I do know how to 'take it easy.' And fishing—fishing correctly—is not all that stressful a sport."

He wasn't getting it at all. They weren't out here to compete at sports. They weren't trying to achieve anything. Oh, he was utterly hopeless. And yet as she stared into his grim, intense face, Kelly couldn't help feeling something warm and tender grow inside.

"Sports in general are stressful," she countered, perhaps more sharply than necessary. She didn't want to feel warm inside! "Believe me, I know. And we are not doing any of that here. We are *relaxing*." And she was not falling in love with him, she wasn't! But despite it all, the warm feeling inside her grew.

He tilted his head and gave her a peculiar look. "The hell you say."

"Excuse me?"



"Move aside. I intend to show Robby how to fish."

"No."

"Yes."

"A fish!" Robby exclaimed. "I've got a fish!" His words cut through the escalating argument like a knife through butter.

"What?" Kelly whirled.

"No." Dean stepped toward him.

"It's—it's something," Robby said, battling to hold onto his line.

It was indeed something. Kelly could see Robby's kitchen string line stretch tight. "Hold on!" she called.

"A net," Dean muttered. "He needs a net."

"No time!" Kelly exclaimed, and splashed directly into the stream.

"Oh, for the love of —" she heard Dean growl, but Kelly clomped toward Robby's taut line anyway. It wasn't the right way to do things, but neither was Robby's paper clip hook or cheese bait correct, so Kelly figured it evened out. She stooped and plunged her hands into the stream.

"It's getting away!" Robby wailed.

"No. No, it isn't. I feel it!"

"You don't." Suddenly Dean was right in front of her.

"What?" The sight of him, up to his high-tailored knees in water, made Kelly start. She dropped the fish. "What—what the heck are you doing, Dean?"

"I'm going to get that fish," he replied, and plunged his own hands into the stream.

For half a second she stared at him. He was going to ruin his suit. Then her eyes widened. "Oh, no you don't. That's my fish— I mean, Robby's." She moved to intercept. Too late.

"Got it!" Dean crowed and lifted a wiggling fish. His jacket sleeves were soaked but he gave Kelly an unmistakable look of triumph.

"Ha!" Kelly gloated as the fish slipped out of his grasp. She lunged for it.

So did Dean. They collided midstream.

"Oof!"

"Hey!"

"I've got it."

"No, I have."

Robby was screaming something, Kelly couldn't understand what. Meanwhile neither she nor Dean actually had the fish, which wriggled between their pressed-together bodies. Kelly's hands grappled with Dean's in the slippery mess between them.

"Can't you—?"

"Over there!"

At one point they almost had it, four hands wrapped around the scaly creature. But Kelly could feel the fish gaining ground.

She started to laugh. It was too much, Robby jumping up and down on the bank, the two of them soaked and fighting this poor fish. Talk about stress! Still laughing, her eyes met Dean's.

Her breath caught in her throat.

Dean's hold on the fish loosened.

"Shoot!" Robby exclaimed, as the fish wiggled free.

*God*, Kelly thought. *Oh God, oh God*. It was there, shimmering in the air between them, the special something, the zing—exactly what she'd felt the first time they'd met in Las Vegas. As if...as if the two of them had been born soul mates, as if they understood each other and always would. As if they belonged together.

Dean looked like he'd been hit by a baseball bat. Kelly thought he was going to stumble backwards, but he didn't. Instead, a sort of haze rose over his eyes. Then he leaned toward her, took her face between his hands, and kissed her.

At first Kelly couldn't do anything but close her eyes. It felt so incredibly good, like a shower of sunshine spreading through her bones. Dean's hands, his mouth, the mere touch of him. Then he got hungry. He moved his head, shifted his lips. And the kiss went from good to other-worldly. Kelly moaned and reached up for him.

They seemed to meld, just blend right into each other. And warmth, such a fantastic warmth grew between them against the freezing cold water of the stream.

"Aw-w-w," Robby complained.

At the sound, Dean started. With his mouth still pressed to Kelly's, he seemed to come back to himself. She could feel him leaving her, first emotionally, then physically. The delicious warmth retreated as he pulled away.

Slowly, very slowly, in no rush to return to reality herself, Kelly lifted her lashes.

Dean was looking down at her with an expression of complete bafflement. As she gazed back, Kelly grew baffled herself. What had happened to 'her' Dean? She could tell he was gone. More bewildering yet, the warm feeling inside her, the connection, wasn't going away. No, it kept growing. Even though this wasn't 'her' Dean!

His brows curled. "I—"

"Have to take a picture," Kelly interrupted. She blinked and took a giant step back, nearly falling into the water. "Historic event," she chattered on. "Have to preserve for posterity." Her heart was going a mile a minute. What was happening to her? She didn't even care that 'her' Dean had left! The feelings—they kept escalating. She—had to think.

"What do you have to take a picture of?" Robby wanted to know. He shoved his hands onto his hips. "You're all done *kissing*."

Dean choked. Kelly laughed. A register too high. She turned and splashed away from Dean, up the bank. Camera, camera. She needed something to occupy her hands. Because she hadn't switched allegiance. She wasn't settling. She wanted *her* Dean, the one who was free and easy, the one who loved her.

On the bank, Kelly fumbled for her disposable camera, picked it up, and made herself turn around. Dean was standing ten feet away from her, fancy suit dripping. He looked like he wanted to strangle somebody, starting with himself. He looked like he wanted to crawl out of his skin. Definitely not 'her' Dean at all. Yet Kelly felt something puff up enormous in her chest.

"Here, I'll take the picture," Robby said. He shoved past Dean. "Because both of you guys are lunatics."

Kelly didn't protest as Robby took the camera out of her hands. She was about to drop it, anyway. What was going on with her?

Dean, meanwhile, had obviously figured out exactly what was going on with him, and didn't like it one bit. He got a tight look on his face, the kind that said he was so above it all. Before Robby could snap a picture, he took a big step away.

"Staff report," he claimed. "They're all waiting."

"Huh?" Robby said.

Dean didn't bother to explain. His eyes flicked once, worriedly, to Kelly. Then he turned, expression implacable again, and stalked away.

Though he was clearly trying his best to pretend nothing had happened, Kelly could hear water squishing out of his shoes.

She wanted to laugh. She might have laughed, if she didn't want to deny it all so badly herself. She'd fallen in love with one man. She just couldn't have gone and become interested in another one.

~~~

Three hours later she was not surprised to learn that Dean had fled the scene altogether.

"Emergency," Troy announced when she walked into the dining room and looked around. His gaze was close on her. "In Atlanta. Said he'd be out of town 'til Monday."

Kelly stood in her floor-length gown, the one she'd picked out especially for Dean, and tried to absorb her disappointment. He was gone. Well, that was...good. Yes, good. Because she was having serious doubts about her sanity.

She'd kissed him, the 'other' Dean—twice now. She'd *felt* something for him. She'd just spent the entire afternoon primping and dressing for him. And now she was disappointed that he was gone.

This wasn't right. It wasn't wise or good. It wasn't even *loyal*.

"Oh, well then," Kelly said out loud. "Might as well eat." She walked up to a chair and drew it out. But her mouth felt stuffy.

Robby half climbed, half sat in his chair. Troy seated himself elegantly in his own. With his brows rising, he picked up a linen napkin. "I must say, I can't blame the man for running. Robby told me you were kissing Dean, in the middle of the stream by the north fence." He looked over at Kelly.

"He was kissing me," she corrected, and tossed open her own folded napkin.

Troy snorted. "All the more reason to get scared. What have you done to him, Kelly, thrown some kind of magic spell?"

More like he'd thrown a magic spell on her. She wasn't a fickle person. She'd *married* a man in Las Vegas. But now, somehow, she was starting to have feelings for this other man in Massachusetts.

"I have to admit—" Troy picked up the spoon for his soup. "I didn't think you were going to get anywhere."

"All of you underestimate me."

"No-o-o." Troy drew out the word. "More like I underestimated Dean. Who'd have guessed he could hold the interest of a decent female this long?" Troy shook his head.

"You defy all logic."

Kelly splashed her spoon in her soup. "Logic has nothing to do with it."

"Hm," Troy murmured.

There was a brief silence. Kelly stopped splashing her soup. She regarded the warm, golden color of the butternut squash, then looked up. What had she said? *Logic had nothing to do with it.*

"I know who I married," Kelly told Troy, vehemently.

Troy started. "Um," he said. "Okay."

Kelly felt heat build beneath her fancy gown, the one she'd picked out just in case Dean had been there for dinner. "I know who I married," she insisted, "and Dean isn't him. He's—he's—a different person altogether."

"Uh...okay," Troy agreed.

Kelly pushed her bowl of soup away. "All right, a *part* of him is the same, but only a part. And that part keeps coming and going so fast I can't keep track of where it ends and the rest of him begins."

Both Troy and Robby were staring at her. As her words came back to her, Kelly felt like staring at herself. She had just said, *she couldn't keep track of where her Dean ended and the other one began*. "Why, there is no difference between the two," she whispered.

There was no schism, no two, distinct personalities. Dean had been telling the truth in that conference room in Las Vegas. A part of him was the man she had married. That part was always there, but it was only one part. He was much more than that. He was—

Kelly leaned back against the sturdy oak frame of her chair. Who *was* he?

Troy frowned at her. "No difference between whom, Kelly?"

Good question. Kelly waved a hand. "I thought he was a different person. I mean, he's cold, closed-off, and—and—disapproving." Yes, and that same man had kissed her in the middle of a stream. He'd soaked his fancy business suit, wrestled a fish. *Who was Dean?*

"He's...more," Kelly said out loud.

"More than cold, closed-off, and disapproving?" Troy's frown deepened. "Not that I know of."

"You're wrong." Kelly laughed, but it was a weak, just-got-hit-in-the-belly kind of laugh. Dean was more. He was loyal, hard-working, and dependable. And when she closed her eyes she could see him standing there with his hands on her face, a look of stark yearning on his own.

He wanted more, too. He wanted love. He really did. In fact, he might even want to love *her*.

Kelly didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. Dean wasn't the man she'd married, but he wasn't *not* him, either. Oh, how complicated everything had become!

"Personally, I don't think Dean is anything more than that cold, closed-off person you were talking about," Troy spoke up, sounding worried.

"Oh, but he is." Kelly couldn't dismiss the truth. "He just needs—" What? What did Dean need?

"To change his personality?" Troy's eyes widened. "Yes, I believe we could all agree on that."

"No." Kelly put her napkin down. She pushed out of her chair. "What he needs...is to be able to *express* his personality."

"Uh...doesn't he do that already?"

"No." Kelly paced the length of the dining room table. "He doesn't feel safe. And why should he? No one's ever made him feel that way."

Troy's brows drew down. "Don't get me wrong. I *like* having you here. But—" He grimaced. "But come on. *Dean*, not feeling safe? I can't think of anyone more supremely arrogant than my cousin."

Kelly arched her brows at Troy. "Is that right?"

"Yeah." But Troy's gaze averted, and he shifted in his seat. It was all the confirmation Kelly sought.

Troy seemed to know it. "Okay, fine," he said. "Dean may have his...little problems. But I'm sure he feels *safe*. Or, even if he doesn't, how could *you* make him feel that way?"

"I don't know how." Kelly gripped the back of her chair. "I only know I have to try." Troy's gaze narrowed. "You have to try." His eyes became mere slits. "Why?"

Why?

While Troy's regard was narrow, Robby's was wide, and curious.

Why?

Kelly refused to acknowledge the immediate answer that came to mind. She stalked back toward her chair. "How...? Now, that won't be easy, of course." In fact, she hadn't a single, viable idea of how to make Dean feel safe, how to allow him to be who he really was.

But she would think of something, because this was important, vital, no longer a choice. She *had* to help him.

"No, I don't know the how of it," Kelly admitted and sighed with a wry smile. "But it looks like I have 'til Monday to figure it out."

CHAPTER TWELVE

It would have been a great weekend, Troy thought, with Dean guaranteed to be gone, except that he had this apology deal with Felicia to get over with on Sunday. Or at least Troy thought he'd get the apology over with on Sunday, but late Friday night he hit the button on the answering machine in his bedroom and found out she was going to keep the wretched thing hanging over his head—again.

"...so very sorry," Felicia's voice claimed, in her best high-society accent. "I *completely* forgot about this luncheon I absolutely *must* attend on Sunday for the Head Start Support Foundation. Really, I don't know *how* it slipped my mind. So, please, let's set another day. Next week perhaps..." Her voice trailed off as she muttered a few other inanities and said good-bye.

With one hand loosening his silk party tie, Troy used the other to put a finger over the stop button on the machine and slowly depress it. He could feel a muscle in his jaw clench. She was putting it off—again.

He might not have minded, he might even have *approved* of Felicia's delaying tactics if it wasn't looking more and more like his apology was going to be necessary.

Hell. Dean and Kelly looked like they might actually take a stab at being married to each other. His stuffy, uptight cousin had kissed her. Quite a smooch, if Robby was to be believed. And at dinner that night Kelly had sounded far gone, like she was falling in love, for heaven's sake.

Troy shook his head. Kelly was either heading for one terrific drop or...she was going to end up married, really married, to Dean.

The idea of Dean being permanently off the market and of the position in which that placed Felicia caused all sorts of conflicting and unpleasant emotions to churn in Troy's gut.

The more time that passed, the more difficult this apology was going to be.

He picked up the phone, about to call Felicia right then and there, about to *demand* she not put him off again, when he realized it was well after midnight. Cursing under his breath, he set the phone back down. He took a pace across the brown-gold carpet.

Perhaps it was just as well he couldn't call her. He needed to think. He needed to plan and strategize and come up with a guaranteed way to get Felicia to have this lunch date with him. Troy expelled a disgusted breath. Yes, he had to think.

Felicia had a way of forcing him to do that.

~~~

After a miserable weekend in Atlanta, Dean returned to Boston on Monday morning knowing exactly what had to be done. He went straight from the airport to his office.

"Get Myers on the phone, would you?" he asked Mrs. Barnes as soon as he walked through the door.

"Myers?" Mrs. Barnes looked up from her computer. "Your attorney?"

"That's right. See if you can set up an appointment for today."

"Yes of course, Mr. Singleton."

Ah, Dean thought, a woman who listened and did what she was told. So...refreshing. He continued through to his office, feeling good enough to whistle. The solution was so easy he didn't know why he hadn't thought of it before.

Money. Everybody had his—or her—price. Dean chuckled. He wouldn't be falling down on his responsibility. Not if Kelly took it. That would mean she was accepting compensation, money for breach of promise. He'd be clear.

For the first time in countless days, Dean sat behind his desk, ready to work.

Mrs. Barnes buzzed. Dean pressed on the intercom. "Yes?"

"Would twelve-thirty do?" Mrs. Barnes asked. "Mr. Myers is completely booked, but will take off lunch since it's you."

Dean smiled hard enough to hurt. "Twelve-thirty is fine. Tell him I'll bring lunch."

"Very good, sir."

Dean released the intercom button and leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers. This was so damnably simple. By one o'clock, one-thirty at the latest, all his problems would be solved. He'd have Myers draw up a cash settlement, something not even Kelly could refuse. Yes, she would take the money.

And she'd be out of his life.

No more sighings over opera, no more fishing with bare hands. No more scary, out-of-this-universe kisses. Sanity. Whistling for real now, Dean separated his hands and bent over the papers on his desk.

Three hours of steady work later, Dean checked his watch. His eyebrows jumped, and he smiled. Three solid hours. Yes, he *had* been ready to get back to business. He straightened the papers on his desk and reached for his jacket. Mrs. Barnes buzzed.

Dean grimaced. Had Myers thought they were supposed to meet here? He pressed the intercom. "Tell him I don't have lunch yet."

Mrs. Barnes ignored that. "Your wife is here," she said.

Dean froze, his finger on the intercom. No. He hadn't heard that. He hadn't had a chance to meet with Myers yet. He—he didn't have the information necessary to strike a deal.

"Mr. Singleton?" Mrs. Barnes said.

Dean realized he was going to have to do something. He straightened, took a deep breath, and depressed the intercom button again. "My wife?" He did his best to sound casual. "Why, send her on in." As if there was anything else he could do. God.

One second later, the door of his office opened. Kelly sauntered in.

Every cell in Dean's body jumped to electrical awareness. It was almost painful. Almost.

"Well, hey," Kelly said, smiling.

Dean swallowed. He should have instructed Mrs. Barnes to make her wait, not that time would have dulled her effect. Her smile alone—It could warm the North pole. And then there was what she was wearing, one of those knit tops with spaghetti-thin straps, the kind that show a woman's bra straps. Only Kelly wasn't showing any bra straps.

"Hope I'm not interrupting anything." Kelly sashayed in the direction of his desk. Her skirt was short. Very short.

Dean was glad he was standing behind the desk, and that the desk was piled sufficiently high with papers. It wouldn't do for her to notice his immediate, and purely physical, reaction.

He cleared his throat. "No, you're not interrupting anything at all." *Except a meeting to get rid of you.* He raised his eyebrows. "What can I do for you?"

Her eyes laughed at him. "Oh. So polite. So *helpful*." On the other side of his desk, she came to a stop.

"Excuse me?" Dean tried to look innocent.

She wagged a finger. "You ran away."

Despite his best efforts to the contrary, Dean could feel his face flush. "I—had to get to our plant in Atlanta. It was an emergency."

"Oh, I'm sure it was." She rolled her eyes. "Since you finally broke down and kissed me."

Dean crushed his teeth together. He could still feel that kiss, its velvety excitement. "Is there a reason you're here, Kelly?" As if he didn't know. She was here to...sink her claws into him. Well, he wasn't going to let her. He was going to make his meeting with Myers. They would concoct a plan to extract her claws.

She twisted to perch a hip on the corner of his desk. "I'm here so you can make it up to me." She threw him a very naughty smile.

Dean tried to meet her gaze dispassionately, but his inner temperature spiked. It was impossible not to fantasize exactly how she'd like him to 'make it up.' As calmly as he could, he lifted his watch. "Ahem, maybe some other time. You see, I have an appointment."

She laughed. "Oh, no. I'm sorry Dean, but you can't use that excuse again."

Her face had come alive with her laugh, become radiant. Dean forced himself to breathe. "It's not an excuse." Indeed, if he didn't manage to get Kelly out of his office soon, he'd miss his chance to make sure she never ambushed him there again.

"It is an excuse, but I'll tell you what." Kelly's head tilted. "I'll consider us quits if you answer one question."

Dean stared. That was it? One question? He didn't believe she would make it this easy, but asked, "What?"

To his surprise, her teasing gaze dropped. When she spoke, she sounded almost timid. "Tell me, Dean, what was the hypnotic suggestion?"

He froze.

Kelly looked up. "I always assumed it was—well, for you to go out and do something embarrassing. But I asked Troy and he said it wasn't that, but he wouldn't tell me. He said it would have to come from you." She gazed at Dean steadily.

Dean gazed right back, even though it seemed like all the air was leaving the room. The hypnotic suggestion. He couldn't answer her. Not truthfully. She'd make all kinds of assumptions—false assumptions. Like they really were meant to stay together or that he actually wanted to fall in love with her. He made himself breathe and his eyes narrowed. "I'm afraid that information is...not forthcoming."

"Not *forthcoming*?"

"I'm not going to tell you."

This provoked a lengthy perusal from those witchy green eyes. "You mean," she said at last, "it's too personal."

Dean gave a curt nod.

Kelly held her fortune-teller eyes on him a minute more, then lowered her gaze.

"Okay," she said. "I guess I can understand that."

Dean blinked. She could? She was going to back off? Not that he planned to stick around and look a gift horse in the mouth. "Thank you," he said stiffly, and began to come around from behind his desk. "Then if you'll excuse me, I really do have an appointment to make."

He thought he was going to get away, he really did. He was halfway to the door when she stepped in front of him. She put a hand on his chest. "Not so fast."

"Pardon?" Dean tried his best to look unworried, though his heart was beating very fast beneath her hand.

"You didn't answer my question." The corners of Kelly's mouth curved. "So, now you owe me."

"I—what?"

"You owe me. Still. For running away the other day. So—" She got a wicked sparkle in her eye. "So no going to your appointment unless...you kiss me."

"What?"

"You heard. Kiss me. Right here." She tapped her lips.

Dean's own lips parted. No way, no how. He wasn't going to kiss her. It was exactly the kind of activity—the dangerous kind—he was going to meet Myers to prevent.

"You don't think you can do it." Kelly was arch.

"Of course I can *do* it."

"Hmm, yes. You kiss very well." Kelly patted his tie. "But you couldn't just kiss me and stop there. Not any more."

"What are you talking about?"

Her eyes flicked up at him. "Your famous self-control. You don't have it with me."

The look in her eyes sent a thrill through Dean. "Nonsense." His own gaze averted. "You are no different than any other woman."

"Oh, really?" Her hand moved up his tie, lightly circling it. "Prove it."

Dean swallowed. That thing she was doing with his tie made his knees feel weak, but he could do it. He could kiss her, knowing it was a means to get out the door to meet Myers, and that Myers was a means to get her out of his life altogether. "Fine," he said. "I'll prove it."

Triumph—or was it arousal—flashed across her face. Dean felt a simultaneous fire blaze inside, but he could manage this. He *did* have the self-control.

Jaw clenched, he put one hand over hers. He moved it down from his tie. But that didn't really help. As she looked up at him he could feel heat spread from his center out to his extremities. But, fine. That didn't mean he was going to get *carried away*. He could



kiss her and stop at that. In fact, he could make it a very short kiss. He had that much control.

He put his free hand on her cheek and bent his face to hers. They would touch lips, he decided. That defined a kiss. And it wouldn't be cowardly to leave it at that. Simply...prudent. His face lowered. Mouth touched mouth.

At the contact of his flesh to hers an incredible sensation rushed through Dean. A tidal wave, a volcano, a hurricane.

But still... He could pull back. He could stop there, as Kelly had taunted him that he couldn't. Even against a hurricane he could maintain control. But Dean didn't pull back. His lips stayed pressed against Kelly's.

He waited for the hurricane to pass, but there was no attenuation. On the contrary, the sensation grew wilder. More out of control. Dean felt his lips move against hers.

Oh, her lips were soft, pliant, amazingly giving beneath the savagery growing inside him. Then she moaned.

It was the merest sound, like a kitten's mew. But it made Dean breathe in hard and feel even more barbaric. He moved closer. God, he couldn't stop—feeling. It was—overpowering. His grip on her tightened and his mouth got fierce.

Kelly melted under this assault. Gulping in air, Dean squeezed her yet closer. His hands moved up and down her back.

He needed to stop. This was getting completely out of hand. He felt positively ablaze. But instead of stopping, he deepened the kiss, using his tongue. He slipped one hand beneath her shirt.

"The door." It was a hoarse whisper from Kelly, only possible because Dean had relinquished her mouth for her neck.

"Hmm?" Dean's seeking fingers found the nipple riding the softness of her breast. That wonderful nipple was taut and aroused, like himself.

"The door," she croaked, arching backward. "It's not locked."

Dean's busy fingers halted. The door, not locked. But—locking the door would mean he was committed, that he was going to proceed with this madness. That he wasn't going to stop.

And he *was* going to stop...

In just a minute.

Meanwhile...he nipped her ear. She gasped. The sound, the way her body jerked in response, pushed a roll of pleasure through him. He heard an animal sound come out of his throat.

*Stop*, a voice whispered, very dim, and far away. Dean ignored it. He leaned back, hitting his desk. But rather than distancing himself from Kelly, he pulled her with him, hip pressed to hip. In the moment of sway, while her shoulders were back, he pushed up her shirt.

Her breasts were a beautiful sight, aroused, as his fingers had discovered already, the nipples large and pink. Growling, Dean lowered his mouth.

She moaned again, louder than that kitten thing, and her fingers dug into his shoulders. Dean couldn't get enough of her. She tasted *so good*. He suckled hard, not the delicate dance he usually played, tantalizing, in control. This was crazy, like wildfire, ferocious.

She shoved her pelvis against him. "The door," she said again, a soft wail.

Dean flailed back with one hand. The intercom. It took a minute to find the button, as he refused to let his mouth leave Kelly's breast.

"Yes, Mr. Singleton?" Mrs. Barnes' fluty tones swept into the room.

Dean forced his lips from Kelly's nipple. "No interruptions."

"Yes, Mr.—" Mrs. Barnes' voice cut off as Dean released his hand from the intercom. He moved that hand to Kelly's rear.

"This is—" Kelly's words ended on a groan as Dean palmed her bottom. Head thrown back, she began circling her hips against his.

This was crazy, insane, but Dean was beyond caring. It had been building for some time—from the moment she'd first burst through his conference room door three weeks ago, in fact, and he was through fighting it. God help him but they were going to finish this. Holding her hips close to his, he turned them both so that she was the one leaning against the desk.

Kelly understood what he wanted, parting her legs so she could wrap them around him. Dean drew in a deep breath and took her mouth again. Tongue plundering, he leaned her all the way down, her back flat on his desk. The Robertson report scattered. A pen holder fell. As finely sharpened pencils rolled onto the floor, Dean put his hand under Kelly's skirt.

Her panties, well, there was hardly anything to them. All he had to do was push a scrap of lace to one side and there she was. A crisp curl of hair and then a wet and warm softness.

"Dean!" Her whole body convulsed.

She was so wet, so hot and utterly inviting. And the way she responded—it was beyond Dean's experience. A woman needed more than what he was giving her, which was simply him taking whatever he wanted. He should slow down, behave like a gentleman, but she opened her legs and shoved against him. He gasped against her mouth. She *liked* this. She wanted *more*.

He nipped the edge of her jaw, then sucked on her neck. Meanwhile his finger flicked gently, making her jerk. At her responsive motion, Dean couldn't let his mouth linger at her neck, though he should have. He should have prolonged the pleasure, used control. Instead he slid between her legs. Holding her scrap of panties to one side, he applied his tongue.

She screamed. Well, not out loud. It was a between-the-teeth and in-the-throat kind of scream. As if she were doing her best to restrain herself—and failing. Dean felt an access of pleasure and pride. Despite his greed, he was driving her crazy, sending her right through the ceiling.

She moaned and thrashed her head from side to side. Dean used his shoulder to hold up her thigh and moved his hand to one pink nipple. Lightly, he pinched.

Her hips bucked and then her whole body jerked and shuddered. Above his shoulder, Dean could feel heat suddenly flush her body. "Enough," she whispered, and pushed his head.

Dean looked up and felt a surge in his own engorgement. Yes, she'd come. Very nicely, too. Her hair was tousled and her face a rose blush; her breasts were the same blush color, and more erect than ever. He barely had time to enjoy this achievement, though, before she sat up and pushed him back.

He landed in one of the visitor chairs. She leaned toward him with a lopsided smile. Dean had a split second to anticipate, his own skin flushing, before she reached for his fly.

"Oh, yes." It came out of his mouth like an oath, low and gritty.

Slowly, teasingly, Kelly drew down his zipper. Dean felt tight enough to burst. Kelly seemed to realize it, too. She pulled back, ratcheting up the anticipation. Then she threw one of those sleek legs over the armrest of Dean's chair. His palm went to her thigh. He could feel the capable muscles there. His own muscles leaped at this indication of female strength. Then with one hand on Dean's shoulder for balance, she threw her other leg over the opposite armrest.

Dean drew in a long breath. She was above him now, open and ready. Oh, his fingers remembered just how ready.

With a faint smirk, she dipped her hand into the tiny pocket of her miniskirt. Dean watched, lashes low, as she pulled forth a slim single-package condom. He almost laughed. Well, at least he didn't have to admit he had one in his front pocket, too. Not because he'd wanted anything to happen between them, but because he'd surrendered to the reality of his own weakness. A weakness he was experiencing in all its glory at that moment.

Indeed, he was beyond self-recrimination as he watched Kelly rip the plastic outer wrap with her teeth. He felt like a powerful engine, a jet revving as it waited to rush down the runway. Dean forced himself to keep waiting, though he hissed out a breath as Kelly rolled the thin plastic down his shaft. Her fingers drove his engine so much the faster. And then she was hiking herself closer along the chair arms. It was time for take-off. Dean took hold of her hips and clenched his teeth.

The feel of her closing over him, tight, hot, wet—He was going to start speeding down the runway. No, he didn't think he could stay still a moment longer.

"Move!" she whispered.

Dean closed his eyes and moved. He moved hard, he moved fast. It was too hard, too fast, but he couldn't stop himself. He was flying down the runway. Only he wanted—

"More," she muttered.

Dean's eyes shot open. Had she read his mind? He grabbed onto her bottom. He pushed harder. But still—

"Deeper." Her voice was a harsh growl.

Dean didn't know how to bring it any deeper, not in the position they were in. Clutching her close, he stood up. Kelly moaned. The sweat popped out in beads on Dean's forehead as, still holding Kelly tight, he laid her flat on the floor.

The carpet was nice and thick, something to sink into. Kelly looked up at him with deliberate challenge and spread her knees wide. Dean arched his back and drove into her.

Oh yes, this was better, definitely closing the connection between them. Dean drove in again and again, urgent to complete the union. Kelly's head moved from one side to the other.

"More," she said.

By this time Dean was pushing her across the floor in six-inch increments. His blood was on fire, every muscle in his body straining with need. Oh, it was as if she'd been made just for his own personal sin.

"More," Kelly demanded.

Her head bumped into the couch, the couch that was on the opposite side of the room from where they'd started. "Deeper," Kelly moaned.

With a sharp hiss, Dean pulled out of her. She moaned again, this time in protest. He ignored that as he took her limp body, lifted it, then bent her forward onto the seat of the leather couch. He pushed her skirt up and drew her panties to the side. She groaned low as he came into her from behind. "Oh yes," she breathed, pushing back. "Yes."

Dean was beyond hearing. The pleasure was excruciating now. He gripped her hips, moving fast, moving hard, taking himself exactly where he wanted to go. He wasn't even thinking about her, except as that part of himself he needed.

*Needed.*

Finally, he could feel the pleasure come to its absolute crest, the exquisite pain-point of release. At the same moment she seemed to come apart in his hands.

He rode the wave, out of control, rudder-less. Meanwhile his chest expanded to the point he thought it would burst.

*My God*, Dean thought. *My God, my God, my God*. Never, ever had he imagined it would be like this, so—so—Murmuring wordlessly, he folded himself over her back and put his arms around to hold her close. Together, they slid to the floor.

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

They decided not to go home.

"Troy, Robby, a bevy of servants," Dean said, after the second time in his office. Panting, he handed Kelly her shirt. "We'll get a hotel room." Then he looked at her and added, "Now."

Kelly wiggled back into her clothes. As she trotted with Dean past the dragon outside his office, she tried her best to look as if she hadn't been tumbled twice in the past half hour. Judging by the expression on Mrs. Barnes' face, Kelly wasn't too successful.

Dean didn't seem to care. With Kelly's hand firmly clasped in his own, he led her the few city blocks from his office to the Parker House. Classy place. But no sooner were they upstairs and in their hotel room then they were attacking each other's clothes again.

It went on like that for the rest of the afternoon. Rolling over the bed and onto the floor; panting, hot, and entwined. It was crazy. It was wonderful. Kelly couldn't get enough of him. Better yet, Dean couldn't get enough of her. Oh, it was as if a dam had broken.

He was finally letting go.

Yes, later in the dusk and lying in Dean's arms, Kelly smugly assumed she had managed to break through. Dean was reaching out for what he wanted and needed.

And what he wanted and needed was her.

Smiling, Kelly caressed his toe with her own. "Say," she said with a yawn. "Do you know what time it is?"

"Does it matter?"

"No." Kelly's smile widened. It didn't matter in the slightest, except that Dean Singleton didn't care what time it was. She abandoned her warm spot and lifted onto her palms to look down at him.

The lights from downtown Boston drifted through the sheer curtains over the window and illumined one half of his face. It was a fabulous face; sharply cut features,

deep intelligence, profound passion. It was the face of a man she'd come to know much, much better that afternoon. His lashes were low as he returned her gaze.

A sensation like honey flowed through Kelly; warm, complete, and unutterably tender. "Hmm." She smiled and tapped his chin.

All right, the feeling was love. She'd been in love with him since—well, probably since he'd first flown back to Las Vegas to apologize. She just hadn't realized it. How could she have? He kept the real him, the all-of-him, so well hidden. Now she leaned down and gave him a kiss as a laugh escaped her.

Dean's eyebrows raised.

"I was just thinking—" She bit the inside of her cheek. "This sure has been a revelation."

"Indeed."

"Uh huh." With a grin, Kelly lowered her chin onto his chest. "You are quite...inventive."

He frowned, clearly not understanding.

Kelly couldn't help giggling. "*You* know." She cocked her head toward the bed. "At this."

"At this?" His eyebrows jumped, then came way down. "But—wasn't I inventive in Las Vegas?"

"Unh unh." Kelly chuckled and rose onto her knees. "So I guess there are some advantages to you being, well, just plain you."

He continued to frown, appearing to digest this.

"That's good," Kelly assured him.

"Hm." His gaze shifted to one side. "Well I'm glad something good has come of this."

Kelly stopped. Hearing his tone, she did a slow blink. "Is something wrong?"

"Is something wrong." He repeated it like a statement, then pushed himself to a sitting position. "What's wrong is that you were absolutely correct. I *don't* have any self-control when it comes to you."

Kelly blinked rapidly now, trying to make sense of what she was hearing. Well yes, he didn't have self-control, but hadn't that been the point? She'd thought he'd let go—happily. For heaven's sake, hadn't they been going at it like rabbits all afternoon?

With an oath, Dean shoved the covers aside and stood up. He had a beautiful back, broad at the shoulders, tapering to the hips. He seemed utterly unaware of his own nakedness, though, as he began to pace the room.

"We went from a kiss to pure insanity. And now this—" He threw out an arm, encompassing the room. "I walked out of my office, just walked out, in order to spend the afternoon...*here*."

Kelly remained scrunched on her knees, watching him. She'd thought there had been *joy* in their lovemaking. But Dean, bitterly pacing the room, did not look the least bit joyful. He looked, in fact—now that she really *looked* at him—utterly miserable.

Kelly felt a terrible lowering sensation. It was as though a dark blanket were getting pulled over the brightness of her own joy. Why, none of this was what it had seemed. None of it was what *he* had wanted. He wasn't happy. He hadn't let go. Nor did he want her, really, at all.

She'd completely mistaken everything.

Dean muttered something unintelligible and paced away from her again.

A huge knot lodged in her throat. "I'm sorry."

He stopped. His head whipped around.

"I'm sorry," Kelly repeated, then tried to swallow the knot. "I certainly didn't intend to make you unhappy."

Dean stared at her.

"If it's any consolation," Kelly chattered on, "I don't have much self-control when it comes to you, either. I mean, believe it or not, I didn't intend this to happen." She waved her own arm to encompass the room. "Either."

Dean's eyes grew dark. "But you came to my office. You were dressed like—"

"I know, I know." Kelly looked away and heaved a deep sigh. "But all I really wanted was to get your attention."

There was a short silence, and then Dean barked a laugh. "Consider it gotten."

"Yeah, well." Kelly sank to pull the bed sheet over her chest. Her heart was shriveling. He was upset he'd let go with her. He wasn't *happy* about this.

She'd completely fooled herself, just blinded her eyes. Heck, she'd known he was scared. He'd actually left town in order to avoid her. That should have told her something. But no. She'd thought she could push through.

Instead what she'd done was simply push.

"Tell you what." Pulling the sheets with her, Kelly slipped off the bed. "It's not too late. Put on your clothes, go back to the office. You can catch up on whatever you left undone this afternoon."

The expression on Dean's face changed rapidly. "Go back—?"

"A few phone calls and I'll bet you can reschedule whatever appointments you missed." Wrapping the sheet around her, Kelly hobbled over to her skirt. Her shirt, she saw, was all the way by the door.

"Kelly—" To her surprise, Dean's tone indicated resistance to her plan. But there was relief in there, too. He wanted to go back to the office, retrace his steps, she could tell.

Kelly bit her lower lip and bent to retrieve her shirt. Oh, how *had* she fooled herself that he was happy, that he felt *anything* for her?

"Kelly, no." Dean began to walk toward her, utterly naked, gloriously so, and way too preoccupied to care. His tone was firm. "This is my fault. It was my choice to walk out, my choice to come here. I'm not going to compound my sins by treating you like a—like a—"

Kelly didn't wait to hear what word he might come up with. "I'll take a cab home. The party's kind of over, anyway, don't you think?" She ventured to glance over at him. Somehow, she smiled.

He paused in the center of the room. His expression was conflicted. On the one hand, he clearly did want to go back to the office, to prove he wasn't completely out of control. On the other hand, he seemed to think there were certain rules that applied to this kind of situation and they did not include walking out on a recent sex partner.

Kelly felt warmth rush back into her chest. He truly was a good man.

Just not one who was ready to love her.

The knot leaped back into her throat. She'd done it again. Jumped the gun, made up stories about the man's feelings. Kelly clicked open the door to the bathroom. "It'll just take me a minute to get dressed."

"Kelly—" Dean stepped toward her and Kelly halted. The look that was suddenly on his face—For half an instant she thought he was going to say something incredible,

something magical, something that might allow her to believe she hadn't made such a terrible mistake, after all. Then whatever Kelly had seen in Dean's face disappeared.

"I'll call you the cab," he said.

"Right." Kelly pushed open the door of the bathroom. She managed a breezy smile as she stepped through. Once the door was closed and she was alone, however, the smile vanished. She turned to rest her forehead against the closed door.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Here she was in love, and Dean wasn't even happy he'd *had sex* with her.

Quietly, Kelly knocked her head against the bathroom door. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

~~~

Alone in his downtown office that Monday evening, Dean didn't get much done. It wasn't that he was tired, though he'd certainly exerted himself during the afternoon spent at the Parker House. Nor did he have trouble finding the parties he needed to reach in order to reschedule his missed appointments—Myers the attorney excluded. No, those weren't his problems.

His problem was Kelly.

Oh, she wasn't there physically. He couldn't blame her sensual aura, the clothes she wore, or that special light in her eyes. But she was there in front of him all the same.

I'm sorry, she'd said, her voice hoarse, her eyes shadowed. *I didn't mean to make you miserable*, she'd said.

Dean sat behind his desk and stared unseeingly at a budget projection. He couldn't get her voice or those words out of his mind. And he couldn't help wondering: could she have been sincere?

Was it possible she really *hadn't* wanted to make him miserable?

At his office desk, Dean squeezed his fountain pen between his fingers. An hour ago he'd been in her thrall. Utterly bewitched. Sexually stupefied. He'd easily have spent the next day, the next week, in her arms. He'd have hated himself afterwards, but he'd have done it. He'd totally lost control.

She'd had him just where she wanted him—that is, just where Dean had imagined she wanted him—and she'd let go. She'd called a halt to things, extricated him. She'd even sent him here to his office so he could take care of his responsibilities.

Dean pushed the budget projection away. He stared heavily at the opposite wall. One could almost argue she'd looked out for him, though he wasn't ready to go that far. However...

However, she most certainly hadn't taken advantage of him. She hadn't used his weakness to gain some selfish concession.

Dean scowled and uncurled from his chair. This was not what he'd expected of her, not what he'd...counted on. She was supposed to be bad, selfish, manipulative. She was supposed to be like one of his father's awful brides. Somebody he didn't have to consider.

Instead, she'd been...a mystery. Inexplicable.

Dean paced over to the window. With one hand on the frame, he stared at the lights on the street below. His own behavior had not been mysterious, however. His own behavior had been cloddish, at best. Loutish, at worst. The woman had been giving him the most exhilarating sexual experience of his life, and he'd brought her to an apology! He'd let her take the blame for his own flaws, his own miscalculations. She'd left the Parker House clearly feeling awful, as though she'd done something wrong. He'd *let* her leave that way.

Talk about bad, selfish, and manipulative.

Cars and people traveled by on the street fifteen stories below. Dean moved his hand from the window frame to a spot beneath his tie.

No, he was not getting much accomplished here at the office.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It was not difficult for Felicia to see that her mother was unhappy. Over dinner on Monday evening in the formal dining room, her mother picked at her salad with small, sharp stabs of her silver fork. When she glanced over the polished table, her mouth was pinched. It was not until the main course had been served, however, baked chicken breast with lemon sage dressing, that her mother revealed her problem.

"You had a phone call while you were out," she told her daughter, prodding at the stuffed chicken breast on her plate. "From that cousin of Dean's, Troy." Her mother's gaze flicked up. "He wanted to remind you about your lunch date on Tuesday."

Felicia's first reaction was a rush of anger. Tuesday? Since when had she agreed to have this cursed lunch date with Troy on Tuesday? The last phone call had been hers, postponing the thing, and she hadn't given any date as an alternative. Purposefully. If she put it off long enough, they could both end up forgetting about it.

But, no. Troy couldn't let well enough alone. He had to call her mother, of all people, and set another date.

Her mother... Felicia came back to the land of the living with a bump. Her mother was now gaping at her. She wore the hurt look, the one she got every time she thought Felicia was holding out on her, not spilling every little detail of her life.

"Felicia," her mother asked. "Are you *dating* Troy Singleton?"

Felicia's eyes widened. "No!" She waved her hands, as if to shoo the notion right out of the room. "No, no, no."

Unfortunately, this strong denial only deepened the hurt expression on her mother's face. Felicia realized she was making it seem more, rather than less, as if romance was involved. "It's not a date. It's—a business meeting." Immediately Felicia realized *that* was hardly going to fly, considering her mother knew Troy Singleton. "That is, I hope it's going to turn into a business meeting," she quickly amended. She took a deep breath and forced herself to relax, to slow down, and to smile. She picked up the salt shaker and drizzled some sodium over her chicken. "I'm trying to talk him into doing fundraising for the Boston Family Aid Foundation."

Brilliant, Felicia congratulated herself. For this was—almost—true.

Her mother tilted her head. "Troy?" She sounded dubious. She did, after all, know the man.

Felicia picked up her knife and began cutting her chicken breast. "Yes, Troy. Despite his lack of experience, he'd be perfect for it. He has everything that's necessary: a good smile, a silver tongue, and the right connections." She pierced a piece of chicken with her fork. "He only needs to be persuaded to bestir himself and do it." Felicia smiled, for that, too, was almost true.

All this truth appeared to convince Felicia's mother. The hurt, strained look on her face eased. "Oh, that's all," she murmured. "Well, good luck to you, my dear. That Troy seems pretty set in his ways."

"Mm." Felicia set her knife to her chicken again. Yes, Troy was set in his ways. Or rather, he was set on *getting* his way. Calling her mother...

Felicia didn't know whether she was more annoyed with Troy, her mother—or herself. Troy had overstepped the bounds. Her mother *knew* no bounds. And Felicia—? Well, Felicia only put up with it all because she was such a coward. It was so easy to live at home with a doting mother whose presence effectively prevented any male of Felicia's acquaintance from thinking she'd fall into bed with him. She didn't have to dream up excuses for saying no. Her excuse was live-in.

She glanced across the table at her mother as a familiar sorrow sifted through her. What a half-life she lived. And the half she lived was spent so alone sometimes. This lunch date with Troy, for example. She had no one she could tell the truth about it. She knew no one who could help her scheme a way out of the thing.

She might have to go ahead and meet Troy on Tuesday. Get it over with.

Felicia looked down and impaled a piece of chicken with her fork. Yes, it was no doubt best to get it over with—if Troy was going to go around calling her mother.

~~~

By the time Kelly arrived back at Dean's humungous house in the woods, she was more than merely late for dinner, she'd missed it altogether. That was all right, though. Dean wasn't there to frown over her sin. He was back at his office, escaping from her and her inexcusable pushiness.

When the cab pulled up to the front door, Kelly added a tip to what Dean had already paid the driver, thanked Maggie, who opened the front door for her, and ran straight upstairs toward her room.

Or she tried to run straight to her room. Troy was coming down the stairs as she was going up. He raised a hand and opened his mouth. Kelly just knew he wanted to ask her if she'd managed to find Dean. *So* interested.

Really, Kelly thought, with a mental shake of the head. Dean's cousin didn't have nearly enough of his own to do. She smiled and sailed right past him.

But avoiding Robby was another matter. She had to pass his playroom on the way, and though Robby's back was to her, the kid somehow knew she was walking past him. He swiveled his chair from the dinosaurs he'd been exploding with his joystick. "Hey!" he called. "Kelly!"

She had to stop. "Well, hey." She bit her lip and tried to smile.

"So?" Robby bounced against the back of his wheeled chair. "D'you see Dean?"

Kelly felt like scuffing a toe. Oh, why had she boasted to Robby that morning that she was going to track Dean down? "Uh, yeah," she admitted.

Robby smiled. Kelly knew what he assumed. He assumed that she'd known what she was doing, he assumed that her words of determination and insight about helping Dean had been wise.

"Well, that's good then," Robby said.

There was no way Kelly could meet the kid's eyes. Maybe Dean had been right, she was realizing—too late. Maybe she shouldn't have befriended Robby. At least she shouldn't have led him to believe there was a chance she might become a permanent part of his life.

"I mean, isn't it?" Robby asked, turning worried.

"Isn't what what?" Kelly had lost track of the conversation.

Robby got up from his seat. "Isn't it good that you found Dean? Didn't you help him, like you said you were going to?"

Kelly stared at the child. It was all she could do not to burst into hysterical laughter. Had she helped Dean? But Robby was looking at her with trust and worry in his eyes.

"Ahem. Well, you know Dean." Kelly took a step back. "A difficult case. Things...may not go as smoothly as we'd like."

She'd meant her words as a gentle let-down, something to start Robby on the path to harsh reality. But the worry eased from his face. A smile appeared. "Aw, Kelly. You. You're so...fantastically *stubborn*."

"Uh..."

Robby waved dismissively. "You'll have Dean eating out of the palm of your hand in no time."

Kelly felt like her face was going to shatter.

But Robby had already plopped back into his chair. He'd already swiveled around. The sounds of exploding dinosaurs were already filling the air again. The kid trusted her. He thought she could live up to her own advertising.

Feeling terrible, Kelly backed away and left Robby. God, she'd made nothing but faux pas from the moment she'd entered these doors. She'd bullied Dean and misled Robby. No, she was definitely not living up to her own advertising.

Head down, Kelly opened the door to her bedroom suite. For the first time she could remember, she actually wished she were someone else.

Wanting out of her ill-fated, too-abbreviated clothes, Kelly stripped. She threw on a sweat suit and then paced the bedroom, brimming with guilt and shame. She'd led Robby on, and she'd overwhelmed Dean. She gritted her teeth and shook her head.

Dean. She hadn't thought about what *he* wanted. No, she'd only been thinking about herself, about what *she* wanted so badly. A life together with a man she loved.

But Dean certainly didn't love her.

Kelly grimaced and clawed her fingers into her arms. What had she been thinking? Obviously, she hadn't been thinking. She'd been fantasizing, dreaming that he could love her, he only needed to learn how. God.

Kelly came to an abrupt stop by the swag-draped window. Maybe she should leave. Go home.

Kelly squinted out at the dark night. Yes, maybe that was what she should do. Pack up and go. Get out of Dean's life and leave him alone.

She bit her lip. But she'd told Dean she was giving the marriage a two month chance. It had only been two-and-a-half weeks. Leaving now would be going against her word.

Kelly frowned. Did her word really matter in this situation? She didn't want to stay. Dean didn't want her to stay. What was practical—what was humane—was to leave.

In the morning she would go.

The decision made, Kelly suddenly felt exhausted. She dragged off her sweat suit, slipped on her nightgown, and got into bed. But the minute her head hit the pillow she couldn't sleep. Perversely, all she could think about was the last bed she'd lain in, with Dean, and all they'd done together there.

She wriggled onto her side and scrunched the pillow under her head. She shouldn't think about that. It was wrong to dwell on a sexual experience that had not been shared as the same wonderful, enriching thing by both parties. Dean hadn't been into it— Kelly suddenly remembered a moment when his tongue had— No. She stopped herself with a

vigorous shake of the head. Despite that tongue thing, Dean hadn't been into it the way she had. He'd been...coerced.

She turned onto her other side. Meanwhile the grandfather clock in the hall tolled out eleven times.

Twelve tolled out and Kelly was still tossing. When she heard a single chime, she wrestled the sheets to switch on the bedside lamp. Sleep was obviously a losing proposition. Maybe she should read a book or watch TV.

Or get a head-start and pack.

Kelly was just swinging her legs over the edge of the bed when she heard a knock on her bedroom door. She halted, certain she couldn't have heard any such thing. It was one in the morning. Who'd be knocking on her door?

But she heard it again, a definite knock. Discreet but determined.

She reached for her wrap on the end of the bed. Maybe it was the maid. Who knew? A place like this, a little tap on the door was probably how they announced a fire. Tying the sash around her waist, Kelly opened the door.

Dean stood outside in the hall.

Kelly's heart took a strangled leap. What in the—? How —? She had to be the last person in the world Dean would want to see, and yet there he stood outside her bedroom door, his jaw shadowed with beard and his eyes haunted.

"I saw your light on," he said.

Her heart pounding now, Kelly explained, "I only just turned it on."

He sighed. "I know. I've been standing out here— Listen, could we talk?"

"Talk?"

Dark eyes rose to meet hers. "If you don't mind."

"Well, um." Kelly's pounding heart began to beat harder. "Uh, sure. I don't mind."

Dean lowered his lashes. "Never have I behaved so awkwardly with a woman."

"Oh," Kelly breathed. "*No. You* weren't— I mean, you were just being honest. And I appreciated that. Really, I did."

He raised his lashes and his eyes seemed to blaze at her. Kelly wilted, but knew she'd feel much better if she could get the whole thing off her chest. "I forced myself on you." Her voice cracked. "It was greed, really. I just wanted— Well, anyway, I am so, so sorry."

Dean's eyes fairly burned. Kelly barely managed to remain upright under that awful glare.

"Sorry," he finally said. It was a harsh whisper. "You're sorry."

She started to tremble. He sounded even angrier than she'd imagined he might.

"Kelly." He stepped toward her. "Kelly." His hands closed on her shoulders. "You really aren't— I mean, I always thought—" With a frustrated hiss, he shook his head. "*I'm* the one who is sorry. What you did, then how I behaved— I couldn't be more ashamed of myself if I'd whipped you." His lips pressed together as he released her. "Which, in a manner of speaking I did."

Kelly stared up into his face, confused. "What? You didn't whip—"

"Kelly."

"You didn't—"

He put a finger against her lips.

Kelly was afraid to say anything then. He certainly looked...adamant. At the same time she *knew* she was the one at fault. He wouldn't have been 'awkward' with her if she hadn't put him in such a position.

Dean lowered his finger from her lips. "Listen. After we parted this evening I started to think about it, about everything, from the very beginning. And I—" His brows drew down. "I came to the conclusion I've misunderstood you."

"I don't know about that."

Dean gave a harsh laugh. "I do. I have not given you the benefit of the doubt, to put it mildly. And I'm sure that's part of why I...exploded this afternoon."

"Lost control," Kelly murmured.

"Exactly." Dean's steady gaze shifted. "I wouldn't have done that if I'd been seeing you clearly."

"Mm," Kelly said.

Dean swore under his breath. "That didn't come out the way I intended."

"No, no. I think I get what you mean."

"You don't. What I mean is—is—"

"You wouldn't have slept with me if you'd been seeing me clearly."

Dean opened his mouth. He shut it again. His face was the picture of consternation before he laughed. "You think I'd only have wound up in bed with you if I thought you were bad?"

Kelly blinked a few times. "Well, um—" His logic was escaping her. Or perhaps it was her own logic that was failing. Had he thought she was *bad*? "Still, one way or another, you didn't want to," she insisted.

Dean's eyebrows flew upward. "One could almost imagine you weren't even there, Kelly."

"Well, I..." She felt herself blushing.

"Besides—" Watching her closely, he added, "It's not as if I don't still want to go to bed with you, right now."

Their eyes met and the breath stopped in Kelly's lungs. *What? What had he just said?* But she knew. And as they stood there, with Kelly just inside her bedroom and Dean just outside, the air between them started to heat.

"Maybe we should," Dean suggested, his voice dipping low.

It must have been sheer surprise that aroused Kelly so. Instantly. Her bones hummed. "But, um, wait a minute—" She took an instinctive step back. "I thought we'd agreed we *shouldn't*."

"I don't remember making any such statement." Dean took a step forward.

"But I recall—" Kelly took another step back as Dean advanced once again, coming through her doorway. "That is, don't you think we ought to consider this more carefully? I mean, the last time—"

Dean made a low sound in his throat. "That's what I'm trying to tell you, Kelly. I made a mistake 'the last time.'"

"But, Dean—"

"But, Kelly," he mocked playfully, then stopped, head tilted. "Or does this kind of thing only happen when it's your idea?"

Kelly felt her mouth open again, and stay that way. Was that true? Did she have to be in charge? She had to admit she'd been beating herself up all evening because she thought she'd taken *too* much charge. "No," she said softly. "It doesn't have to be my idea."

"Good." His lips curved and he closed the door behind himself. "Then it'll be my turn this time."

A delicious thrill ran through Kelly, even as she tried to take a mental step back, out of the sensual spell he was starting to weave. He couldn't really want this. She remembered the look on his face at the Parker House. When he moved forward again, she put a hand to his chest, stopping him.

"Mm," Dean said. "Nice hand." He took hold of her hand. Deliberately, tenderly...sexily. Kelly watched, incredulous.

"Very nice hand," Dean murmured, threading his fingers through hers. By spreading his fingers, he spread hers.

The action chiseled another notch in the crumbling structure of Kelly's resistance. She felt herself spreading open in the heart of her, becoming vulnerable all over again.

Meanwhile Dean lowered his head. His tongue flicked out, stroking wet and warm on the sensitive webbing between her fingers.

"Oh," Kelly breathed.

Dean smiled. "Helpless. That's how I want you. Completely at my mercy."

Kelly suppressed her next moan as Dean swept his tongue between another two of her fingers. She was rushing past the point of reason, but his words did penetrate. He wanted to be in charge—this time. He wanted her to be the helpless one—this time. The idea was either tit-for-tat shallow or...pretty good.

Dean raised Kelly's hand and fit his lips to the inside of her wrist. Kelly moaned as he began a gentle, warm suction. The idea was looking better all the time, though a part of her, deep down, still wondered... Did he really want this?

Dean increased the sucking pressure on her wrist. At the same time, he reached up to curl his other hand around the nape of her neck.

"Dean!" Kelly's head fell back. How did he do that? How did he know the exact spot that would make her—helpless?

"Kelly." With his voice deep and confident, he turned her chin toward him. Then his mouth came down on hers.

Dark heat enveloped Kelly. It was all she could do to keep standing. "Mm," she groaned. "The bed."

Dean's chuckle was low, even diabolical. "Oh, we'll get there...eventually."

They did get to the bed, but it must have taken an hour or so. Dean kissed, he stroked, he caressed. With every touch, every murmur, Kelly melted more. Gone, fled, went every misgiving. The man was a master. By the time he did set her down on the silk counterpane, she felt like a liquid puddle.

It was a completely different experience from their afternoon at the Parker House. Yes, Dean had been inventive there, but not...a Houdini.

"Let me—" she murmured, trying to reach for him, wanting to give him something back.

"Not this time," Dean replied. "I'm in charge."

"Oh, yeah." It was just as well. Kelly's arms felt like jello. She lay there, supine, as Dean did *everything*. At one point she found herself clutching his hair. "This is too—"

"No," Dean insisted. "It's not enough." And he continued, moving up and down her body, with his mouth, with his hands.

Kelly moaned, she writhed. It *was* too much, but somehow she was taking it; taking it and becoming more and more his willing slave.

"Open your legs," he commanded, and of course she did.

"Dean, I want—"

"Not yet," he said. And so it went. To every sensual peak he brought her, it was 'not enough' or 'not yet.' Kelly hadn't known she could sustain such an intense state of arousal, rising and falling, only to rise again.

She abandoned her pleas for him to come with her. He wasn't about to do that and anyway, she was getting too lost in her own sensations to care. The world focused down to the fire raging through her. She strained against him.

"All right," he finally said. "Now."

She came apart, just shattered into a million pieces. Exactly on cue. Not that she was complaining. The pleasure was intense, the whole experience like nothing she'd ever known. "Dean!" she cried, and reached for him.

He tensed in her arms, she thought, though she wasn't terribly sure of anything right then. "Dean, Dean," Kelly sobbed.

It took her a minute, holding him close, to realize he was still fully clothed. A chuckle bubbled up amid the aftermath of her climax. "You're still in your suit," she exclaimed. "And tie!"

"Hm." He pulled away enough for her to see his smug smile. "Guess I was too busy to take them off."

"I'll say." Kelly smiled back as she smoothed a hand down his tie. She'd never been with a man who could concentrate so completely on a person other than himself. "Looks like you've got a minute now."

His lashes lowered. "Oh, I don't know. I'm not sure I've plumbed your potential."

"Ah." Kelly put a hand on his chest. "You've plumbed it."

His smile managed to widen. "If you're sure."

"I am."

"Well, then." Looking awfully pleased with himself, Dean sat back on his haunches and began loosening his tie.

Watching his obvious satisfaction, Kelly felt it shimmer through her again, stronger than ever, the love. This time, though, she wasn't taking anything for granted. She didn't expect him to love her back, but was he at least happy they'd had sex? Her head tilted.

"How about you?" she asked, "Are you okay?"

His hands stopped on his tie.

Her eyes hooded. "Are you sorry?"

He stared at her. "That's important to you, isn't it? That I...not be hurt."

"Well...yeah." More important than he could know.

He continued to stare, his expression turning almost desperate. "I'm not hurt," he told her. "Far from it. Besides, don't you remember this was my idea? My choice?"

Oh, yes, she remembered. He'd wanted to show her, to prove a seduction could be as much his idea, but still... She wouldn't put it past Dean to have done all this as an elaborate apology. He was a man who'd want to leave everything square. He could easily have brought her to the most exquisite orgasm only because he wanted to balance the ledger sheet.

"Remember?" Dean insisted.

Kelly gave a tiny nod. "I remember."

Dean gazed at her a moment longer, then smiled. "Liar."

"What?"

"Fine." Still smiling, he gently pushed her until she was lying flat on the bed. "I'll prove it to you, all over again." His teeth flashed. "I'll just keep on proving it until you start to believe me."

"I believe you," Kelly said quickly.

Dean laughed and kissed her lips. "Problem is, *I* don't believe *you* now."

"Oh, Dean, we can't—"

But Dean kissed her again, and put his hands and shifted his body in a way that told Kelly, indeed, they could. Oh yes, even after all Dean had just brought her through, she could feel herself softening, dampening, wanting again.

"You are magic," she murmured.

"No," Dean whispered back. He released a strange, uneven sigh. "You are."

~~~

Dean might have drifted off to sleep if they hadn't left the bedside lamp on. Despite his exhaustion, the light caused his lashes to flutter, his eyes to open. He stopped himself, though, from simply reaching up to switch it off. He had to think a minute here.

He was in bed with Kelly. If he turned off the light, he would undoubtedly remain in this spot until morning.

Would that be a good idea?

He lifted his head carefully. Kelly was facing him on the bed, her eyes closed and her breathing long and deep.

Dean had to admit it was a profound pleasure to look at her. Her hair was curled wildly about her face, her mouth reddened from his beard. Something lurched possessively, triumphantly, within him. She looked like a woman who had been loved long and loved well.

Dean's lips twisted. Long and well, indeed. He hadn't intended to make love to her at all. All he'd intended was an apology, something sincere and deserved. Instead, here he was in bed with her. Again.

Dean shook his head. Clearly, he went crazy whenever he was around this woman. He didn't behave rationally or intelligently. He didn't behave like...himself.

On the other hand—Dean's rueful twist of the lips turned into a genuine smile. On the other hand, he wasn't alone in the insanity. He had a strong feeling Kelly didn't have much control over her behavior when she was around him, either. Why, she'd been downright leery about hopping into bed with Dean again. It had been a wicked pleasure to see her resistance flow into surrender—because of him.

Yes, because of him. Dean's smile slowly faded. Thoughtfully, his gaze searched Kelly's sleeping face. She hadn't wanted to seduce him, she hadn't sought to get him in her power. Afterward, she'd asked if he was okay. He could no longer deny she was sincerely concerned for his welfare.

She was...nice. A nice, perhaps even sweet, woman.

Dean felt a flare—of something. Like faraway lightning. There, and then gone. Inexplicable. Unsettling. He frowned.

Passion, he told himself. He'd never felt passion this powerfully. Every time he reached a climax with her—every time she reached one with him—it hit him like a thunderclap. That first time tonight, with his name on her lips... Fortunately, Kelly appeared to be as much a slave to the phenomenon as he was. Why, if he reached out for her right now, she'd probably turn into his arms.

Leave her bed? That would be useless. Avoiding the issue of their passion was not going to make it go away.

Dean chewed the inside of his cheek, then reached over to turn off the lamp.

Perhaps it was time to try a different tack.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

In the gray light of dawn Kelly rolled over, waking with a sigh and a frown. Her eyes opened wide as they met Dean's.

"Oh," she breathed. "You're still here." So...it hadn't been a dream.

Meanwhile he stared at her with an expression so blank it made Kelly's stomach twist. Oh God, what was his attitude *now*? As if in answer, very slowly, he smiled. "Yes, I'm still here. Better yet, it's still early."

"Early?" Kelly's stomach remained tight, but now for a very different reason.

He put a hand on her shoulder and pushed her onto her back. "Nobody will be up for, oh, at least fifteen minutes or so."

"Fifteen—? Oh." Kelly's head tipped back as she accepted Dean's thorough, drugging kiss. She could feel her stomach relax and her body start to melt as it had last night. Last night... Dean had made love to her over and over again. He'd gone to the limit—and beyond—to prove he wanted to. Even if Kelly had questions about his deeper feelings, of his desire she was now certain.

And for right then, intoxicated by his kiss, enveloped by his strong male body, Kelly decided desire was more than enough. She murmured encouragement and threw her arms around him.

A few minutes later, panting, Dean leaned down to kiss Kelly's lips. "Noon," he said. "My office."

"What—?"

"For more." Dean swept off the bed. Before Kelly could do or say anything more, he'd grabbed his clothes and was gone.

~~~

Dean paid no more than perfunctory attention to the faxes that came across his desk on Tuesday morning. He gave scarcely more attention to the people who filed through his office, giving him their reports. All he could think about was what had happened the night before, and then that morning.

He'd made love to her—yet again.

Of course that had been the plan, but now, in the cold light of day, he wasn't sure if his plan was bonkers, or incredibly shrewd. Was passion all that there was between them? Not that it mattered, Dean hastily assured himself. If there was one thing he understood about human nature, it was that emotion, of any sort, was fleeting. Passion, whatever. It would pass and be gone in less time than it would take for Dean to worry about it.

So Dean didn't *need* to worry about the lightning bolts that had returned and kept flashing, brighter and more distinctly than the night before.

Meanwhile, he kept an ear out for his intercom and the announcement Mrs. Barnes would make regarding Kelly's arrival. When it came, Dean felt a leap in his heart, a surge of adrenaline.



"That's all, Roger. Thanks." He smiled at his CFO and stood to indicate the briefing was over.

"You're going to want the numbers—"

"I'm sure you will take care of all the details to my complete satisfaction." Dean came around from behind his desk.

Roger looked at him in stupefaction. "You don't want to check my work?"

"No." Dean put a hand on Roger's shoulder. He nudged him in the direction of the door.

"Well, if that isn't—" Roger began, sounding pleased. He never got the chance to finish his sentence. Or maybe he did and Dean simply didn't notice, for by that time he'd opened the door. His eyes had found Kelly, sitting out in the anteroom. Kelly with her silky legs crossed at the knee. Kelly with her smile of a thousand watts. Immediately Dean's brain went into its familiar scrambling routine; his brain and all the organs running in a straight line down from it.

Kelly didn't even try. Dean understood that now. She didn't want to make him crazy. He also understood that it was useless to resist this thing. All he could do at this point was run through it.

Eventually they would reach the end. Sensations would attenuate, desire would cool. Eventually.

Right now, however, desire was anything but attenuated.

"Kelly." Dean cleared his throat. "Right on time."

She gave him a smile. That was all. It made his heart go ballistic, made his blood heat. But that was okay. Despite the flashes of scary lightning, Dean had decided it was okay, even good, to experience this rush, this excitement.

The more excitement now, the sooner it would pass.

"Wouldn't want to miss a minute," Kelly said.

Yes, she said that, right in front of Mrs. Barnes, Roger, and whoever else happened to be cluttering the outer office. Dean felt his air supply choke.

With an effort, he swallowed. "All right, then. Let's go."

~~~

He took her to the Parker House. Kelly had a moment of doubt about that. But once he'd closed the door behind them, once he'd started kissing her, slowly, leisurely, and without a trace of desperation, she relaxed.

It would be nice to make a good memory here.

"I only have ninety minutes," he murmured, when he finally lifted his mouth from hers.

Kelly felt a bubble of relief. He was keeping track of time, showing her he could. "That's all right," she whispered back.

He drew off her suit jacket. "I'll make it up to you tonight."

"You don't have to—" But Kelly didn't finish the thought because Dean took her mouth again. He kissed her deeply, thoroughly, while his hands cupped her buttocks and drew her close against his hips. Slowly, he rotated.

Kelly clutched his shoulders. "Keep that up," she muttered, "and you won't have anything left to 'make up' to me tonight."

"Mm," was all Dean said, and he pulled her blouse from her waistband.

Precisely ninety minutes later, he put Kelly into a cab at the porte cochere of the hotel.

"Tonight," he said, and kissed her. A second later she was looking at his back as he strode efficiently up the street.

It had all been...very good. As sweet and tender as she could have wanted. But there were a host of questions in Kelly's eyes as, through the window of the cab, she watched Dean walk away.

~~~

At noon on Tuesday, Felicia sat in a taxicab as it wended its way through Boston traffic. She had to resist the urge to bite her fingernails. She hadn't done so since she was twelve and she wasn't about to start again now, no, not even if she was on her way to her little lunch date with Troy. He'd made it clear she could not delay the thing one more time.

Today, they'd get it over with.

In silence, the cab driver maneuvered his way to the side of the road.

"Ah, yes, this is the place," Felicia murmured. She could see Troy, leaning against the side of the building with his hands stuck in the pockets of a pair of crisp gray chinos. He straightened when he saw her in the slowing cab.

Drawing in a breath, Felicia gathered both her purse and her self-possession. When Troy reached the cab and opened the door for her, she gave him her most proper, garden party smile. He didn't smile back. He held out his hand. The arm that supported her out of the cab was very strong. All that tennis, no doubt. Felicia lowered her lashes to conceal the way his touch made her shiver.

Once out of the cab, she let go of Troy's hand, and took a few steps toward the restaurant. She pretended to find the façade just fascinating while Troy paid the cab driver behind her. Meanwhile, she did her best to recover.

A few seconds, that was all it had taken for Felicia to become aware all over again of Troy's animal sensuality, and to feel intimidated by it.

"Okay." He'd come to her side. Felicia forced herself to look over and smile. He smiled back, just as falsely. Yes, they were equally miserable. "Shall we go in?" he asked.

"Certainly." Felicia preceded Troy into the sunny, upscale restaurant. She had been there once or twice, but on neither occasion had she felt gawky as she navigated the array of small linen-covered tables. She was acutely conscious of Troy behind her.

The hair on her arms lifted electrically as he pulled out one of the high-backed chairs for her. But she smiled and accepted the seat as if there were nothing out of order. As if she went out to lunch, tête-à-tête, with nasty Troy Singleton every day of the week.

"Uh...have any trouble getting into town?" Troy seated himself opposite her.

"Not at all. Traffic was light today." Felicia delivered the social lie as she folded her hands in her lap. She wondered if it was a good or a bad thing that the restaurant, crowded at dinnertime, was completely empty now at lunch.

"Good," Troy replied, about the traffic. "That's really good."

Felicia's gaze hit Troy then slanted off to regard the trompe l'oeil mural on the wall behind him. He began tapping a thumb on the linen tablecloth. Thankfully for both of them, the waiter arrived with a well-trained smile and a pair of menus.

Felicia took her menu and opened it as if it were a rope thrown to a drowning woman. Thank God, something to talk about. "I've tried the scrod here, but not the sirloin," she told Troy. "What do you recommend?"

Troy frowned into his menu. "I've never been here before."

"Oh." Felicia bit her lip. Goodness, the man could *help*. Or was she supposed to stave off the horrible silence all by herself?

"Ahem. You think the pasta bolognese is any good?" Dark eyes glanced over the menu at her.

"Ah." So he *was* trying to help. "That sounds delicious. I think I'll get...the Nicoise salad." She closed her menu and smiled brightly. Her poor mouth was going to be very sore by the end of this meal.

"Right." Troy closed his menu as well. Their eyes chanced to meet. Felicia stiffened with her habitual response to him, the readiness to parry whatever he might throw her way. But he didn't throw anything. He merely flicked his gaze past her left shoulder and focused on whatever was back there. Restraining himself.

But Felicia couldn't relax her state of readiness. It was too weird.

Fortunately, the waiter returned before the awful silence could descend again. He took their orders, flashed the well-trained smile, and walked away.

Troy cleared his throat. Felicia watched, mesmerized, as the long fingers of his hand folded over a corner of his linen napkin. Never, she realized, had she observed Troy nervous. Nor had she taken a good look at his hands. They were rather...artistic.

"I guess we might as well get down to business," he said.

Felicia couldn't take her eyes off Troy's hand, folding and pressing the corner of the napkin. Business, her mind thought. He was taking care of the wretched apology. Thank goodness.

Troy cleared his throat again. "I wanted to say that I'm sorry. I'm sorry I was deliberately cruel to you at the tennis courts the other day. I, uh, expect there was a better way I could have told you about Dean's marriage—if I had to be the one to tell you at all."

Felicia raised her eyes from his hand at that. *Oh, but you'd wanted to be the one to tell me. You were looking forward to it!* Polite as Troy was being today, she knew he basically loathed her.

However. They were here to take care of a social duty. Felicia didn't want to start an argument or create any obstacle to concluding this obligation. So she retrieved her bright, well-mannered smile and claimed, "Really, there is no need to apologize. I—"

She nearly claimed she had no interest in whether or not Dean was married but—again—that would only provoke an argument, and a stupid one at that. Troy had, in fact, guessed Felicia's fantasies regarding Dean. Her smile twisted as she instead admitted, "I doubt there was any good way to do it."

Troy's dark eyes flicked her way. He was clearly surprised by her admission. "Maybe not a good way." His own words were careful. "But definitely a better one."

Felicia shrugged. "I never had a claim on Dean. Do you know I saw them, Dean and Kelly, at the opera?" She smiled at Troy, desperate to get the focus of attention off herself. "They seemed well-suited, and quite happy."

"You think?" Troy's brows curled. "Because actually that's another reason I should apologize. I'm not even sure this marriage is going to last."

Felicia's eyebrows jumped. She thought of the couple she'd seen at the opera, of the glow of excitement in Kelly's eyes, and the intense attention in Dean's. Felicia gave a little cough. "It's going to last."

There was more surprise, and some bewilderment in the look Troy threw her. "You sound pretty sure of that."

"Not sure." Felicia lifted her shoulders. "That's just how it looked to me."

The bewilderment in Troy's gaze hardened into disquiet. "Do I have this straight? You're going to sit back and simply accept this?"

Felicia laughed. "Is there something else I'm supposed to do?"

Troy looked dark. "Not be so all-fired cheerful about it, for one thing."

"Oh, why shouldn't I be cheerful?" He was clawing through her forbearance, turning the focus back on her. Worse, he was claiming she had to be fading away! She was not fading away, or if she was, he'd be the last person to whom she'd admit it. She waved a dismissive hand. "Life is full of little disappointments."

Troy's gaze was deriding. "I wouldn't call having the man you love marry somebody else a *little* disappointment."

Felicia's teeth crushed together. But she didn't lose her smile. She wouldn't. "I'm not in love with Dean."

Troy just looked at her.

"I'm not!" It was all Felicia could do not to hiss the words through her wretched smile. How *dare* Troy try to tell her how she felt!

But Troy not only dared, he started to smile. It was a slow, knowing...and somehow sexual, smile. "Not in love with him, huh? But your nose is getting red. How much do you want to bet that means you're lying?"

Felicia felt the blood rush to all parts of her body, her nose included. She wasn't lying. She was furious. How dare he? How dare he sit there and tease her! When she spoke, it was in a mere purr, with her lips curving into her own knowing smile. "Maybe you would like to hear what I would be willing to bet about *you*?"

Troy's smug smile faltered.

That made Felicia's smile grow. "I would bet there is a reason you are so morbidly interested in your cousin, Dean, and the women in his life. I would bet it's because you are jealous of him. In fact, you feel quite inadequate in comparison to him, all around."

Troy's big smile was fading faster than the sun before a thunderstorm.

Feeling a surge of satisfaction, Felicia went on. "That's why you wouldn't even consider taking the fundraising job I offered you. Why you won't take any job. You're afraid of paling next to Dean."

Pale was exactly what was happening to Troy's face. He looked so stricken that Felicia almost—almost—felt bad.

But the idea that she was actually getting the better of him spurred her on. "You've spent your entire life trying to make sure nobody would compare the two of you, but here's a news flash. I do compare you. And I know you're selling yourself short, Troy. I know you could do more and you could be more—if you weren't such a yellow-bellied coward."

Nothing moved in Troy's face except for his eyes. His eyes glittered dangerously at Felicia.

She felt a frisson of mixed excitement and fear. Immensely satisfying as that had been, she'd done the equivalent of cornering a big alley cat. Probably not her most intelligent move.

Very slowly, Troy straightened from his casual slouch. Slowly, he leaned over the little table. And slowly, oh so slowly, he smiled. His eyes glittered more dangerously than ever. "You," he said, very softly, "shouldn't throw stones...seeing as how you live in a glass house, yourself."

There was a sharp, sinking sensation in Felicia's stomach.

"Let's talk about being a coward." Troy's eyes held hers. "Let's talk about staying inside your safe, little shell. About never daring to set foot outside. I'll bet you would have a lot to say on that subject, wouldn't you?"

Felicia knew she was staring at him. Not only because he seemed to be speaking her most private, carefully hidden thoughts, but because his masculinity was pouring off of him in waves. She could practically smell it; the power, the drive...the near violence. Like a mouse before a cat, all she could do was sit there, barely able to breathe.

"Nicoise salad." The voice came from above the tension-shimmering air. A sleeve-clad arm descended in front of Felicia, bearing a china plate heaped with crisp vegetables. "And pasta bolognese," the waiter continued. A plate of angel hair noodles came to a landing in front of Troy. "Enjoy your meal," the waiter said brightly.

Felicia supposed the waiter walked away. She didn't know. She couldn't tear her gaze from Troy's. His eyes were like firebrands, searing through her. Who would have guessed dark brown eyes could be so piercing? She felt as if he was seeing right through her. Everything. She felt as if she couldn't continue to exist if she sat there one more minute impaled by those eyes.

She stood up, clutching the purse she'd laid in her lap. Whirling, she managed to wrench her gaze from his, and then she walked. She walked fast, desperately navigating the tight array of empty tables and chairs, making for the door out of the place.

One couldn't have asked for a more beautiful spring day. Felicia dimly registered that fact as she walked, straight and swift, out of the restaurant and down the sidewalk.

"Felicia!" It was Troy's voice, and not very far behind her. Felicia's eyes widened and she stepped up her pace, though she wasn't going to add to her humiliation by running.

Troy had no such compunction. He ran. She could hear his footsteps rushing up to her. And then her shoulder was roughly caught in his hand. She gritted her teeth as he stopped her and turned her around.

"Please, Felicia," he groaned. "I'm sorry, okay? I don't know what got into me— Okay, maybe I do, but I'm very, very sorry." And then he uttered a word that Felicia didn't think a man who truly had reparation on his mind would say to a woman. On top of that, his hand, so very strong on her shoulder, was making her tremble. All she could do was stand there and stare at the buttons of his Cashmere cardigan.

"Felicia." It sounded like a warning. And then as if things weren't bad enough, he grasped her other shoulder. "Look at me," he ground out.

Quaking, she looked up. Maybe that would make him let her go. But he only looked back at her with eyes that were almost black.

"You...do something to me," Troy claimed. "You get under my skin. The way you walk, the way you talk...how you look down your nose at me. It all makes me...crazy."

Every bone Felicia owned was still shaking, but she was staring at Troy now. What was he talking about? Her stomach began to curl in a very strange way.

Troy went on, his voice sounding like gravel rubbing together. "Your eyes say 'touch-me-not,' and that just makes me want to...touch you."

Felicia's curling stomach now dropped, abruptly. Had he just said that? That he wanted to...*touch her*. Like he was...attracted to her? No! Impossible. Troy wasn't attracted to her. He made fun of her. He thought she was comical.

Yes, yes, all of that was true. But it was also true that his eyes were blazing dark fire. It was true that he was leaning her up against the side of the building. She could feel his hard, taut muscles up and down the length of her abdomen and thighs. She could feel—

Good God, was that his—? Her eyes briefly lowered, then flashed back up to his. Her lips parted in shock.

"I know I treat you rotten," Troy growled. "I have to, because if I didn't treat you rotten I'd be doing...this." And his mouth came down on hers.

There was an instant of shock at the first touch of his lips to hers, and then it was like nothing Felicia could have predicted. She felt no revulsion, no squirming desire to wiggle away. She didn't have time. As Troy's mouth took firm possession of hers, a sensation of incredible heat swept through her. Her purse dropped to the ground. Felicia grabbed Troy's shoulders. Her knees melted into butter. This was—this was—

*Good.*

She held on and met his every move with one of her own, her heart pounding, her blood rushing. It was incredible, unbelievable, the sensations pouring through her. She felt like a potent narcotic had been injected straight into her veins. She felt like her skin was frizzling into steam and lifting off of her.

She felt like she would die if she couldn't *eat this man up*. Her fingers dug into the toughened muscles of his shoulders and a long, deep moan came out of her throat.

*No wonder*, a voice mused, as from far off. *Now wonder you always avoided this.*

Felicia stiffened.

"Good *God*, Felicia!" Troy wrenched his mouth from hers with a gasp. For a moment they stood pressed close together and staring into each other's eyes.

Good God, indeed! Felicia could feel Troy, every inch of him, including the erection pressed hard against her Christian Dior skirt. Even worse than that, she could feel a deep and powerful thrill inside herself as she recognized what it meant. Troy, *Troy* was aroused by her.

And *she* was excited by his arousal.

Heaven's above. Out. Immediately. She had to get out of there.

Fortunately, he didn't resist when she pushed him away. No, he parted his body from hers most willingly. Maybe he was as shocked and displeased with the turn of events as she was, though Felicia sincerely doubted it. Troy wasn't dealing with the emotional upheaval of a lifetime.

"I've— Good-bye," she told him, very firm. Then, not daring to look his way, not knowing what might happen if she looked into his amazing brown eyes, she remembered to scoop up her purse, then whirled and stalked off down the street. She tried to move as if there had been no interruption at all in her progress. Just as if he hadn't kissed her.

And she hadn't kissed him back.

Oh, my goodness gracious *everything*. Felicia ducked down into a subway stairway that opened fortuitously in front of her. Her lips still tingled. Damn, but her whole *body* still tingled.

With pleasure, with desire, with yearning. She wanted more!

Felicia paid the fare for a token and, with trembling fingers, slid it into the slot and pushed through. She struggled to control her erratic breathing as she waited for the next train—to anywhere.

She'd kissed Troy, kissed *Troy*, of all people.

And she'd *liked* it.

~~~

He'd just kissed the ice princess.

Troy walked back into the quiet restaurant, every inch of him shaking; with sexual reaction, with self disgust...with unfulfilled lust. God. Dear God, but that had been— He wiped his forehead with the back of one hand and walked over to the table they'd abandoned. He looked down at the two plates of untouched food.

No way was he going to be able to eat that pasta bolognese with Felicia's dainty Nicoise salad staring across the table at him. Troy pulled out his wallet, removed a generous number of bills, and slapped them onto the table. Then he turned and walked out of the place for the second time.

Could he have screwed up a simple apology any better, Troy wondered? He stood for a moment outside the restaurant, then deliberately turned in the opposite direction from the one Felicia had headed. As he walked, he tried to avoid groaning out loud.

Felicia was very wrong if she thought Troy could come anywhere close in a comparison with Dean. He was a screw-up through and through. Look at today. He hadn't managed to last half an hour in Felicia's company without insulting her yet further.

And then kissing her.

Troy swallowed and started shaking again. Now, that had to be the stupidest thing he had *ever* done. Even giving Dean his hypnotic suggestion couldn't compare.

Because kissing Felicia had been both stupid and—and *fantastic*. Troy's teeth gritted so they wouldn't start chattering as he continued to shake. Kissing Felicia had been shocking, exciting, excruciatingly pleasurable...and...and...

Something more.

It had made him feel...good. Somehow...right.

Walking fast, Troy frowned, and his shaking managed to get worse. Right? What the hell did that mean, 'right?' Felicia had to be the exact wrong woman for him to be kissing. Totally *unright*. She compared him to Dean, for crissake.

Troy didn't scan the road for a cab. He didn't walk down into any of the subway stations he passed. He just kept walking while he tried to stop shaking.

And telling himself there was absolutely nothing *right* about Felicia.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Kelly and Dean made love again that Tuesday night, as promised. Dean came home late, after everyone else had gone to bed, and knocked on Kelly's door.

After thinking about it all afternoon, Kelly had formed an opinion about what was going on. It was an opinion strengthened by Dean skipping the family dinner that evening. Still, she was taken aback by the expression on his face when she opened her bedroom door. "Uh, hard day?" she asked.

"You could say that," Dean replied. Then he removed her nightgown. In two minutes they were both naked on Kelly's bed.

After a fine round of mutual orgasms, at around two in the morning, Kelly asked, "Making up for lost time?"

"Mm," Dean said. "I'll see you tomorrow at noon."

"Let me guess. We'll make love."

"Mm," Dean said. Then he kissed her, put his clothes back on, and left.

Kelly put up with this for the next three days. She couldn't say she wasn't enjoying herself. Dean was a superior lover, and whatever demons drove him made him more

daring every time. They made love in the back seat of his car, in an old gardening shed, and behind a tree in Dean's forest. In one way, though, Dean was very careful.

He never gave them a chance to talk. Not a chance to talk, or do anything but make love.

On the morning of the fourth day, Kelly lay on her bed watching him leave her, once again, and knew this had to stop.

"Later," Dean said, with a smiling flash of his teeth.

"Sure," Kelly replied, though she felt a sinking inside.

He drew up the zipper of his fly, threw her one more smile, and went out the door.

As Kelly stared at the cream-colored panels of her closed bedroom door, the sinking sensation inside her grew. This had to stop. Dean couldn't hide behind their sex life forever. Not to mention she wasn't supposed to be sleeping with him at all, not according to her policy. Well, yes, they were married—technically. But they weren't married, really. They couldn't really be married until Dean declared his true love and respect.

He hadn't done that. He hadn't even come close.

In fact, as he'd walked out her bedroom door just then he'd given her no more than a lascivious grin. Kelly rolled onto her stomach. She fought down a wave of self-disgust.

She wasn't doing a darn thing to protect herself, to keep herself safe from emotional harm. She was letting herself get drawn deeper and deeper into intimacy with a man who might never come to love her. True, he was tender at times, and always considerate, but that didn't add up to love.

On the bed, Kelly buried her face in her pillow. She knew her present actions were foolish, and she knew if she had any self-respect at all, any intelligence, she would do something about it.

If she had any self-respect, she would do something, and soon.

~~~

They'd made love in the back seat of Dean's Lexus, in Tom's old gardening shed, and behind the sugar maple tree by the south fence. They'd done it and had it in every conceivable style and position.

After three days of this, Dean was exhausted. But he was far from ready to give up. He was just going to have to try harder, he told himself, looking out the window of the limo as Jackson drove him into town on Saturday. He was going to have to exert himself yet further in order to run through this thing.

It was impossible to deny any longer that there was a lot more than passion going on here. Indeed, an astonishing, if not alarming, range of emotion was involved.

All the same, somehow, somewhere, there had to be an end to it.

In the car, Dean clasped his hands and tapped both index fingers against his lips. The problem was that Kelly was...different. She wasn't sharp or sophisticated or demanding. She was, well, innocent. Yes, innocent in her own crazy way. She was innocent and generous and uncomplaining. She was the most accepting woman Dean had ever met.

He released a deep sigh. Kelly was *too* different. Despite his certainty he would get tired of her, he wasn't. On the contrary, there were moments he simply wanted to hold her close; he wanted to hold her and never let her go. At those moments he quickly roused himself from the dangerous contentment into which he'd fallen and quickly brought the both of them to some incredible orgasm.

But that didn't work, either. After he'd made love to her, he ended up wanting to hold onto her more, wanting less to let her go.



Fighting a strange species of panic, Dean rubbed his fingers up and down his lips. He had to try harder, that was all. Surely this bounty of feelings had to change, and diminish. He just didn't know how much longer he could go on until they did.

~~~

Kelly waited in her bedroom that night, knowing Dean would come. Just past ten there was a knock on her door.

Oh yeah, big surprise. Well, she had a surprise for him. Dressed in a pair of jeans and a tee shirt, she opened her door. "Hi, Dean," she said.

"Hello." If he were disappointed in her casual attire, Dean didn't let on. He stepped toward her.

Kelly stepped back. "Come on in."

Dean hesitated, apparently noticing her small physical evasion. But he put his smile back on and came in.

Pretty confident, Kelly thought, but then she'd been giving him every reason to believe she was his sexual slave.

Halfway into the room, Dean came to a halt. "You don't know how happy I am to see you."

No, but Kelly had a pretty good idea he was about to show her. "I'm happy to see you, too," she said.

He smiled and began loosening his tie. For a moment Kelly marveled at how far he *had* come. He was in her bedroom, wanting to make love to her—and smiling. Could she have imagined such a thing on that horrid airplane ride from Vegas?

But enough was enough.

She had to retrieve her self-respect, stop playing the doormat. And Dean had to stop evading. They had to see if they really had something going here.

She sashayed toward him. "I am happy to see you," she repeated. "Very happy." She got close enough to stop his hands on his tie. "But it so happens I have a headache tonight."

"What?"

"A headache," Kelly repeated. She tried to soften the blow by tapping him on the chin. "You look awfully nice, though."

It took him a second to get it. His expression went flabbergasted. "You mean you don't want—?"

Kelly's eyebrows rose.

"You don't want—" He stopped again. A strange sequence of emotions crossed his face. "No," he then said, his eyes narrowing. "You're not tired of me. That isn't it."

"Well, no, of course—"

"Then I must have angered you." He took a step back. "Done something to displease you."

"No—"

"Yes." He bit the word out. "You're unhappy with me."

"Dean—"

He waved an imperious hand. "Tell me. What have I done? I'm not ready— That is, there's no reason I can't change it, make things better. Tell me."

"No!" Kelly made an effort to calm herself. At least one of them should keep their head. "Listen. Just—sit down." She pointed to a well-stuffed armchair.

He turned his gaze toward the chair. "Ah," he said. "So it's a long list."

"Dean..." Kelly wavered. Perhaps they should make love, after all. He was taking this wrong, so ready for rejection.

But Kelly steeled herself. Making love to him would only reinforce the notion that sex was all they had to offer each other. And it would be disastrous for her self-respect. "The only thing you need to do to please me," she enunciated carefully, "is sit."

His brows jumped. But he turned. With long strides he made for the indicated chair. Brusquely, he sat.

Kelly suppressed a sigh as she took the armchair next to Dean's. She leaned back and smiled.

"Are you pleased now?" Dean asked.

"Yes." Kelly bit her lip. "How about you?"

"Excuse me?"

"Are *you* pleased?"

His brows lowered. "Oh, I'm just peachy."

Kelly felt her heart skip around. This wasn't working. They had to do something together, something to demonstrate they could enjoy each other's company other than in bed. Assuming, of course, that was even true. "Uh, would you like to play checkers?"

He stared at her. "No."

"How about watch TV?"

His amazement abounded. "No."

Kelly got desperate. "Well how about—taking a walk?"

Some of her desperation must have gotten through. Dean gave her a close look. "This would please you, a walk?"

Kelly smiled. "Yes." Oh, anything.

"Fine." In one smooth motion, Dean stood up. "Let's take a walk."

~~~

She wanted to take a walk. Taut as a bowstring, Dean led Kelly out through the kitchen. She wanted a *walk*.

He couldn't imagine what he'd done to turn her off, but it must have been something. Just before they went out the door, he flipped on the exterior lights. They walked into a landscape of glowing trees and flowers.

Kelly made a low sound, though whether of pleasure or scorn Dean couldn't tell. Hell, maybe she'd have preferred the natural light of the moon. He hadn't thought of that.

Clearly, he hadn't thought of anything that would please her tonight.

Kelly's sneakers crunched on the gravel of the drive that led off toward the garage. "I remember there's a kind of meadow at the end of the trees in that direction." She waved a hand. "Do you know how to get there?"

Dean gave a jerky nod. "This way." He walked past her and toward the path that wound through the woods. He didn't dare take her hand. If he did, she'd find out he wasn't nearly as calm as he was pretending.

It was absurd, really. His whole goal here was to come to an end in the relationship. If Kelly were displeased with him, he should be happy. That meant she'd discovered their fundamental incompatibility. They could come to a mutual, amicable parting of the ways.

But, damn it, Dean wasn't ready for that. He wasn't...through with her yet.

They walked side by side through the trees. Accompanying them was the gentle peeping of new frogs and a hint of the symphony of crickets that would come later in the summer. The setting would have been bucolic if Dean hadn't felt so panicked.

What did she want from him? What?

The path wound upward until the trees thinned. They were beyond the scope of the electric lights by then, picking their way along the softly matted path.

"Yes," Kelly breathed, looking forward. "This."

They came out into the meadow, a place of grass and wildflowers left to grow at will. Dean's hands itched to take Kelly and draw her into his arms. He wanted them close again. But she didn't want closeness. She'd told him so. Panic clawed its way up his throat.

Kelly walked away from him through the long, bending grass. He could see her breathing in deeply. He gazed around himself in desperation, searching frantically for something, anything, to say.

"Uh, so how is Robby?" he blurted.

Dumb. Dumb as a post. But it was the best Dean could come up with under the circumstances. Pretending he wasn't nearly suffocating from fear, he shrugged. "I haven't seen him for the past several days. I assume you've continued befriending him. How has he been lately?"

"The truth?" Kelly turned to face him, crossing her arms over her chest. "I think he's bored."

"Bored? Oh." Dean wondered, without much hope, if this was the problem. Did Kelly blame him for Robby's boredom?

In the darkness, she frowned. "Troy is out of sorts, as well. He's actually been home for dinner four nights in a row. Very strange. But as for Robby, well—I never thought I'd say this, but I think he needs to be in school."

On top of everything else, Dean felt a surge of guilt. "I tried," he told Kelly. "No one would take him so late in the semester. Not to mention his running-away problem and poor grades. And now the school year is basically over."

"Ah, that's right." Kelly sighed. "Then even someplace local wouldn't work."

"I'm afraid not."

Kelly uncrossed her arms. "What about a tutor?"

"A tutor."

"He could make up for this lost semester, maybe even raise his grades." Kelly waved an arm. "And he'd get some confidence, being at home and getting individual attention and all."

"A tutor," Dean repeated. So simple. So exceptionally simple, and the idea had never occurred to him.

"Of course, he still needs some contact with other children his age," Kelly went on. Her lips pursed. "Maybe a few days a week in a summer day camp as well."

"Day camp." But Dean was still thinking about that tutor. Robby could be got ready for school in the fall. Dean had despaired, but it could be done.

"Yes," Kelly said. "Do you think you could find somebody for the tutoring bit?"

Dean smiled widely. "I know people who know people."

"Well, good then." Kelly was smiling, too.

They were standing in the moonlight, yards apart from each other, and both grinning like idiots. Whatever it was she'd wanted, he'd managed to deliver it, by guesswork, by sheer, stupid luck.

She wasn't unhappy with him any more.

The sense of relief that wound through Dean was intense. It was so intense it took a minute before he got it. His smile vanished. His relief turned to horror.

He'd cared. He'd cared about making her happy with him. Desperately.

"What?" Kelly's smile disappeared now, too. "What's the matter?"

Dean stood frozen. He couldn't believe himself. He was a traitor to his own cause. He needed her *unhappy* with him. He needed to make this thing end. Instead he'd just done everything in his power to make it continue.

*Why?* For God's sake, *why?*

"What's the matter?" Kelly repeated.

"Nothing." Woodenly, Dean turned toward the house. "It's getting late. We ought to start back."

But Kelly wasn't moving. They'd been happy one second ago, really connecting. And now Dean was acting like a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs.

"No." She remained right where she was planted. "What just happened?"

Dean stopped. His back stiffened. "You're unhappy with me again."

"What? No. I wasn't unhappy with you to begin with—" Kelly stopped. She realized that wasn't exactly true. "All right," she conceded slowly. "Maybe I was a little upset, but not with you. I was upset with—well, our activities of late."

"Our activities?"

Kelly cleared her throat. "We only—you know."

Slowly, Dean turned. He was frowning. "But don't you like—?"

"Well, yeah, sure." Kelly felt her face warm. "But that's not *all* I'd like to do with you."

"No?"

He looked so confused, Kelly had to smile. "No," she assured him. "I'd like to do all kinds of things with you."

He cocked his head. "You would."

"Sure."

"But—other things aren't intense enough. They won't get us through—"

"Through? Through what?"

Dean shook his head. "Never mind." He pressed his lips together. "So what, exactly, do you think you want to do with me?"

"Oh...anything. This walk, for instance. I'm liking this walk."

Dean snorted.

"I am." Kelly took a step toward him. "It isn't all that important what we do, just so long as we do it together."

Dean's eyes narrowed on her. "Why?"

"Why?"

"Yes, why?"

Kelly hesitated. It was the million-dollar question. And just how far, she wondered, dare she answer it? "Why?" she asked again, and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Well, I guess because...I like you." Her heart beat very fast.

Dean went absolutely still. He stared at Kelly like he'd never seen a creature of the sort in his life. "You like me," he repeated.

Kelly tried to look nonchalant. "Sure."

Dean continued to stare until Kelly couldn't take it any more.

"And you like me," she announced firmly. She held out her hand. "Come on, you were right. It's time to go inside."

For an awful moment she thought Dean was going to ignore her outstretched hand. But then, jerkily, he reached out. Their palms connected. Slowly, carefully, Dean closed his hand around hers.

"All right," he said, his voice hoarse. "Let's go inside."

~~~

Dean walked toward the house in a daze. She said she liked him. She *liked* him. The woman was clearly confused, muddled by the inexplicably powerful emotions roused by their physical passion. He was no doubt adding to her confusion in doing something so cozy as holding her hand.

Nevertheless, he gripped Kelly's hand all the way back to the house. He sensed this gesture was dangerous, but he didn't let go. Inside, he hummed.

Hand in hand then, they walked through the kitchen and into the main hall. The stairs loomed before them. She didn't really *like* him, Dean reminded himself. She just thought she did, as a natural by-product of their physical infatuation. The same with him liking her. Oh sure, she was sweet and nice and all that, but the 'liking' would pass, probably around the same time that their physical obsession faded.

Nevertheless, he kept her hand all the way up the stairs.

As they approached Kelly's bedroom door, Dean wondered if she still had a 'headache.' Not that it would be a good idea for them to have sex tonight. In fact, it would be a damn disaster. She'd take it all wrong. And besides, sex didn't seem to be moving this relationship toward its natural conclusion.

But that didn't stop Dean from feeling a tug of disappointment when Kelly let go of his hand at her bedroom door and turned with definite physical evasion. "So," she said, and leaned her back against the door.

"So." Dean had no idea what else to say.

Kelly wore a soft smile. "Thanks," she told him. "That walk was exactly what I needed tonight."

"It was?" But it couldn't have been, according to Dean's theory. As far as he understood things, Kelly needed exactly what he did: physical passion. Their sexual attraction to each other was at the core of this whole mess. A little walk couldn't truly have satisfied her.

But Kelly's smile only widened. "Uh huh. You're very good to me, you know."

Dean could feel his face warm. "Well..."

"You pay attention," she claimed. Then she stepped forward and Dean felt the quick brush of her lips on his. "Good night, Dean."

He had to close his eyes at the touch of her. Such a simple thing, so soft, so delicate, yet it ran through him with earth-shattering force. Meanwhile Kelly opened her bedroom door, stepped around it, and was gone.

Dean was left in the hall, shaken by that small kiss, though he knew by all his theories he shouldn't have been. He really shouldn't have been.

[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN](#)

On Saturday night, Felicia decided she couldn't avoid the Club forever. She might run into Troy, true, but such a meeting was going to occur sooner or later. Considering the people and places they had in common, they were going to see each other again. Repeatedly. Somehow they would have to get back on a normal footing.

Still, she didn't expect to see Troy her very first time back. Walking into the lounge of cool green walls and smart white furniture to find him sitting there in an overstuffed armchair was something of a shock. He had one smartly clad knee crossed over the other and was joking with Joe Esterley and Martin Goeffland. Felicia's immediate reflex was to turn around and leave the room.

But she suppressed the cowardly impulse. This was her club, too. If she wanted to sit in the elegant, half-lit lounge and enjoy a glass of white wine then she shouldn't let the mere presence of Troy stop her.

Pinning a casual smile on her face, she straightened her shoulders and waltzed on in. But she was acutely conscious of Troy across the room, still chatting with his friends and apparently unaware of her. She was terribly conscious of her own body, the working of her legs and hips beneath her St. John white dress as she moved toward the bar. And she was blisteringly conscious of the precise moment Troy caught sight of her. From the corner of her eye she saw his nonchalant smile falter.

An astonishing rush of satisfaction went through her.

Behind her cool smile, Felicia gritted her teeth. Oh, but feeling satisfaction was...inappropriate. She shouldn't want Troy to notice her, nor should she want him disconcerted because he had.

Deliberately, she placed her back to Troy and his little group as she slid onto one of the leather cushioned bar stools. "Glass of the house white, please," she told the bartender.

The young woman with the blond ponytail smiled and nodded. "Right there, Miz Thurgood."

Felicia kept on smiling but her heart pounded at the sound of Troy's voice, recovered from his shock and now rumbling in and out of the conversation going on behind her. It was no lie they needed to get back to a normal footing. For three days now she'd been hearing that voice, seeing his face. She'd been over and over it, the image of his stark features right before his mouth had come down on hers. The gritty sound of his voice telling her he was *attracted* to her, that all this time he'd actually *liked* her.

At odd moments of the day her heart would speed, just as it did now, simply from remembering.

Felicia breathed in and out deeply, determined to calm down.

"You okay, Miz Thurgood?" The bartender's youthful features showed concern as she set a glass of pale gold wine in front of Felicia.

Felicia brightened her smile. "What? Oh, I'm fine." To prove it, she lifted her glass and took a small sip, smiling again at the bartender as she lowered the glass.

The young woman's expression relaxed and she turned away. Felicia's smile faded. The wine, which she knew was excellent, tasted like water. Nothing, actually, had tasted very interesting since Troy's kiss.

Meanwhile, Felicia could hear the group behind her breaking up. Joe was announcing he had a dinner meeting. Martin grumbled that he had a wife and kids waiting for him at home. Felicia felt her heart pounding mercilessly against the wall of her chest.

Troy was going to leave, too. He was going to walk out with the other two men. She tensed, in anticipation of being able to relax.

"Tennis tomorrow?" Troy asked someone.

"Noon," Martin replied. "On the dot, man. Some of us have jobs."

Troy chuckled. But then, instead of leaving with the others, he walked right up to Felicia. The hair on her arms stood up straight as he sauntered oh, so casually, to the barstool on her right.

She wanted to look at him. She wanted to send him a cool and casual smile, something to say that he'd never rattled her. But all she could do was sit there, staring fixedly at her wine glass.

A tanned hand moved into her vision, long fingers reached into the ceramic bowl of cashews in front of her.

"Hi, Felicia," Troy said.

Finally, Felicia managed to pin on a bright smile. She managed to turn his way long enough to flash it at him. "Hello, Troy."

He didn't smile back. "You okay with me sitting here?"

While her fingers played with her wine glass, Felicia gave a light laugh. "Okay? Why, of course I'm okay. Why wouldn't I be okay?"

From the corner of her eye, she saw his gaze turn mildly deriding. "I haven't seen you on the tennis courts recently."

"That's because I haven't been playing recently."

His voice pitched low as he asked, "Have I driven you away?"

"Oh, Troy." She gave another little laugh, so superior, so above it all, and made herself glance at him again. "I wouldn't let you do that."

But Troy simply looked at her.

She smiled, held up her wine, and looked directly back at him. "I'm here, aren't I?"

"Ye-es."

"So." She waved a hand. As if to say she'd just proved her point.

Troy leaned an elbow on the bar, rested his jaw on his hand, and gazed at her. His dark eyes did amazing and mortifying things to her physiology. "So," he said. "You'd be willing, say, to play on a tennis court right next to the one I was playing on?"

"Certainly." Felicia took a sip of her wine, meanwhile imagining Troy playing tennis, his muscles moving under his shirt. Her heart sped the way it did when she remembered his kiss.

"And you'd sit at a table for dinner together with me and your friends, the Hunsington's?" Troy asked.

Felicia inclined her head. Forget her speeding heart. This was what she'd been after. Establishing a normal footing between them. Getting things back to the way they'd been before.

"Really," Troy demanded.

Felicia smiled. "Really."

Troy's lashes lowered while he reached out his free hand to snag another cashew. Felicia watched with a low heat beneath her bodice as he put the nut between his lips. His gaze flicked up to hers again. "You're just so all-fired cool with me that you could do anything."

"Really, Troy, you give yourself too much credit." She leaned closer to whisper. "Just because you kissed me isn't going to change the world, you know. It was no big deal."

Troy's gaze didn't leave hers. "No big deal."

"That's right." Felicia lifted her wine. She maintained her lighthearted smile. *No big deal*. It had only reversed twenty-eight years of believing herself immune to men. It had only made her realize the incredible vulnerability she had toward Troy, of all people. Troy! Even now the blood was racing through her veins.

"Then..." Troy watched her closely. "Then you wouldn't mind going out to walk on the terrace with me...right now."

Felicia's wine paused on its way to her lips. "What?"

"If you're so unaffected by me, then you wouldn't mind going out on the terrace with me right now. There's something I want to ask you...in private."

It took every ounce of self-possession Felicia owned to maintain her composure. He wanted to go outside on the terrace with her, so they could be alone...to discuss something private? Well. It was one thing to pretend indifference when she was sitting in the safety of the lounge, with the bartender and a few elderly couples scattered here and there. But to be alone with him, in the dark...

Felicia drew in a sharp breath. To be alone with him, in the dark, would teach him once and for all that she was not in his thrall. It would put them squarely back on the normal footing she so wanted. "If there's really something you must discuss with me in private, then I have no problem going out on the terrace with you."

Troy's eyes glittered, suddenly looking dangerous, but Felicia was certain he didn't intend to kiss her again. Troy might be tricky, but he had his pride. He wouldn't kiss her now unless she indicated she wanted to be kissed. Meanwhile he straightened and held out his hand. "Come on, then."

Felicia took his hand. Her stomach did an amazing somersault at the touch of him, but she kept her expression bland. Fortunately, once she was off the barstool he let go of her and let her simply walk by his side as they strolled toward the glass doors that led out to the terrace.

The night was cool, but not uncomfortable. Troy led the way to the stone balustrade that overlooked the grounds. A dark mass of trees stretched in front of them. On the terrace, they were alone. Felicia gritted her teeth together to keep them from chattering.

Nothing untoward was going to happen. Instead, she would make certain they went back to a normal footing, one where he held no kind of power over her, sexual or otherwise.

He turned and leaned his hips against the balustrade. With his arms crossed over his chest, he announced, "I'm not going to apologize."

"Excuse me?"

His jaw set. "I'm not going to apologize for kissing you."

"Well, I—" Felicia was glad it was dark enough he couldn't see her blush. "I'm sure I never asked you to."

"No." Troy's reply was curt. "You didn't."

"Fine." She started to turn. "Then I can go back inside?"

"No."

Felicia's brows went up.

Troy hissed out a breath from between his teeth. "We are not through dealing with this."

"I think we are."

"Then you're nuts."

Felicia drew herself up and raised her eyebrows. "Excuse me?"

"It's still between us," Troy gritted out. "You know it is. We want to get each other's clothes off."

Stunned, and to be truthful, excited, Felicia did her best to appear yet haughtier. "Speak for yourself."

"I'm speaking for both of us and you know it." Troy uncrossed his arms and pushed off of the balustrade. "That kiss was...addicting."

Felicia's heart was going crazy again and her breathing sped. "That kiss was...the simple result of a release of psychic energy," she declared.

"What?"

Felicia waved a dismissive hand. "We were both angry at each other. The kiss came out of that. It was a natural result of the built-up angry energy. Nothing more."

Troy's chin lowered and his eyebrows raised. "A result of built-up anger."

Felicia stuck to her guns. She was not going to admit there'd been anything more to that kiss, anything deep or personal. Though, of course there must have been. She'd never enjoyed a kiss with another man, never imagined, over and over, having another one. Now she simply lifted a shoulder.

"Huh," said Troy. He spread his feet and put his hands on his hips. "So...we only get hot for each other when we're mad. Is that what you're saying?"

Since he was sounding less dubious and more credulous, Felicia agreed. "Yes. I think that describes the phenomenon."

Troy rubbed his jaw. "I'm not so sure, but I'll tell you one thing, we have no business going around kissing each other."

"Agreed," Felicia said. And, though she *did* agree, she felt piqued.

"The question is," Troy went on, tilting his head. "How the hell do we avoid getting angry with each other?"

It was a darn good question. "Perhaps..." Felicia thought quickly. "Perhaps we should always have something nice to say to each other, when we chance to meet."

Troy stared at her. "Always have something nice to say."

"That's right." Felicia tried not to bristle. It wouldn't do to get angry at him *now*. "In fact, why don't we start immediately?"

"Saying something nice to each other."

"Yes."

He rubbed his jaw again, his expression more dubious than ever, but he agreed. "Well...all right. At this point, I'm willing to try anything." He paused. "You go first."

Felicia stiffened. "Why should I go first?" He would no doubt let her say something nice, then turn around and insult her.

Troy threw up his hands. "All right, I'll go first. Something nice about Felicia. Something nice." He put his hands down and clasped them behind his back. "Okay. Here's something nice about you." He drew in a deep breath. "You're a good person. Honest-to-God, basically good."

Felicia's jaw dropped.

"Well, hey, come on, you *know* that." Troy sounded defensive. "You pour every ounce of extra energy you have into half a dozen charities. What is it—? All the way from more art programs in the schools to battered women? And you're good at it. You help an awful lot of people. It's admirable. Yup." He nodded. "Downright admirable."

Felicia knew she still looked like a woman out to catch flies. Troy thought she was admirable? He noticed or cared about the charity work she did? "Am I supposed to believe this?" she finally asked.

Troy scowled. "Look, if this is going to work, you're going to have to at least believe what I say."

"Okay, okay. I'll...try." But she couldn't believe him. Troy didn't admire her.

"Now it's your turn," he said.

"Right, right." But how was she to top that? Felicia licked her lips and tried to think. "Something nice about you..." She grimaced.

"Oh, come on. It can't be that hard."

"Well, actually..."

"Felicia."

"All right, all right." She held up her hands. "It isn't hard, really. I know what I admire about you: how easy you are with people."

Troy scowled. "That's nothing admirable."

"Oh, yes it is. It's a talent you have. I—I wish I had it, too."

"You're fine with people."

"Oh, I have impeccable manners. I know how to make small talk, but you—" Felicia sucked in her lips as she wondered how to put it. "You have a way of drawing people out. You put them at ease and make them laugh. You make them feel...as if they're charming, too." She laughed. "Why do you think you get invited to every party that happens around here? People know that wherever you are, they're going to feel good."

Troy was still scowling. "That doesn't sound like much of a virtue to me."

"That's because you take it for granted. Believe me, it isn't easy for most people." She tilted her head and decided to add, "And it's why I think you'd do marvelous at that fundraising job for the Boston Aid Foundation."

"Oh, for heaven's sake—"

"Troy." Felicia was laughing. "Do you think I would keep offering you, of all people, this job if I wasn't convinced you'd be good at it?"

Troy's eyes narrowed to slits. "Huh."

Felicia still felt like laughing. This had been a most odd interchange, telling each other nice things. And the strange part was, it had felt just as good to say something nice to Troy as to hear him say something nice about her. "So." She chuckled and spread her hands. "There. We aren't angry at each other. Wonder of wonders."

"Yeah," Troy said, low. "It's a marvel."

Their eyes met and Felicia felt her happy smile fade. They weren't angry at each other, but the sizzling awareness between them had not gone away. On the contrary, she could feel it more potent than ever, pulsing against the new idea that he might admire her, and the fact she'd admitted some admiration of him.

"Unfortunately," Troy said, staring at her. "I don't think that fixed the problem."

Felicia swallowed. He was correct. They hadn't fixed the problem. They'd only made it bigger. Even though she wasn't anywhere close to Troy, she took a step back.

"Don't worry," Troy said, very deep. "I'm not going to kiss you."

"Oh." To Felicia's horror, her voice sounded disappointed.

One corner of Troy's mouth quirked. "That is, if we did kiss—which I'm not saying is going to happen—but if we did kiss, it would have to be your idea."

Felicia went very still. In the cool night air they stood looking at each other. Electricity hummed all around them. She could feel her inner motor start to rev. But, no. She wasn't about to kiss him! Not only didn't she want to—of *course* not—but she just *couldn't*. That would be—it would be—

Fun.

Felicia hiccupped in surprise at herself. Fun? Fun! Was she crazy? This was Troy they were talking about, Troy who was mean and nasty to her, Troy who was much too masculine for her comfort, Troy who'd kissed her, so violently and so thoroughly that her knees went weak just thinking about it.

But her blood was pulsing hot through her veins, her insides were going soft and melting. She imagined going up to him, touching him, lifting her mouth to his. It would be—it would

be—

Marvelous.

Meanwhile Troy stood there, silently watching her in a way that made him infinitely compelling. All his male sexual power was banked, waiting—at her discretion. It made the whole idea seem so—

Possible.

Felicia took a step toward him. Yes, toward him, not away. She felt anticipation like the twist of a screw. His eyes glittered, but not with danger. They glittered with the same anticipation she felt, and a doubt. Felicia could see the sliver of doubt, the fear that she wasn't going to follow through. Anticipated loss.

That did it, actually. She might well have pulled back and come to her senses except for that moment of vulnerability in his eyes. There was no way she could have stopped then.

Her heart pounded madly as she dared to reach up her hands. Anticipation was at the point of pain right before her palms connected with the flat, faintly rough surface of his cheeks.

Oh, he was all man, but holding himself back, making her master. And, indeed, she felt a rush of triumph, of power, as he stood still beneath her hands. She saw his nostrils flare, felt the need crouched tightly inside him. He let her rise up on her toes and press her lips, ever so cautiously, against his.

Air rushed out through his nose, but he held still. He let her experiment with the pressure of her mouth on his. A small noise came out of his throat and he closed his eyes tight, but he held still.

It was pure delight to have him at her disposal, to be able to run her hands through his hair—it was just as silky as she'd always imagined. It was even okay when he began to respond to her light kisses. In fact, she liked that even better. She would nip, and he would nip back. She would press a little harder. He would press a little harder back. His hands went into her hair, spiking through the strands to hold her to him.

Felicia started to feel a heady sense of power. This hard, strong male body was hers to control. Troy was like a dancer, following her lead, going wherever she wanted.

And she seemed to want more. Exhilaration was like bubbles in her blood, curving her body against his, moving her lips in ever hungrier patterns. Yes, need, she was feeling that, the need to get closer, more intimate. Her hands swept down from his hair, exploring the strength of his chest.

Troy groaned and moved his jaw in a way that opened Felicia's mouth. It was the first initiative he'd taken, but she found that it was okay. It was even okay when his tongue swept into her mouth, touching and then wrapping around her own tongue. It was not the first time a man had kissed her in this way, but it was the first time such a kiss had given her a sweet shock of pleasure. And it was the first time it made Felicia reach for more.

Troy's breathing grew deeper and faster. His hands smoothed up and down Felicia's back. But it was okay, she didn't mind that he was starting to take control, because she knew she'd been the one to set everything off. Meanwhile Troy's hands, strong and assured, circled her buttocks, then skimmed up her sides. His tongue was deep in her mouth when he curved his thumbs over the surface of her breasts. The sensation was so sharply exquisite Felicia flinched.

Fortunately, that didn't stop Troy. He moved his entire hands over her breasts, massaging, testing, squeezing. It was heavenly. Felicia had to wrench her mouth from his and throw her head back.

Thank God he didn't stop. She could hear him breathing heavily as his head lowered to her breastbone. She felt his lips there, hot and wanting. His fingers squeezed her nipples.

Felicia groaned deeply. This was beyond anything. Who knew? Surely nobody could have convinced her before tonight that such activity could be so *marvelous*.

"Oh! I say!" A deep male voice suddenly intruded on the delightful scene. Felicia felt as if she were being jerked awake from a deep sleep. Both she and Troy froze. "Do excuse us," said the voice, but sounding annoyed, as if the opposite were the case. One of the older club members, apparently, and not amused.

Felicia could hear feet moving, clothes rustling. The intruder had stalking off. Meanwhile, Troy pressed his forehead against her collarbone. His hands stilled on her breasts. "Okay," she heard him murmur. "Okay, okay."

Fighting a physical pain that was almost equal to the pleasure that had come before, Felicia drew her hands from his hair.

Slowly, he lifted his head. Slowly, he let go of her breasts. He let go of all of her, and straightened.

"Ho, boy," he breathed, and looked down at her.

Felicia self-consciously straightened her silk bodice. Her gaze flitted up at him, then down.

"That *really* didn't work," Troy muttered.

Felicia simply nodded. There was no point belaboring the obvious. Why, she'd nearly let the man have his way with her—on the public terrace! She, Felicia, who'd always thought she was frigid.

It appeared she was nothing of the sort.

At least...not with Troy.

Felicia frowned. There it was again, the grand contradiction, that this should be happening with Troy, the most irresponsible, least safe man she knew. Her whole life had been spent trying to avoid involvement with a man like her father, the kind of man who'd desert his wife and family in everything but name—and here she was throwing herself straight into the arms of just such an individual.

Meanwhile Troy was looking as grim as Felicia felt and shaking his head. "We *really* have to avoid doing that again."

Felicia cleared her throat. "Agreed."

"So, at the risk of acting responsible for once in my life, I have a suggestion." Troy pulled down his shirt. "We don't have anything to do with each other. No conversation beyond 'hello' and 'goodbye.' And we absolutely never, ever, be alone together."

Felicia drew in a deep breath. "Agreed." Of course she agreed!

"Because," Troy went on, getting puritanical, "there is no way we could have any kind of a thing going between us."

"A—a relationship?" Felicia's eyes widened. "Definitely not."

"Right." Troy's gaze flicked away and he pulled down on his shirt again. "It would never work."

"We're far too different."

"You *are* a goody-good."

"And you're unreliable."

Troy's gaze shot toward her, then flew away again. "Right. So. Ahem. I'm going to go inside now. And you...you just take your time out here, giving *me* enough time to, uh, clear out. Okay?"

"Okay."

He turned to go then, but not before shooting her one last look, a look that belied everything he'd just said, a look that told Felicia he'd be ever so glad to kiss her again, and more, if she were so unwise as to let him.

And she, crazy woman, came very close to doing just that as if—as if she had no sense of self-preservation. As if she hadn't just found out, both tonight and on the sidewalk outside the restaurant in Boston, that she had the capacity to play the fool for this man.

She could easily make the same mistake with him that her mother had made with her father.

So Felicia managed to stand her ground as Troy walked away. She didn't move as he went through the lounge doors. She stood outside for a good long while, making extra sure that Troy would, indeed, have time to clear completely from the Club's grounds before she dared go back inside the lounge, herself.

Her heart pounded painfully all the while. Close. That had been so awfully close.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The morning following their moonlit walk, Kelly stood and watched from her bedroom window as Dean drove off. He'd left early, before anyone could conceivably have come down to breakfast, before Kelly could conceivably have gone down to use the gym. And it was a Sunday, no less.

In the dawn light, Kelly leaned against the window frame and rubbed her thumb against her lips as, through the paned glass of her bedroom window, she watched his Lexus disappear down the drive. But was he *running*? Oh, it was too hard to believe that after last night and their nice walk, he would start playing that game again.

Kelly shrugged and stepped away from the window. She decided to hang cool, wait and see.

Mid-morning, Maggie came into the gym with a telephone. "For you," she told Kelly.

Kelly stepped off the treadmill. It could be her chorus line friend, Valerie, on the phone, with the latest gossip, or her boss, Rudy, with yet another complaint about her

replacement. So Kelly calmed the leap in her heart as she reached for the telephone. "Yes?" she asked, casual.

Dean's voice on the other end sounded husky. "Would you like to have lunch?" He paused. "A real lunch, that is."

Kelly's heart took another leap, but she forced her voice to remain casual. "Why, I'd love to."

"Jackson will drive you into town." Dean made this clear. "He'll deliver you to the restaurant, say, around noon?"

Kelly cleared her throat. "Noon will be fine."

"I'll see you then."

Kelly hung up the phone and handed it to Maggie. She waited for the housekeeper to leave and close the door behind her before throwing her arms into the air and dancing a jig. Those good vibrations hadn't steered her wrong.

Dean had just asked her out.

~~~

They had lunch. Kelly was delivered by Jackson to a posh little café on Beacon Hill, a small place with heavy-duty prices. Dean was waiting for her. He pulled out Kelly's seat for her. She got the first glass of wine. Their eyes met, fell away, met again. After clearing her throat, Kelly asked how his day was going. After clearing his throat, Dean wanted to know if she'd had much traffic coming into town. They both made some kind of an answer and afterwards simply sat at their chic little table and looked at each other.

Kelly was delighted. The nerves meant they each cared about the impression they were making. This was like the start of a real relationship. Dean didn't seem too sure about the situation, true, but things were definitely moving in the right direction.

She sat back and sipped her wine, enjoying herself immensely. Dean, on the other hand, was not nearly so serene. He kept frowning and looking down, as if afraid of holding Kelly's gaze for too long. But that was okay, Kelly thought. It was part of the whole beginning-of-things package.

In time, their lunches came, were suitably gourmet, and were consumed. Dean paid, then rose to pull out Kelly's chair.

As she stood, she looked over her shoulder at him. "Do you have to go right back to work?"

He went very still. "No."

"Good." Kelly smiled. "I know just what I want to do with you."

~~~

She made him ride a swan boat. In all the years Dean had spent in the Boston area, growing up, going to college, and building his business, he'd never ridden one of the swan boats in the public garden.

Kelly said it was a scandal. She made him purchase two tickets and they had to stand in line with the families on vacation and the European tourists. Dean felt silly. He'd imagined she was going to take him to the Parker House.

Not that he should be making love to the woman. On the contrary, he'd asked her to lunch in order to call the whole farce to an end. He'd intended to explain to her, calmly, logically, over a bowl of lobster bisque, that the idea of any kind of real relationship between them was ridiculous. Especially if Kelly was imagining hearts and flowers. Dean didn't do hearts and flowers.

But watching her over the peach linen tablecloth, Dean had been unable to find the right words. She'd looked so happy, so contented, sitting there in her off-the-rack sundress, drinking the expensive wine that he'd ordered out of guilt.

And now, well, he should have been putting Kelly into a cab for a handkerchief-sopped ride home. Instead Dean was picking his way over the rickety floorboards of a flatboat along with a dozen other chumps, about to get transported around the pond by yet another chump, who pedaled from a seat that looked like a swan. Dean's grumbles faded, however, when he saw Kelly settle onto her portion of the bench seat with an amazingly happy smile on her face. He sank down next to her and closed his eyes with a sigh.

He cared about making her happy. Lord, he shouldn't. It was a damned trap. He'd never be able to. Nor would she be able to make him happy, in the long run. They simply had nothing solid to build on. He'd witnessed the way these things played out through his father. Over and over he'd seen passions flare, burn bright, and then crumble into charcoal. It was inevitable, a law of nature.

Oh, it was a mess. He had to explain things to her, make her see. This wasn't *real*.

The water of the pond gurgled against the sides of the boat as it slipped between the lily pads. A breeze brought the scent of newly mown grass. Dean knew he shouldn't delay his talk any longer. He drew in a breath.

"Oh, look at the ducklings!" Kelly pointed toward a line of the scruffy things, paddling madly to keep up with their mother. "Aren't they adorable?"

Dean glared at her. Couldn't she be unlikable, for at least half a minute?

Unmindful of his problem, Kelly was beaming at the ducks while her hands blindly opened her purse. "I think I have some saltines in here. Oh, look for me, will you?" She thrust the sequined purple purse at Dean. "Hello, sweeties. Oh, don't swim away!"

Dean automatically clutched the purse. Because he didn't know what else to do, he peered in. He fingered aside a metal tube of lipstick and an extra-thin gold pen. His search halted on a Winnie-the-Pooh key chain. He swallowed. "No saltines," he told Kelly.

"Oh, darn. Probably for the best." She sighed and accepted her purse back, all the while peering after the ducklings. "I suppose crackers aren't a part of their natural diet."

"No, I wouldn't think so." Dean watched Kelly watching the ducklings. The woman had a Winnie-the-Pooh key chain in her purse. How on earth was he supposed to explain the hard facts of life to a person like this? Not to mention the way his heart was twisting at the mere sight of her, going ga-ga over some ducklings.

Of course it was this moment Kelly chose to turn and look at him. Her eyes were bright, her smile wide. Dean felt as if two hands reached inside his chest and wrung his already twisting heart.

He wasn't going to do it. Something inside him, some relic, long-repressed, rose in rebellion and prevented speech. The normal part of him knew what he had to do, knew what was proper and responsible. But this older, wilder part of him didn't care.

Kelly tilted her head. A querying look came into her eyes. She put a hand on his arm. "Did you want to say something?"

He certainly ought to say something. He ought to say that a relationship between them would never work. He ought to say they had to stop kidding themselves here.

But, dammit, he wasn't going to.

I like you. Kelly had told him that yesterday. The words echoed through him like precious jewels. Dean wasn't ready to expose them for what they really were, an outer shell, no more. He wanted to keep them, just a little longer.

For one more day.

Dean stared at Kelly while the tension that had been riding him since the previous evening mysteriously relaxed. He felt a slow smile crawl over his face. One day. It was the perfect way to combine his desire with his responsibility. He wouldn't give those marvelous words back—yet. He could do that—tomorrow. Yes, tomorrow he'd go back to the sober, pragmatic fellow who knew better. Tomorrow he'd deal with everything.

But today?

Well, today...wouldn't count.

"Dean?" Kelly asked. "What is it?"

Dean's smile grew. Instead of telling her how these matters really worked, instead of warning her not to get too attached, he let the sun warm his face, he heard the pleasant lap of water against the boat. He luxuriated in the sensation of Kelly's little hand on his sleeve.

"Yes, I want to say something." He heard a laugh in his voice. "I want to say I'm having fun."

For today, a small inner voice reminded him. Dean ignored it. He knew what he had to do tomorrow. But for now...? Feeling reckless, feeling almost giddy, he touched Kelly's cheek. "Today," he said, "I'm going to have fun."

Kelly smiled. Dean laughed. Swiveling at the sound, mama duck headed her brood quickly back toward the shelter of the lily pads.

~~~

Kelly had hoped the quiet ride on the swan boat would relax Dean. She wasn't prepared for the transformation, however, once they got off. He didn't reach into his jacket pocket for his cell phone. He didn't look at his watch. Instead he rearranged his palm around her hand to get a better grip and smiled.

"So," he asked, looking down at her. "What's next?"

Kelly's lips parted. He wasn't going to run back to his office? He wasn't going to plead some kind of business emergency to sort through his emotions? She closed her mouth and cleared her throat. "Um, well..." An afternoon at the Parker House occurred to her, but she knew they weren't ready for sex. Dean had turned some sort of corner, to be sure, but it wasn't yet love.

If it was love, he would have said so.

He wore a big grin, however, an appealing one, as he turned to face her. Still holding Kelly's hand, he began to back up the path. "Have you toured downtown Boston yet?"

"Have I toured?" Other than the walk between his office and the Parker House, that was? "No."

"Good." Dean's smile broadened. "Then I can show you the sights."

"Oh." Kelly couldn't help staring. He really *had* turned a corner. He seemed happy, eager...relaxed.

Dean turned to face forward again. He pulled her along. "The Freedom Trail. That should be sufficiently hoke—er—" He broke off and his face turned red.

"Hokey?" Kelly guessed, and tilted him a look.

To her surprise, Dean laughed. An outright, unconsidered laugh. "All right, hokey," he admitted. "But I think you'll enjoy it."



"Because it's hokey."

Dean threw her sidelong glance. "If the shoe fits..."

"Then I ought to wear it?" Kelly laughed, too. Then they shared a look, smiling, connected. Kelly felt a hiccup of pleasure. Well, this was...unexpected, a truly different side to Dean, joking and spontaneous.

She found herself stepping closer, hooking her arm with his. Okay, maybe she should question this new side of Dean, maybe she should wonder what was really going on.

Maybe she should, but she wasn't going to. Heck, why ruin a perfectly good moment?

For one day, she could just enjoy whatever was.

~~~

It was the closest Kelly had seen Dean come to the Dean she'd first met in Las Vegas. He looked happy, he had a sense of fun, he laughed.

They started out on the Freedom Trail, the red-brick line that wound through downtown. After two churches and a cemetery, however, they decided to abandon the formal, tourist path.

"Maybe I didn't have you pegged so well, after all," Dean said, coming up behind Kelly where she roamed, frowning, amidst three-hundred-year-old headstones.

She looked up at once, alert and concerned. But he seemed to be taking his miscalculation in stride.

"Let's try the Haymarket," he said, and took her arm. Adaptable, unruffled. And casually taking possession of her as if—well, as if they belonged together.

That felt awfully good. "Let's," Kelly agreed, and held onto him.

Arm-in-arm then, they strolled through the Haymarket. Buyers and sellers argued over the price of vegetables, and fish lay in gleaming silver piles. Dean steered Kelly around spilled vegetables and the odd fish head.

"Two hundred years of rats have been cleaning up here after hours," he told Kelly. "Speaking as an expert in the field, I can tell you by now it's built into their genetic code."

She laughed.

From Haymarket they ducked into the relative sanity of Faneuil Hall, where carts lined up under glass awnings sold everything from Red Sox banners to hand-carved sculptures. Dean waited patiently while Kelly debated between buying a straw scarecrow or a wooden chess set for Robby. Not once did he evince a desire to be out of her presence or doing something else. Not once did he check his telephone or his watch.

As Kelly paid for the chess set, she felt a deep contentment. She didn't know what had prompted this about-face behavior on Dean's part, but she did know she liked it. This was good for him.

And it wasn't so bad for her, either.

She felt wanted, she felt appreciated. She felt like she was getting to know a man who might actually come to care for her.

She turned, wrapped bag in hand, to find Dean watching her with an arrested expression. "What?" she asked. Lord, she hoped the castles she'd been building in the air weren't showing on her face.

To her relief, Dean shook a smile back on. "Nothing." He lowered his head closer to hers. "I'm just enjoying myself."

Kelly met his eyes. "You're enjoying yourself." She dared to add, "for a change."

Dean's smile went crooked. "For a change." He straightened and took the bag from her hand. "Are you hungry?"

"I'm ashamed to admit it, after that fancy lunch..."

"Gourmet food is notoriously unsatisfying. Come on. I'll take you to a place where they know how to fill you up."

~~~

A neon sign in an upstairs window of the North End building announced this was 'Josefina's.'

Dean led Kelly through a street-level door and up a narrow staircase. Wonderful smells drifted down to meet them, garlic and tomato and basil. At the top of the staircase stood a large woman in a white apron. Her eyes widened when she saw Dean.

"*Signore!*" She opened her arms. "We have not seen you for ages. You eat somewhere else, you bad boy?"

"No, no, Josefina. I haven't eaten a thing since I last saw you, not one bite."

"*Pagliaccio*. A liar on top of everything else."

"It's the God's honest truth. "

Josefina gave Dean a mock box on the ears, something Kelly was amazed to see him put up with, much less appear to enjoy. The older woman blinked when she noticed Kelly bringing up the rear.

"Oh-h-h." Her expression turned astonished. "Look what we have here."

"Kelly," Dean supplied.

"Kel-ly." Josefina took hold of Kelly by the shoulders and beamed. "My, but this is— Don't you worry, *signore*. We take good care of your girl. We give her the extra-special treatment. We put out all the gos."

"Pull out all the stops, I think she means," Dean confided to Kelly.

"I'm sure anything you do would be great, Josefina. It smells wonderful in here." Kelly smiled, liking the woman immediately.

Josefina's beam managed to pick up wattage and she let loose a stream of happy-sounding Italian. "Come, come," she said at last. "I give you a place to sit. Sit, sit, sit."

The upstairs room looked to have been originally the living room of an apartment. One wall had been torn down to add the living room of the next apartment over. The lighting was dim and the décor simple.

Josefina led them to a table by the window, intimate, candle-lit, and with a view of the village-like North end. The way Dean took his seat told Kelly this was a usual spot.

She picked up her linen napkin and raised her brows. "Something tells me this isn't where you take investors for power lunches."

"No." Dean smiled faintly as he rearranged the placement of candle and flower vase. "I come here alone."

Kelly's ironic smile faded. She'd assumed this was a trysting spot, a place to bring the odd lover. Instead, he'd brought her to his private haunt.

She tried to think up something flip to say in response, but couldn't. Dean was letting her into his real life, deeply into it.

Their eyes met over the checked linen tablecloth. Kelly felt her heart beat fast and hard. "Well," she said at last, her voice no more than a whisper. "You aren't alone tonight."

"No." Dean's faint smile faded. "I'm not."

~~~

The day Dean had chosen for his enjoyment was quickly drawing to an end. He'd strolled through the time aimlessly, basking in Kelly's emotions. He'd let her joy and her

affection wash over him like so much rare elixir. Deliberately, he'd refrained from questioning the endurance of such emotions. What did endurance matter when he was only counting on a single day? For the span of one day their emotions weren't going to change.

But the day was nearly over. The dial on the dashboard of his Lexus read 11:53 when he pulled the car into its spot in the garage. It took a few minutes to gather Kelly's purchases from the trunk, a few more to walk up to the house. Dean figured it had to be past midnight by the time they got to the hallway outside Kelly's bedroom door.

His day was officially over.

It was time to return to reality. Reality was the temporary nature of emotions. Reality was that passion and all its by-products didn't last. Reality was the huge mistake it would be to rely on mere feelings.

But reality was awfully hard to come by when Kelly turned at her bedroom door, when her tremulous smile made his insides clench.

"I want to tell you," she whispered huskily. "I had a really nice day."

I liked you. You were good for me. As good as I was for you. Drawing in a deep breath, Dean tried to still her fantasy voice in his head. "Yes," he said gruffly. "It was a nice day." And just one day, he struggled to remind himself. He had to get away from fantasy, back to reality.

Kelly's smile crooked. "And now it's over."

Yes, it was over. All over. That had been the deal Dean had promised himself on the swan boat. But as his groin stirred traitorously, a voice whispered slyly in his head. *It's not quite over yet.*

Kelly's lashes lowered. "Things are different now, aren't they?"

Whoa. Even as desire stirred, Dean knew he couldn't have her believing anything was different. Hell, he might start believing it, himself. Yes, he'd let down his guard, he'd allowed himself to enjoy her company, but that didn't mean anything essential had changed. Whatever they'd felt for each other today wasn't real. It wasn't lasting. Such things never were.

Before he got a chance to say anything of the sort, however, Kelly reached out to put a finger in the middle of Dean's chin. He stood immobilized. The smell of the salt of her skin reached his nose, the leather from the car seat, and even a hint of the garlic they'd had with their dinner. The whole magical day seemed encapsulated in Kelly's finger.

Reality began to slip.

Kelly smiled softly. "I don't know what it took for you to let go, to loosen up today, for you to trust me, but I know it was a lot. And so...thank you." Her eyes came up to meet his.

Reality continued its downward slide. Swiftly. The look in her eyes... She'd had a good time, as good a time as he'd had. He'd done that—for her. He'd *been able* to do that. The ancient part of Dean, the part that had elected to take the day off, surged upward again.

He didn't want this to go.

Not yet.

As Kelly gently lowered her finger and made to step back, he cast frantically for something, anything, to prolong the moment, the time—the connection.

"I like you."

Kelly froze. It took Dean a second to realize he was the one who'd uttered the words. He'd just told Kelly he *liked* her. Out loud.

Terror warred with the most bizarre access of joy. It was true, of course. He did like her. A lot. But— Oh, there were so many but's. Nevertheless, his joy continued to grow, along with his terror. What would she think of this?

"Oh, Dean," she murmured, while her face went all soft and warm.

That was it. The end. He affected her. *He* did. The ancient warrior inside Dean, the rebel who refused to face reality, charged in with the strength of an armed battalion. Any thought of being responsible flitted into nothingness.

What was responsibility compared to *this*, this new and incredible sensation?

Dean set down the bags. The air seemed to hum around them. Through the hum, he reached for her. She leaned toward him. Their noses briefly fumbled for space before their lips touched.

Magic. Power. Immensity. Dean closed his eyes and let it all wash over him. Deep, deep down, in the darkest heart of him, he knew he was continuing the pretense. This was neither smart nor honest.

But, God, he did like her! And she'd liked that. She'd liked it!

Kelly's arms went around him. Dean pulled her close. Reality? he thought, his chest nearly bursting. *The hell with reality.*

Deeper. He kept letting her in even deeper, Kelly thought, as Dean's arms closed around her. He'd told her he liked her. That was—it was—

Not enough.

Some voice inside her, not yet seduced, spoke up. There were rules governing this kind of situation, rules she'd thoroughly flouted last Monday. She wasn't supposed to be going to bed with him, not giving so much—or at least not giving so much until he gave something back: a proposal of marriage, or in their case, the words that ought to go with one. Words of love, words of commitment. She'd promised herself she would go back to the rules that would protect her.

The resistance of the door behind Kelly gave way. She suspected she'd been the one to grope for the knob. But it was Dean who walked her backwards into the room. Kelly didn't protest, however, when he turned to lean her against the inside of her bedroom door, when his mouth descended desperately to devour hers. She twined her arms behind his neck.

Perhaps there were rules, but the situation seemed strikingly familiar. Five weeks ago with Dean in her car in Las Vegas, she'd felt the same thrill of discovery, the same pulse of need and giving. That night, Dean's touch and his words had sparked Kelly's infatuation into love. *Marry me*, he'd said. *I love you*, he'd said.

Okay, so he hadn't said that tonight. Kelly admitted this as Dean's hand roved over the bodice of her sundress and she moaned her appreciation. No, Dean had not pronounced his undying love and devotion, but he had admitted he liked her. For the Boston Dean, that was equivalent to an avalanche.

"Kelly," Dean murmured.

"Dean," Kelly whispered back. She reveled in the shudder that went through him when she rocked her hips against the ridge in his trousers. Did it truly matter if she closed the barn door now, when the horses had been let out not once, but several times?

Dean's fingers found her taut nipple through the cotton of her dress. The jerk of arousal pulled Kelly out of her haze. Wait a minute. She'd sort of decided it did matter. Surrendering now, without words of love, would leave her vulnerable and unprotected.

"Stay," Dean then breathed. "Kelly. Stay with me."

Oh, boy. Kelly lifted her lashes. Dean's eyes were closed, his face drawn in lines of stark, heedless need.

He didn't merely want her. He needed her. Kelly's love for him swelled.

"I'm here," she choked out. She brushed her hand against his cheek. "I'm not going anywhere, Dean."

With a low sound, he opened his mouth over hers in a deeply carnal kiss. Kelly kissed him back, while reaching behind herself to draw down her zipper.

Some rules, she told herself, were meant to be broken.

~~~

It was the kind of a party that was usually Troy's favorite: good booze, loud music, and a wide variety of women. The range of females at this particular shindig went all the way from somebody's wacky grandmother, wearing décolletage and pearls, to a gaggle of terrified-looking Harvard undergrads.

But all Troy could do was wander the many rooms of the mansion of a friend of a friend and feel...bored.

He forced himself to come to a stop in the main room of the house, the one with the DJ and the dancing. He stood next to the five foot high speaker and lifted his martini to his nose for a sniff. His body hummed with the vibrations of the music, but he felt an overall dissatisfaction. Hell. It didn't make sense.

Troy was *always* satisfied. He made himself satisfied, whatever the situation. He'd learned to do so at the age of fifteen, when they'd come to tell him that both his parents had died in the same small plane crash. That's when he'd figured out that life was not going to turn out the way he'd like it to, so he'd better learn to be happy with whatever *was*.

Sniffing his martini again, Troy brooded that he'd yet to learn how to be happy about his last interview—his last kiss—with Felicia. That kiss had been...amazing. But while his body craved more kisses from the woman, his brain knew better. They couldn't have a relationship. Why, they didn't even define the word the same way!

And yet...and yet... Troy's lashes lowered. And yet, there was something very unfinished about the whole business.

Across the room by the bartender, one of the Harvard undergrads lifted her Margarita and smiled at Troy, apparently not as terrified as he'd assumed. Indeed, the girl was on the bold side, considering Troy looked what he was: a dozen years her senior. He smiled back, but turned and walked in the opposite direction, as if he'd just remembered a previous assignation.

As he strode through the next room, the one with the tables heaped with appetizers, he tried desperately to remember. Would he have walked away from a smiling undergrad two weeks ago, before this whole thing with Felicia had started? Had he owned that many scruples? He gnashed his teeth and hoped to God he would have behaved with such restraint.

Otherwise, he had to worry that kissing Felicia might have ruined him for anyone else.

After stalking right through the appetizer room and out onto the lawn, Troy stopped, shuddered, and finally took a swallow of the drink he'd only been sniffing for the past hour. Felicia ruining him. It was a scary thought.

Or was it? Was it actually scary, or was it something else? Maybe it was something he wasn't ready to define—but that he'd forever rue if he didn't explore.

He took another swallow of his drink and looked out over the darkened landscape. He was always satisfied. He never wanted anything he couldn't have. And he probably couldn't have Felicia.

Probably. But then, *probably* wasn't *certainly*. And this particular *probably* was going to drive him crazy. What if he could have her? What if he could experience a fulfillment he hadn't enjoyed in fifteen years? What if?

Troy bared his teeth and tossed the rest of his martini over the lawn. Hell. He had a sinking feeling there'd be no peace for him until he exerted himself and did something about that *probably*.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Completely comfortable in Kelly's bed, Dean yawned luxuriantly. It was Monday, he was already late for work, and since the moment he'd walked into Kelly's bedroom last night he'd crossed every line of morality and self discipline he owned.

But somehow, with Kelly curled up under his nose, Dean couldn't work up the energy to hate himself.

Indeed, as he lay there and sensed Kelly's limbs shift, her muscles tensing in a stretch, he felt nothing but pleasure; pleasure to be next to her, delight that they were in bed together, and a pure, mindless contentment with the whole situation.

"Hey, beautiful." Silly words. They just popped out of his mouth.

But they accomplished what he wanted. When Kelly looked up at him she was smiling. "Hey beautiful, yourself," she whispered, morning hoarse.

Dean knew he was grinning like an idiot. He supposed he *was* an idiot. "You really are drop dead gorgeous, you know."

"Dean." Her tone was half embarrassed, all pleased.

He smoothed his hand over her shoulder and decided he liked embarrassing her, and pleasing her. Maybe he would do more. "Say. It occurs to me that in all this time I still know next to nothing about you." Nothing, that is, besides what he'd learned from the private detective he'd hired at the beginning.

Kelly raised her eyebrows. "And you want to know more?"

Yes! No. Hell. Personal questions. That meant probing, getting closer. Was that smart? And yet— And yet—he *did* want to know more about her.

Dean shifted onto his side so that he could look directly at her. "First thing I don't understand—" and what couldn't have made its way into the private detective's report.

"—Gorgeous as you are, why Las Vegas?"

She tilted her head. "Las Vegas isn't such a terrible place."

Dean snorted.

She brushed the hair from her eyes with a smile. "It isn't. Not if you love dancing. Besides, my parents encouraged me to move there."

"Your *parents*?"

"Sure. They wanted me to be able to make a living doing something I loved." Kelly grinned. "And dancers can make a good living in Las Vegas."

"But—" Dean started to frown. But—the detective's report had described her run-down apartment building, had listed her monthly credit card debt. She didn't appear to make a good living. He shook his head. "Even so, what kind of parents send their child—their female child—to the gambling capital of the world?"

Kelly's eyes sparkled. "My Dad was a minister. My mother helped him in the church."

Dean just looked at her.

She laughed, delighted.

"You're not kidding."

Obviously enjoying herself, Kelly tapped his chin. "Call it 'only child' syndrome. All they wanted was for me to be happy."

All they'd wanted was for her to be happy. Dean shook his head. For most of his life, he'd been an only child, too, but neither of his parents had thought beyond their own happiness. His mother had taken off before he'd turned two. To that day, his father was still too busy womanizing to care about Dean's happiness.

"Do you still see them?" Dean asked.

The grin on her face faded. "My Mom passed away three years ago. My Dad went soon after that."

"Mm," Dean gazed at her, feeling like he was getting a window into a world he'd never known. He had the urge to comfort her, though surely there was nothing he could do about her parents' deaths at this late date. "I suppose that was...hard," he essayed anyway.

Kelly's eyes swept back to him. "Yes. Yes, it was, especially with my mom. She...lingered."

Dean reached out to clasp a hand around Kelly's. Emotions rose up in his chest, emotions he had no business entertaining. For the love of Pete, he'd already gone past his deadline. They were supposed to be back in reality again.

He drew his hand away. "I should get up."

Kelly wrinkled her nose and snuggled closer. "Say that again."

"I should get up."

She laughed. "Just as I thought."

"What?"

Her eyes flicked upward. "You don't really want to."

Well, of course he didn't want to. He was in bed with a delightful and fascinating naked woman, one to whom he felt suddenly, perhaps dangerously, closer. "It wouldn't kill me to take a day off," he heard himself say. *Am I crazy? I've already taken one day off.*

Meanwhile Kelly lifted a hand to his cheek. Her expression sobered. "Do you mean that? I mean, could you?"

Dean looked deep into her eyes. Did he? Could he? He was supposed to have ended this business last night. Instead he'd delved even further into it. It was crazy. Persisting in this thing was only going to hurt them both. This was the moment to tell her.

Dean threaded his fingers through her hair, hair generously mussed from their lovemaking of the night before. He looked into her eyes, eyes that seemed deeper, more

three-dimensional than the day before. His insides clenched. This was the moment to tell her.

If he were about to do anything of the sort.

Dean smiled. Everything within him calmed. He was not going to tell her. Not now, and maybe not tomorrow, either. This simply felt too good. And, wrong or right, he wanted to feel good.

"I'm sure," he said. Still smiling, he kissed her.

~~~

That day, a Monday, Dean drove Kelly up to Rockport, the old fishing village. They wandered the streets of gift shops, then toured the Revolutionary-era mansions. While enjoying herself, Kelly watched Dean. He was spontaneous. He was relaxed. But he also took care of his responsibilities. At one point in the afternoon he bought Kelly a fat paperback, installed her in a quaint café, and went off for forty-five minutes to make phone calls. When he came back he was smiling. Indeed, he was relaxed enough to sit down and order a fancy coffee, after which he suggested a hike.

Kelly found herself waiting for the other shoe to drop. Dean had spent so much of his life behind emotional walls. It didn't make sense for him to act the way he was today, as if he'd overcome all his fear. And yet, one couldn't deny he was having a good time with her, laughing, connecting. And that morning in bed, he'd really seemed to, well, *care*.

She felt torn between wanting to accept things the way they seemed to be, and wondering if she ought to push the issue.

She ended up choosing not to push the issue. Everything was too nice, too dreamy and marvelous. She didn't even question matters when Dean pulled off the road on their way back home, when they began kissing—and more—in the back seat of his car. If ever there was a time Kelly should have been protecting herself by making sure of a man's feelings, this was it. Yet she did nothing.

All right, maybe there was something wrong here, something off, but most of it felt so good and right. The last thing Kelly wanted to do was ruin what appeared to be Dean's awakening, and the beginning of true love.

~~~

"Okay, so that's taken care of." Felicia folded the budget request that Andrea, director of the Boston Family Aid Foundation, had just given her, and put it in her briefcase. Then she smiled at Andrea across the functional desk in the tiny office of the family shelter facility. "I'll see what I can do about getting you those folding chairs and call you later in the week."

"That'd be great." Andrea stood to bid Felicia goodbye. Her mop of frizzy brown hair and ubiquitous blue jeans belied the sharp competence of a first-rate administrator. So when Andrea's smile turned questioning and her eyes went past Felicia's shoulder toward the door, Felicia turned around to see what had caught Andrea's attention.

She found Troy Singleton standing in the doorway.

Felicia hoped she didn't gasp. But, for the love of—there was Troy, with his sharp-fitting clothes, his easy grace, and his thousand-watt smile. Troy, who instantly made her stomach sink to her toes and her heart start racing. What on earth was he doing at the Boston Family Aid shelter?

"Hey, Felicia," Troy said, and his smile managed to widen.

As inconspicuously as possible, Felicia cleared her throat. "Hello, Troy." His appearance made no sense at all. Troy had been the one to suggest they never speak to



each other. But Felicia recalled her manners and turned to Andrea. "This is Troy Singleton, Dean Singleton's cousin. Troy, please meet Andrea Shapiro, director of the Boston Family Aid shelter."

"Pleased to meet you." Troy smiled and came through the door to shake hands with Andrea. "I've heard so much about this place from Felicia. Thought I'd come check it out." Then he turned to look at Felicia.

It was a request. No, a demand. *She* was supposed to help him 'check it out,' by offering a tour.

No way. Felicia wasn't about to give Troy a tour. She didn't want to spend five minutes in his company. Or, more accurately, she wanted to spend a great deal longer than five minutes in his company, while committing unspeakable acts with him. Oh, her response to him was so dangerous.

She could easily imagine falling under his spell, losing herself, forgetting that Troy was not the kind of man a woman could trust. He wasn't Dean. Not solid or reliable or safe.

But as she stood there being watched by both Troy and Andrea, she couldn't decently refuse to give him a tour. Andrea would wonder what the problem was. Troy would know. Felicia couldn't let him think she was weak. If he could take being in her company, then she could take being in his.

And besides, there was always the possibility that a tour of the facilities might convince Troy to bestir himself and use his sleeping charm to bring in some badly needed funds.

"Oh," she said, smiling innocently. "Would you like a tour?"

Troy's dark eyes gleamed. "Why, yes," he replied. "A tour would be ever so nice."

Felicia inclined her head. It was anybody's guess why Troy was *really* here.

"Oh," Andrea said, and winked. "Be sure to show him our 'new wing.'"

Troy turned to Felicia with a lifted eyebrow.

She smiled with even more innocence. "We'll save that for last."

With a curve of the lips that said he was willing to play along, Troy lowered his eyebrow again.

It was all Felicia could do not to gnash her teeth. Lord, but he was appealing, all lithe and athletic and bedroom-eyed. She smiled her farewell to Andrea and then walked quickly past Troy and into the hall. Fortunately, every room in the place was full of people; volunteers, staff, and clients. She would have no opportunity to give in to the temptation to press her hands against his hard chest or run her fingers through his silky hair.

Felicia's pace was brisk as she strode down the hall. No, nothing *that way* was going to happen between them here...but perhaps she could make something more constructive happen. If she were very clever she might manage to provoke the sleeping philanthropist in Troy's soul.

She started where the clients would start, at reception. There, under Troy's polite attentiveness, she pointed out the comfortable furniture, the carpeting, and painted landscapes on the walls. Prospective clients, often fleeing horrific situations, should feel safe and at home.

Troy nodded. He was doing his best to appear detached, but Felicia noticed his eye catch on one client who was sitting on the sofa, paging through a *People* magazine. The

client looked about fifteen years old, and had a black eye. Felicia saw a muscle jump, ever so slightly, in Troy's jaw.

After a hike through the kitchen and dining room, Felicia led Troy through the dormitory, where the rooms had been designed to give privacy to family groups. There, touring a one-bedroom suite, Felicia got her second hint she might be getting through.

Occupying the suite was Roberta Brown, a single mother suffering from cancer. With hollowed cheeks, she sat in a rocking chair and slowly read a book to Shane, her six-year-old son. Shane huddled in her lap, his arms clutched around his mother's neck as he peered out at Felicia and Troy.

Felicia could feel Troy stiffen beside her. At the same time, his sleeping charm seemed to leap to the fore. "Hey, buddy, whatcha reading there?" He waltzed easily up to the pair, then leaned sideways to peer inside the book.

Roberta smiled wanly up at him. "It's Dr. Seuss."

"Oh, Seuss is the best." Troy put on a mock stern look and pointed at finger at Shane. "I hope you're paying attention."

Looking cowed, Shane nodded.

"Good," Troy said, and grinning widely, chucked Shane under the chin. The boy laughed in surprise at the sudden reversal in attitude, and reflexively grabbed onto Troy's hand. There followed the kind of tussle Felicia had often witnessed between males, something from which they seemed to derive a mysterious joy.

Both Shane and Troy were beaming by the time Felicia led the latter from the room. But Troy's grin dropped once they were in the hallway with the door closed after them. "What's wrong with her?" he asked Felicia.

"Leukemia. She's getting treatment through government aid, but meanwhile she's too weak to make a living."

"Huh," said Troy, and his eyes flicked away from Felicia's. She suddenly remembered a fact about Troy that she'd long known, and had long forgotten. Both his parents had been killed in a small plane crash when he'd been a teenager.

Quickly, Felicia turned away. Funny, how she'd forgotten that, and funny how it now hit her. How hard it must have been for him to lose both his parents at once, and at such a young age. But he never showed any lingering ill effects.

Or at least, not in any obvious way.

"Ahem. This way." Felicia started down the hall. Unfortunately, the idea that Troy might harbor some vulnerability poked at her. It made him, somehow, more real.

Impulsively, she changed her mind about ending the tour before they got to the 'new wing.' She turned right instead of left. She strode toward the locked door that led to the attached building next door.

Torturing herself? Taking an unnecessary risk? ...Or pushing that final button, the one that was going to move Troy.

Felicia had a key, given to her by the hopeful realtor. She used it now to unlock the door and open it onto the large, empty warehouse space. She walked in and flipped the switch for the set of naked light bulbs around the walls. Her skin tingled as Troy walked in after her. They were now alone together in the big, echoing space. But she put on a serene smile as she turned to face him.

"And this," she told him, "is our 'new wing,' or what we hope to acquire. We could really use it, as I imagine you can now see. But...we don't have a down payment."

Troy hummed and took a polite look around the empty space. Felicia knew he understood what she'd actually said. She could really use *his* services. Oh, if he would only deign to exert himself, Felicia just knew he could get that down payment together.

Smiling wryly, Troy leaned against the open door jamb. "I was right the other night." "Excuse me?"

He laughed softly. "About you being a good person. You are that, in spades."

"Oh, please. And didn't we agree, that same night, that it wasn't a good idea to trade compliments?"

Troy chuckled and looked down at his shoes. "Yeah, we did, but...why did we decide that, Felicia? That is, it seemed to make sense at the time, but I've been having a harder and harder job remembering our reasoning." His gaze came up to hit hers. "Remind me. Why did we decide it wouldn't work out for us to get together?"

Felicia stilled. Was this why he'd come today? To test her resolve? "You know why." "Because we're too different?" He sounded doubtful.

Felicia wasn't to be deflected. "Yes, because we're too different."

His head canted to one side. "But that could be a plus, don't you think? Maybe we could, oh, balance each other out."

"No."

It was Troy's turn to go still. Felicia knew then that she'd blown it. She'd dismissed the idea too quickly, betraying she had another, better reason for refusing a relationship with him.

"O-kay," he said, and looked at her.

Felicia expelled a breath and took a pace away, one hand to her forehead. Maybe she should tell him. If he understood, he might go away. With her hand still on her forehead, she spoke. "Look, my mother married my father when he got her pregnant with me. She was wildly in love with him. But my father, well—" Felicia lowered her hand and released a dry laugh. "My father had never wanted to be married. And so...he didn't bother to act like he *was* married. I don't think he lacked some kind of girlfriend the entire span of my parents' marriage. But my mother hung on...for too long."

Troy's dark eyes watched her, not with the mockery that was so familiar but with something else; close attention, processing, and finally, it appeared, comprehension.

"You don't want to be in love," he said.

Felicia let out a long breath. He *did* understand. And now she didn't have to say such a difficult thing out loud. She nodded.

Slowly, Troy straightened. "I must admit, it's flattering that you believe you *could* fall in love with me."

"'Could' being the operative word."

He chuckled. "Yeah. Anyway, I'm grateful for that much, since I'm pretty sure I'm already *in* love with you."

Her head whipped toward him.

His smile was rueful. "I was halfway there and then Dean dropped out of the running. It didn't take long to fall the rest of the way."

Felicia knew she was staring. "You," she demanded, "are in love with me?"

He shot her a deriding glance. "Don't look too impressed. My being in love doesn't mean as much as some other guy doing it. I must have been in love, oh, a dozen times—just this year."

She laughed, but was painfully certain it hadn't come out right, light and unconcerned. But she *should* be unconcerned, because he was correct. Him being in love wasn't nearly the serious matter it might be for another man.

Meanwhile Troy lifted a shoulder and leaned against the jamb again. "But now that you've explained, I can see where you're coming from. It wouldn't do for a serious woman like you to get involved with a man who thinks two months is akin to a lifetime commitment."

Their eyes met. Two months, Felicia thought. No, she shouldn't be concerned—or impressed or excited or any other stupid thing—if that's what Troy meant by being in love.

"You were right about me," Troy went on, sobering. "In every respect. What you said about how I don't want to do or be anything because I'm afraid I wouldn't measure up. You were *so* right. And— And it's safer not to *want* things." He looked away and sucked in his lips. "Much safer."

Felicia gazed at him as he stood there, so handsome with his hair falling over his forehead. Yes, he was sensual, but more. She'd never again be able to dismiss him as that nasty Troy Singleton. He wasn't a monster, but a human being, with a human being's load of dreams and desires—and wounds.

For the sake of that human being, she smiled and claimed, "Well, for what it's worth, I do think you could be more. And measure up."

Troy looked back at her and his eyes crinkled. "Ah, Felicia. You are never going to give up."

"Excuse me?"

He looked ceilingward. "You are *still* trying to get me to be your fundraiser."

"Well! I'm sure I—"

"Don't worry." Troy was back to his lighthearted self. "Now that I've seen the place and everything you do here I'll be sure not to ruin things by sticking my oar in the water."

"Oh, Troy." He was *impossible*.

"But thanks for showing me around." Laughing now, he pushed off the jamb and walked toward her. His hilarity sobered as he reached quickly, gently, to touch her cheek. "And thanks for explaining things to me. It helps...kind of."

He looked into her eyes and she felt punched. There was so much person, so much Troy in his eyes. Then he smiled again, jaunty. "Goodbye, Felicia."

"Goodbye, Troy." She told herself that whatever she'd just seen in his eyes meant nothing. This idea of being in love with her was a mistake or a joke. Or—or just some passing fancy. Two months, right? Whatever he felt, it couldn't be *love*.

But before she'd even started ironing it out he was gone, striding athletically out the door.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Well, that hadn't accomplished much. As Troy walked down the sidewalk of the seedy area of Boston, he decided that his little trip to Felicia's pet foundation had been the exact opposite of constructive.

It was bad enough Felicia had announced she could never return his feelings, but he had to go and get all worked up over the whole family shelter thing.

Scowling, Troy went down the stairs and into the humid heat of a subway station. He paid the fare, went through the stile and looked up to see a train pulling into the station. Instead of getting on the train, however, he crossed his arms and leaned against the old, tiled wall of the station. He watched broodingly as the train closed its doors and hummed electrically away.

He wasn't ready to go anywhere, he was too...depressed. Depressed beyond any depression he could remember experiencing. Because, hell, he didn't *get* depressed.

But that shelter had brought back memories, memories he'd prefer to have kept buried. He remembered when they'd come to the house of the friend with whom he'd been staying while his parents went off on their exotic vacation. They'd told him his parents had been killed. On impact, they'd said. Child Protective Services had been mentioned. Troy had been terrified.

Fortunately, someone had remembered he was cousins with Dean. Kirk had come. Yes, for his dead brother's son he'd actually bestirred himself. Papers had been shuffled and signed. For that, Troy would always be grateful to his uncle.

He had not gone to Child Protective Services.

But today, seeing that little kid with his cancer-ridden mother...Troy remembered how close he had come.

Down in the quiet subway station, he shook his head, trying to shake the dread-filled feeling away. But it wouldn't go, especially now that it was attached to the little talk he'd had with Felicia. Felicia, who thought he was like her roving, philandering father.

And so wanted nothing to do with him.

Troy rubbed his mouth and watched another train come into the station. He glared at the halting train and admitted he bore some resemblance to Felicia's father. He was a Singleton, after all. They were not the most constant or responsible of men—Dean being an exception. Troy had never taken on a responsibility in his life. He'd certainly never considered taking on the responsibility of being a husband. And 'husband' was obviously what Felicia was looking for. A constant, reliable, *worthwhile* husband.

Troy winced. He couldn't hack being a husband, let alone a worthwhile one. But on the other hand, he had a sinking feeling that his emotions toward Felicia were not nearly as temporary as, out of pride, he'd led her to believe. Hell, he'd probably been denying he was in love with her for a couple of years.

Too bad he couldn't have kept on denying it.

Troy stood there and watched the next train, too, hum its way out of the station. He wondered when he was going to be willing to get onto a train. He wondered how long he was going to go on feeling this terrible aching inside. He wished, oh how he wished, that he could just stop *wanting*.

~~~

"Wow, it's crowded in here, today," Kelly said to Dean, gazing around at the long tables at Durgin Park restaurant where Dean had taken her for one of their now-frequent lunch dates. Every seat was filled.

"Tourist season has started in earnest," Dean replied. As though the admission that it was already the middle of June meant nothing to him, he cut into his family-style steak with gusto, then looked up and smiled at her.

The date did mean something to Kelly, but his smile warmed her and she returned it.

Things were going really well, she had to admit. Over the past several weeks, the quality of her relationship with Dean had intensified. They spent time together; quality

time and not-so-quality time. They went out for romantic drives, but they also had dinner at home. There were times of great sexual intimacy, and there were whole evenings spent at the movies with Robby.

Yes, things were going very well, indeed. There was just one little sticking point, one tiny little thing that hadn't happened. And here it was, the middle of June.

Before Kelly could start to dwell on that one missing thing, their tête-à-tête was interrupted. Down the long table from them, two women rose from their seats. One of them, tall, elegant, and blond, perked up. "Dean," she said, and smiled.

Dean leaned back in his seat the better to see the woman. "Ah, Felicia." He answered her smile. "How are you?"

Felicia. Yes, Kelly remembered now. Felicia Thurgood, oh so proper. They'd met her way back when at the opera. At the time, Kelly had thought the woman had feelings for Dean, but now, watching the calm ease of her smile, Kelly changed her mind. This was simple friendship.

"I'm doing well." Felicia started toward them. She gestured toward her companion. "This is Andrea Shapiro. She runs the Boston Family Aid shelter. You know, the one I've spoken to you about. Andrea, this is Dean Singleton and his wife, Kelly." Felicia smiled in Kelly's direction. Kelly smiled back, suddenly liking the woman much better.

"Oh, yes." Dean stood and shook Andrea's hand. "Hear you're doing good work down there in South Boston. Expanding, aren't you?"

As Kelly watched, a strange expression crossed Felicia's face. "I, uh, well it looks like that might happen, after all. We got a check, a rather large check...from Joe Esterley."

"Joe?" Dean looked surprised. "He's the biggest skinflint there ever was."

"Yes." A line formed between Felicia's brows. "That's what I always thought, too."

Dean laughed. "Well, congratulations. You must have spun quite a tale to convince Joe to help you get your down payment."

"Ah, that's just it. *I* didn't say a word to Joe Esterley. This check just...came."

"Really?"

"*You* didn't happen to have a word with Joe, did you?" Felicia seemed keen for an answer.

Dean pursed his lips. "Wish I could take the credit, but I'm afraid I didn't."

Felicia frowned, clearly troubled. "Then, you don't suppose it was—?" She broke off with a sudden, nervous laugh. "No, no, I'm being silly. It couldn't have been. Anyway, it was nice seeing you, and you, too, Kelly."

All parties bade farewell but Kelly thought Felicia was looking troubled again as the two women walked off.

"Wonder what that was all about," Kelly said.

"Hm?" Dean glanced in the direction the women had taken as he sat back down. "Oh, I don't blame Felicia for being curious. Joe *is* a notorious miser."

"No, it was something more..." Kelly frowned as she wondered what had bothered Felicia so about that check.

Dean's smile across the table at her was fond. "Well, if that's your take on it, I imagine you're right." He tapped the back of her hand. "You seem to have a sixth sense about people."

Kelly looked over at him in surprise. He thought that? And here she was, wishing she *did* have a sixth sense—about him. Oh, how she wished she knew his true feelings.

Meanwhile, Dean wrapped his fingers around her hand and his eyes got dark and intense. Kelly could almost hear the words. Almost. *You had a sixth sense about me. You knew I needed you, that I love you.*

And she did know that, kind of, almost. Dean showed it in moments like these, and a hundred others, moments of caring and consideration. He showed it so often and so much that in a way she felt like a jerk for needing the actual words.

But, still, all the same...why didn't he say those words of love, if they were so true? Even Robby thought he should say them. Every morning after Dean went off to work, Robby would corner Kelly and ask, "Did he say it yet?" Yes, even nine-year-old Robby thought the words were crucial, indicating some level of commitment.

"I should let you finish your lunch." Smiling, Dean let go of her hand and his gaze lost its intensity.

Kelly felt a crash of disappointment. He hadn't said it. *Again*, he hadn't said those very important words. In all the wonder of how well things were going, it was the one little thing that wouldn't happen.

"Ahem, yes. This lobster is delicious." Kelly managed to smile as she picked up a claw and nibbled. Not for the first time, she considered starting the discussion herself, telling Dean that she loved him.

But somehow that wouldn't be the same as Dean coming out with the words first. It seemed important he make himself vulnerable. She wanted to know he could trust her.

And so through all these weeks she'd been waiting, hoping Dean would take the plunge. And now there were only two weeks left to her trial period. That was it. Two weeks!

Dean glanced at his watch. "I hate to say this, but—"

"I know." Kelly held up her free hand. "You have a meeting."

Dean wiped his mouth, leaned across the table as he stood, and kissed her. "I'll pay on my way out. Sure you don't want Jackson to drive you home?"

"I'm sure." *Two weeks*, Kelly thought.

Dean hesitated, then leaned across the table to kiss her again. "See you at home," he said gruffly.

Kelly met his eyes. "Yes," she said, gruff herself. "See you at home."

She watched him walk through the crowded restaurant, straight, tall; all masculine grace. A great warmth curled around her heart. She loved him so much. It was impossible to imagine he didn't love her back.

Or almost impossible, anyway.

~~~

Dean was still basking in the pleasant after-effects of his lunch with Kelly at Durgin Park when he waltzed through Mrs. Barnes' unoccupied office. Boy, did he love spending time with Kelly, any kind of time. Meanwhile, he pointedly refrained from glancing toward the wall on the left, where a calendar held prominent reign. Dean did not want to think about the date.

Whistling, he scooped his messages out of his executive assistant's holder. The name on one of the pink slips, however, stopped his whistle between his teeth.

Kirk had called.

It was a typical Kirk call, made at noon Boston time. Dean's father didn't actually want to speak to his son. The message on the slip was inscrutable.

"On the way," it said.

Frowning, Dean continued on to his office. He closed the door behind himself. *On the way?* Was his father planning to come—here? Dean's jaw tensed. Slowly, he continued around to the other side of his desk.

He reached for a piece of paper, something on which to compose a rude missive telling Kirk exactly where he should go. The hell Kirk was coming—now. For months Dean had been launching messages, trying to get Kirk to come and deal with his prodigal nine-year-old son. And Kirk thought he ought to show up *now*, when—when —

Dean stood behind his desk. His frown deepened. When—what? What had changed, such that he no longer needed, or even wanted, his father to do his duty by Robby?

Rubbing the message slip between his fingers, Dean sank into his desk chair. Oh, it was true he'd taken Robby under his wing a bit. He'd gotten the kid that tutor he needed. Under Kelly's approving eyes, Dean had taken Robby to the movies and shot some baskets with him out back. He'd even enjoyed himself in the process.

But had anything essentially *changed*? Dean tapped the edge of his desk with one finger. Resentment bubbled. For the first time in weeks, he was being forced to peer at reality. He'd been putting off reality ever since he'd stepped out of the swan boat with Kelly. Hell, he'd stopped even bothering to make excuses for his extended dip into fantasy. He'd simply...enjoyed.

Indeed. The main reason Dean had been getting along so well with Robby was because he'd been enjoying himself with Kelly so damn much. He milked every moment with her for all he could get out of it, and he could get a lot. The more he discovered, probed...invaded, the deeper he fell in. The woman was *nice*. She was so responsible she was still paying the medical bills from her mother's long illness. On the other hand, she could have a wicked sense of humor when inspired. Dean chuckled to think of the times he'd been on the end of it. Being with her made him...happy.

Releasing a long breath, Dean flattened his palms on the desk. He'd been happy and, admittedly, drifted further and further into fantasy. While taking walks with Kelly through the summer-thick woods, he'd imagine how the setting would look with her in the fall, when the leaves started to turn, or in the winter, under the first snowfall. While sitting in the dining room, with Kelly on one side of him and Robby on the other, Dean would imagine the scene a year hence, five years. Robby would get taller, maybe sport a pair of glasses. Kelly would lose her athletic edge, particularly if there'd been a pregnancy or two—

Dean hissed out a breath and rose from his seat. Kelly pregnant? He'd gone off the deep end. He was fantasizing living with Robby and Kelly like a real family. With babies!

And yet—And yet—Sighing, Dean paced toward the window. And yet, he had been thinking about such a life, maybe even planning for it. Dean might avoid looking at calendars, but he was perfectly aware of the date. Two weeks. There were only two weeks left in the trial period marriage. His time with Kelly was about to run out.

Stopping at the window, Dean gazed outside. With Kirk's message on the desk behind him, he could feel the real world crowding in, the one that wanted him to face reality, the one that said he had no significant relationship with Robby, the one that told him he had no claim whatsoever on Kelly. He felt the panic that always came as he brushed up against that world. It was a world that insisted this joy could not last. Kelly wouldn't love him forever. He had two weeks before all that came crashing in on him. That was all.



Dean crossed his arms over his chest. He glared out the window. Two weeks and everything was over, unless... Slowly, he smiled. He uncrossed his arms.

Unless...he chose not to face reality even then.

He breathed in and out. His panic eased. He didn't have to face reality. He could go on pretending. That was the plan he'd been considering, very privately, for some time now. He could go on pretending. The concept was actually quite logical. So what if feelings changed and the marriage broke down...eventually? That was eventually, and not inevitable. Some marriages worked. Theirs might. And if it did break down, eventually, they'd be no worse off than if they deliberately cut things short in two weeks.

The marriage didn't have to end in two weeks. He could ask Kelly to stay. He *would* ask Kelly to stay.

Dean rubbed the window frame. Would Kelly agree to this proposal? His incipient panic flared up again, but he quickly tamped it down. Kelly was experiencing much of the same joy that he was, Dean was certain. But unlike Dean, she didn't question the integrity of this emotion. She believed in it. She believed in the endurance of her feelings for Dean the same way she believed in love and home and family. Her faith would play right into Dean's hand.

He only had to phrase the thing right.

Dean spent another long moment gazing out the window, then turned and went back to his desk. Picking up the phone, he fired off a telegram to Kirk, telling him, "your presence no longer required."

~~~

From Durgin Park, Felicia and Andrea walked across the plaza to Government Center where they had a meeting with a city planning director about the proposed expansion of the family aid shelter.

A smile played about Andrea's lips. "You seem awfully curious about that check of Joe Esterley's."

Felicia blinked and felt the little dart that stabbed her every time she thought about Joe's check. "It's a mystery, that's all. I've never known Esterley to donate a sum to any charity."

Andrea lifted one of her dark eyebrows but she didn't pursue the matter further, for which Felicia was grateful. The minute she'd opened the envelope and seen that check from Joe Esterley, that large check, her stomach had gone into a free fall. Two thoughts had occurred simultaneously in her mind. One was that Joe Esterley was, indeed, a notorious pinchpenny—and the other was that he was a bosom buddy of Troy Singleton's.

Was it possible...*Troy* had engineered that big check?

Felicia swallowed as she opened the glass door at the base of Government Center and held it for Andrea. If Troy had done that... Well, *why*?

Felicia realized she was standing there, holding the heavy glass door, while Andrea was already in the lobby, waiting for her. She'd completely lost track of what was going on while pondering why Troy might have engineered that check.

Shaking her head at herself, Felicia walked through the door, rejoining Andrea. Troy might have had nothing at all to do with Joe's check. It was definitely safest for her sanity to assume he was uninvolved.

But as she and Andrea waited for the elevator, Felicia worried her lip and couldn't help wondering...if Troy *had* arranged that check. And *why*.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Dean had finally decided to declare himself. At least, that's what Kelly thought this special weekend away betokened. She hoped.

They were at a gorgeous, turn-of-the-century resort in the Berkshires. Their room was pseudo-rough-hewn, with furniture made of unfinished logs and a thick plank floor. Plush rugs covered the rustic floor, and velvet drapes were held back from the multi-paned windows with thick, braided cords.

It was terribly charming and very, very romantic.

Dean had sprung her with the invitation right after telling her he'd arranged for Robby to spend the weekend at a nearby outdoor camp. They could drive Robby up Friday afternoon, go on to the resort, and then pick Robby up for the drive home on Sunday afternoon. It was all so very well planned. So very Dean.

"Do you like the room?" Dean had finished with the porter and was walking toward Kelly.

"It's lovely." Kelly turned around with a smile she felt right down to her toes. This was exactly the kind of place Dean would choose to propose to a woman.

Dean's answering smile was crooked, delightfully nervous. "It is rather remote, but there's sailing, hiking, tennis—"

Kelly laughed.

Dean laughed, too. "Who am I kidding?" He took Kelly in his arms and gave her a slow, warm kiss. "I brought you here to get you alone, really alone."

Kelly's heart did a mad dance as she looked up at him. "As if I'm not deeply enough in your clutches as it is."

A strange look crossed Dean's face. "Not quite." He let her go and turned. "Did that—? Oh, yes, good. He's bringing the flowers."

"Excuse me?"

The porter had returned. He pushed a cart overflowing with vases of white roses. "Where did you want these, sir?"

"Ah, that's up to the lady." Dean gestured toward Kelly, whose mouth had fallen open. Flowers, dozens of them. Her gaze shot to Dean. He was smiling, but she could see him swallow. He wanted to please her.

Kelly raised her lowered jaw and smiled back. "Thank you, Dean. They're beautiful."

A tiny lowering of his shoulders indicated his relief. Kelly took his arm and gave him a kiss. Oh, the man was going all out. And that was okay with her. It was just fine.

That evening, Dean arranged a candlelit dinner on the patio overlooking the lake. Together, they watched the moon glinting off the water. There were soft smiles. They held hands. Kelly tried not to breathe too fast but adrenaline was pouring through her. She kept expecting the big moment.

It didn't happen. No, it seemed Dean wasn't through with the build-up. They finished dinner, enjoyed rich coffee, then Dean led her up to their room. Candles glowed everywhere. They gleamed off the soft skin of the roses and shed a flickering light over the bed.

"Oh, Dean," Kelly breathed.

He came up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. "I'm glad you like it."

They undressed slowly that night, taking their time, prolonging the pleasure. When Dean finally entered her it felt fluid, as if they were two bodies of water wrapping around and then blending into each other.

The next day they took a long walk, holding hands and sharing warm smiles. They rented a sailboat, enjoying two blissful hours of sun and lazy togetherness. For exercise, they played a match of tennis. Afterward, panting and laughing, they went up to their room.

"Wear something nice," Dean warned Kelly as she was about to walk into the full-size shower.

Kelly mutely nodded. *Tonight*, she thought. *He's going to do it tonight*. Her heart started racing.

The weather was chillier than the night before so they ate indoors. It was another candlelit table on a balcony overlooking their outdoor patio of the night before. This time they had a private table with a private waiter who appeared mysteriously only when needed.

Soup was brought, a delicate, nearly transparent bisque, followed by the crispest of green salads in chilled glass bowls. Kelly couldn't eat a thing. Dean, she noticed, didn't seem to have much of an appetite, either.

The waiter crystallized, somehow understanding they were not going to finish their meals. He whisked the plates away.

Once he was gone, Dean cleared his throat.

Okay, Kelly thought. *This is it. Finally*. She made herself breathe.

"Kelly—" Dean began.

"Yes, Dean?" Breathless. She sounded idiotically breathless.

Dean smiled. Kelly hoped to God he wasn't finding her comical. Lord knew, she felt comical.

"Kelly," Dean said again. He reached across the table. Kelly was clutching her wine glass. Somehow she managed to loosen her fingers enough for Dean to take her hand.

His smile faded as he stared at their joined hands. "Kelly, I...don't think I've told you, not in so many words, how very, very much I've been enjoying the time we've spent together."

"I've enjoyed it, too." Kelly's voice came out high, squeezed around a peculiar obstruction in her throat.

Dean nodded. "And now, well...I guess..." He lifted his eyes and gazed straight at her. Through her nerves, Kelly did her best to look encouraging.

Dean drew in a deep breath. "Well, I guess..." Suddenly his gaze flicked to the side. He cleared his throat. "I guess I'd like to plan ahead a little bit."

Kelly blinked and stared at him. He wanted to plan ahead...*a little bit*? She blinked some more, trying to reconcile this with the words she'd been expecting. He only wanted to plan ahead *a little bit*?

But perhaps this was a prelude? If Dean were as nervous as she was, he might need to build up to the real thing. Trying to help, she breathed, "Um, okay. Let's...plan."

Dean's gaze swept to hit her then veered off again. "As far as, well—you going back to Las Vegas, well, perhaps you don't need to."

Kelly's heart picked up speed again. This was more like it. "I—Right. Why do I need to?" she whispered.

Dean's eyes came back to hers. His hand tightened around her own. "Kelly. If you—? Well. I'll just lay it out for you. I want to keep things going."

Kelly stared into his eyes. She held her breath. But he didn't go on. He just looked at her, intense and expectant. He didn't say, 'I love you.' He didn't say, 'Will you marry me, for real?' No, he said he wanted to 'keep things going.'

Kelly's heart beat very fast. This certainly wasn't a proposal. Yet as she sat there looking into his dark, waiting eyes, she heard herself stammer, "Um, uh...yes. I'd like to keep things going, too."

Dean's paralyzed gaze relaxed. Meanwhile Kelly wondered if she'd said that? Had she really said that she wanted to *keep things going*, too? How vague could anyone get?

But Dean's expression was one of incredible relief. "Good, then." He reached over the table to capture her other hand as well. "It's settled."

It was settled? What was settled? But Kelly didn't have the heart—or perhaps the guts—to query further. Dean looked so happy, and at least something had been said. She didn't have to leave at the end of the trial period. The relationship would continue and, for right now, that was enough. Their love would certainly grow. Who knew? Perhaps one day, even soon, Dean would come out with the words she really wanted to hear.

Oh, Kelly didn't know. Was she being pathetic? Or patient.

Then Dean brought her fingers to his lips. His lashes lowered as he kissed her knuckles. "You won't be sorry," he whispered.

Kelly looked down at his lowered head. She knew the emotional desert he came from. She knew how far he'd traveled to get to where they sat now. A well of love sprang up in her heart. The gush of love was big enough and strong enough to quell her momentary doubts. "Oh, no," she agreed. "I won't be sorry. Ever."

~~~

There, he'd done it. He'd asked her to stay. She'd said yes. Dean lay beside Kelly in the big four-poster bed of their hotel room and listened to her soft, slow breaths. She was asleep, which she very well ought to be after the sexual exercise he'd given her. Oh yes, everything had gone exactly according to plan.

So why did Dean feel as if something had been left very undone?

He frowned at the wood beams in the ceiling. Yes, he felt antsy, anxious, as if nothing had been settled at all.

Well, maybe nothing had been. Kelly had said she was going to stay, but she hadn't said for how long. Dean hadn't asked. No, he'd stopped well short of demanding anything substantial.

Dean's frown deepened. But, then, he hadn't intended to demand—or expect—anything from Kelly. That had been his whole plan. Not to expect.

But now he wondered...maybe his plans hadn't matched his desires. Maybe he wanted to demand something from her.

More.

A flicker of fear flashed through him, something old, almost forgotten. He wasn't supposed to want more. That was dangerous, unrealistic, reckless.

He didn't want anything more from Kelly, Dean assured himself, curbing an urge to jump out of the bed and pace. He didn't *need* more. All he needed was Kelly's commitment to making an effort. And that was exactly what he'd gotten. A body couldn't ask for more than that.

Dean closed his eyes. He told himself that everything was fine. Quite all right. Deliberately, he planned the drive home the next day. Once they'd picked up Robby they could stop for lunch at an old farmhouse restaurant he knew. Dean imagined Kelly's face when she saw the vegetarian sandwiches they could put together. She loved vegetarian sandwiches.

It would be a good time.

Dean's breathing calmed. His heart rate slowed. Everything was all right. But it was a long while before he managed to fall asleep.

~~~

"Too much air-conditioning?" Dean asked. He glanced from the road to Kelly as he steered the 4 x 4.

"Hm? No. I'm fine." Kelly gave him a bright smile. They'd been walking on eggshells around each other ever since they'd gotten out of bed at the fancy resort that morning. She wasn't exactly sure why. Maybe it was because something had been said the night before, but not enough.

Yes, yes, it had been enough for her, enough for right then, but not enough for either of them to feel completely secure.

First thing in the morning they'd packed, had a quick cup of coffee, and then driven straight over to the outdoor camp to pick up Robby. Dean's half-brother had acted as if he'd been away for a month instead of two nights. Kelly had felt her nerves calm in the ebullient joy with which Robby had greeted them.

Dean, too, had seemed to loosen up under the onslaught.

He does love the kid, Kelly had thought, watching Dean hook an arm around Robby's neck. He was capable of the emotion. She'd felt the scared places inside of her soften. Dean knew how to give love. He didn't quite know how to receive it, that was all. That's why he'd stepped back from a real proposal, one including an avowal of love. Despite his apparent confidence, he was still wary of Kelly's response.

In the car now watching the summer countryside roll by, Kelly wondered once again if she ought not take the initiative. Maybe she should tell Dean that she loved him.

Or would that be a disservice? Perhaps it was better to let Dean believe in himself enough to take the plunge. Waiting for Dean might take time, it involved some risk, but it could turn out better in the long run.

Kelly was still pondering the matter an hour later when Dean turned the car through the big iron gates of the estate. As he drove down the long, winding road toward the house he made a small, strange sound.

Kelly glanced over. "What?"

Dean only pressed his lips together and shook his head. Meanwhile in the back seat Robby stirred. "Hey," he muttered. Then he shot forward against his seat belt. "Hey!" he exclaimed, full volume. "Dad! It's *Dad!*"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Kelly craned her head to see the house. Coming out of the huge double doors was a tall, trim man with a crown of thick white hair. He stayed on the top step, feet apart, hands on his hips—a picture of lord of the manor.

Handsome. Oh, from a hundred yards away Kelly could see he was the very devil of a handsome thing.

Dean said nothing as he pulled up in the circular drive. Robby was bouncing up and down in his seat. It was clear that despite Kirk's prolonged absences—or perhaps because of them—Robby adored his father. As soon as Dean stopped the car, Robby was out of it, running. "Dad! Dad!"

Kirk laughed and grabbed Robby up in his arms. He whirled around with the boy. Dean, meanwhile, turned off the motor.

Kelly swiveled to look at Dean. He was staring past her at the man still twirling the boy by the front door. He didn't say a word as he popped open his car door.

Um, okay, Kelly thought. She'd guessed the relationship between Dean and his father was troubled. It seemed she was about to see exactly how bad it was, and from a front row seat.

Dean came around to open her door. No matter how upset he was, he didn't forget his manners. Meanwhile Kelly saw Kirk put Robby down.

"More later," the father promised his son. Then his eyes turned to the car. An incredible smile took over his face as Kelly stepped out. She was wearing jeans and an old T-shirt, but Kirk's gaze made her feel like she was wearing Versace. Charm. Oh, the man had charm by the busload.

"Well, hello," Kirk said.

"This is Kelly," Dean announced.

"Your wife." Kirk kept his blue eyes on Kelly. He took her hand and lifted it. "You have no idea how pleased I am to meet you."

Kelly inclined her head. She was speechless. Everything she knew about this man was negative, yet his charm was irresistible. She could actually feel herself warming toward him.

Kirk released Kelly's hand and turned to give Dean a hearty slap on the shoulder. "Couldn't have done better myself."

Dean pointedly ignored this remark, instead asking dryly, "Dropped by in time for dinner, did you, Kirk?"

"Uh huh." In the face of Dean's obvious displeasure, Kirk stuck to his smile. "But I didn't want to be an imposition so I brought my dinner with me, and yours, too. You hungry, son?" This last was directed to Robby, who'd practically melted against Kirk's side.

Robby jumped up straight. "You brought dinner?"

"Oh, just a little take-out."

Robby squealed in delight. Dean said nothing.

"Go on. Go on in," Kirk directed Robby, chuckling.

Robby flicked the briefest of glances Dean's way, then ran to the front door, struggled it open, and slipped inside.

Kirk offered Kelly his arm. "Shall we?" he asked.

Kelly glanced toward Dean. Were they supposed to go along with this, whatever it was? Dean merely gave a vague nod.

Well, all right, Kelly thought, taking Kirk's arm. *If this is the way you want it*. But she doubted very much this was the way Dean wanted anything at all.

~~~

Dean knew he was more annoyed than he ought to be. So what if Kirk decided to show up with take-out? So what if 'take-out' turned out to be a fourteen-course French dinner complete with French waiters and a French chef the size of a Volkswagen, all direct from Paris? So what? It was, officially, Kirk's house. He could do what he wanted.

But it was a fact that as Dean sat there watching Kirk play the benevolent host, he felt a growing irritation. Where did Kirk get off acting convivial, as if he fit in? Where did he get off acting like *he* was in charge?

But Kirk had no trouble playacting. He divided his attention between Robby and Kelly, like some noble king of the hill. He acted like a damned patriarch. And nobody disabused him.

On the contrary, poor Robby was in seventh heaven. It was going to take weeks to put him back together after this—weeks! Not that Kirk cared about that part of things, the real part. Kirk probably didn't even notice that Troy had made himself scarce. Troy avoided Kirk whenever he could, torn between an old gratitude for Kirk taking him in after his parents had been killed, and a more enduring wariness regarding Kirk's acid tongue.

No, Kirk didn't notice his nephew's absence, nor did he notice that the gourmet food was wasted on Robby. On Kelly, too, for that matter. Dean was amused to see her secretly slip her portion of *escargot* back onto the silver serving tray. Somehow she managed to avoid getting the frog's legs put on her plate to begin with.

Yes, despite her show of good manners, Kelly wasn't taken in by Dean's father, and for that Dean was grateful. He only wished she'd stop sending sympathetic glances his way. He didn't need sympathy. Yes, he was annoyed, but he'd live. He wasn't a child any more, like Robby, to get taken in by the show and later disappointed. On the other hand, he'd sure like to know why the old man had shown up after all. Dean's telegram had been painfully explicit. He wasn't wanted.

Kirk had his reasons, Dean supposed, reasons that had nothing to do with taking care of his nine-year-old son.

Dean was confident he'd be hearing all about it soon enough.

"And so!" Kirk suddenly boomed. He placed his palms on either side of his plate and beamed at Kelly. "Just how did you meet my son?"

Kelly went still. So did Dean. What did Kirk care?

"Uh." Kelly sent Dean another glance, this one begging for assistance. Assistance? Hell, Dean couldn't even *remember* how they'd first met.

"Yes?" Kirk prompted.

Slowly, Kelly turned back to Kirk. She scratched the side of her mouth. "We, uh, met outside my place of business."

"Really?" Kirk was still beaming. "And what sort of business are you in, my dear?"

"Oh." Kelly waved a hand. "I'm a dancer."

Kirk's smile dropped. For the first time since they'd arrived back home, he came to a dead halt. "A dancer?"

Dean felt his teeth grind. His father's surprise was way overdone.

Indeed, eyes wide, Kirk now turned to Dean. "We're not talking about Las Vegas, are we?" His disbelief was enormous. Apparently Kirk knew the whole story.

"Oh, sure we are." Kelly spoke up cheerily. "On the Strip."

Kirk rounded on her. "And I suppose you met outside the *stage door*?"

*Why not?* It was on the tip of Dean's tongue to say it, to demand Kirk explain why *Dean* wasn't allowed to meet women outside stage doors. But Kelly jumped in first.

"Actually, it was by a slot machine," she explained.

"A slot machine!" Kirk gasped. "You can't tell me my son was gambling!"

"Oh, no. I mean, it was just a quarter machine," Kelly quickly clarified.

Kirk put a hand over his heart. Dean felt more annoyed than ever, and that was before Kirk's eyes narrowed on Kelly, before he tried to look, almost, serious. "Tell me, if it's not too much to ask—just how well did you two know each other before you tied the knot?"

Dean's eyes widened. Now that was the last straw, Kirk playing holier-than-thou. "We knew each other well enough," he claimed, firm. But he caught Kelly's eye. For an instant the truth hit him like a two-by-four. They'd only known each other for two days. Everything Kirk was implying was, well...true. But fine. That—that was still irrelevant. Dean waved an arm, determined to regain control of the conversation. "Why don't you tell us what brought *you* home, Dad?"

There was silence around the table then. Even the waiters, who probably didn't understand a word of English, shut up. Dean met Kirk's eyes and smiled. He could easily imagine Kirk's true situation. He'd screwed up his trust fund, his latest wife was suing him, or he was running from an irate mistress. It was no surprise when Kirk backed down.

"We'll discuss that later," he said, sounding lofty.

Dean smirked to himself. Oh, he'd just bet they would.

~~~

With dinner done, Kelly felt dazed. Something was happening between Dean and his father but she couldn't tell exactly what. Once the meal was over, Robby glommed onto Kirk and dragged him out of the room, chattering something about a really great video game. The French waiters rushed the table like a pack of piranha, stripping linens and piling china.

In the midst of all this, Dean remained in his seat, tapping his thumb rhythmically on the table top. "I'm sorry about that," he finally said.

"Sorry?" Kelly asked. "What do you have to be sorry about?"

"The hypnosis, how we met—that was all my responsibility. You didn't have anything to do with it."

Kelly was surprised. Where was this line of thought coming from? And besides—"What do you mean? I fell in—I mean, I decided to go out with you, to marry you. Of course I had something to do with it."

Dean turned to look at her directly. "You had no idea what you were getting into."

"Well..." Kelly couldn't argue with that. The man she'd married hadn't told her anything about his real life. But then, he hadn't had much time to tell her anything. She'd just figured they fit.

And as it turned out, they did.

Dean rose from his seat with a sigh. "Don't worry. I'll do everything in my power to get Kirk out of here by tomorrow."

"Well, I—" Suddenly they were talking about Kirk again.

"He only wants something—money, help with his lawyers, a place to hide. It should be easy enough to gratify him." Dean stretched as though he were perfectly at ease and smiled down at Kelly. "He'll probably come by the study to discuss it with me as soon as he can shake Robby."

"Oh." Frowning, Kelly rose from her seat, too. "Then I guess...I'll see you later?"

"Of course." But Dean's casual expression faded. "Don't worry. I won't let Kirk become an issue in our lives."

Their eyes met. In that moment Kelly saw that, in fact, Kirk was going to be a big issue in their lives. "O-kay," she said slowly.

Abruptly, Dean smiled again. "Your bedroom tonight?"

Her bedroom? Kelly halted. They were keeping separate bedrooms? Even after their agreement to 'keep things going'?

They were going to have to talk about this. Just like they were going to have to talk about Kirk and Dean's problems with him. And maybe they had to talk about the hypnosis, for good measure.

Somehow, Kelly was sure, all these things were connected.

But they needed time and privacy. So in the dining room, surrounded by French waiters, Kelly just smiled. "Sure," she replied. "My bedroom." She leaned forward and kissed him. They *were* going to talk. She was not going to let this fester. Heck, this might even be a chance to break through Dean's remaining defenses. "See you," she murmured, and smiled with extra warmth as she turned and left the room.

~~~

Dean knew it would take Kirk a while to divest himself of Robby. He also knew Kirk would take his own sweet time before dragging whatever sorry problem he had to his older son. So Dean sat behind the desk in his study and attempted to busy himself with some neglected paperwork.

But he couldn't concentrate. The more he thought about it, the more furious he became. For weeks Kirk had ignored Robby and his school situation. Now he rode in and thought he could play the white knight.

And what had that been about, interrogating Kelly? Questioning Dean's judgment. As if any of it, top to bottom, were Kirk's business!

Dean ground his teeth and told himself not to get worked up. He didn't want to get into a big argument with Kirk. He only wanted him out of there, him and his...insinuations. He would give Kirk whatever he wanted and then bid him good-bye.

But Dean had to wait an hour-and-a-half before Kirk sauntered into his study. He walked in chuckling. "That Robby," he told Dean. "Busted my butt on his video game."

"That's no surprise." Dean looked up from his papers. "He's had plenty of time to practice."

Kirk fumbled his grin. He started to look confused.

Immediately, Dean regretted his words. Bringing up Kirk's neglect of Robby would start a rancorous discussion. All he wanted was to get rid of Kirk. So Dean set aside the budget analysis he'd been working on and managed a smile. "Why don't you have a seat?"

"Hmm." Kirk kept looking at Dean, then seemed to decide everything was copasetic, after all. "Don't mind if I do." Chuckling again, he took the chair opposite Dean's desk. With only a brief hesitation, he hooked an ankle over a knee and leaned back, comfortable. "Hey, you've made a few changes in here, haven't you?"

"No." Dean's answer was automatic, an attempt to get the conversation back on track, but then he blinked and remembered the television Kelly had set up so she could spend time with Dean while he worked, and the cheap throw pillows she'd distributed around the room. "Well, perhaps a few changes."

Kirk nodded sagely. "That's how it starts."

Dean blinked some more but stopped himself from asking what Kirk meant. He wanted to keep to the matter at hand. "I must say, I'm more than a little surprised to see you."

Kirk contrived to look noble. "I came as soon as I could."

Dean swallowed a snort. It had been almost two months since he'd first advised Kirk of Robby's situation. It had been almost a week since Kirk, himself, had claimed he was coming. "It doesn't matter," he told his father. "I've decided what to do about Robby. Didn't you get my telegram?"

Kirk gave Dean a strange look. "I got it."

"But you came anyway." Dean tapped a thumb on his desk. "What do you need this time?"

Kirk continued giving Dean the strange look. "Nothing."

Dean's thumb stopped tapping. "I see. You don't need anything. In fact, you're actually here to deal with Robby."

"Well, in a way."

"In a way?" Dean raised his eyebrows. "It's a little late, don't you think?"

"I sincerely hope not," Kirk claimed.

Dean rolled his eyes. No, Kirk would hope it wasn't too late—to ask to raid Robby's trust fund or some such irresponsible act. "Why don't you tell me what you want?"

"I told you." Kirk's brows drew down. "Robby."

Dean stopped and frowned at Kirk. "You're serious."

"Dead so." Kirk dropped his dangling foot to the ground. "I left Marisa on the boat off of Greece. Robby and I can be on the first plane out of Logan tomorrow and meet up with her in Crete."

Drag Robby onto the first plane out of Logan—? And Dean could only guess who 'Marisa' was. The whole thing was ridiculous, another one of Kirk's half-baked plans. "You want to take Robby to Greece?" Dean hoped the mere enunciation of the idea would make his point.

"It wasn't my first choice," Kirk told Dean. "But I'm determined to do what I can."

Dean took a deep breath and folded his hands on his desk. He felt anger winding up like a spring inside of him, but he was determined to suppress it. He couldn't afford to lose control when Robby's welfare was on the line. Quietly, he asked, "And how, pray, does flying Robby off to Greece and your mistress help anybody, Kirk?"

Dean's father was giving him the strange look again. "Well, it'll take Robby off your hands, won't it?"

"Ye-us?"

"Give you one less problem to deal with?"

"A-und?"

"A-und you have enough of a problem dealing with your wife," Kirk claimed.

Dean went dead still.

Kirk leaned forward in his chair. "You're in trouble here, son. As soon as I heard about it, I hightailed it off the yacht and got myself a ticket home."

The wound-up anger inside Dean nearly sprang free. But he kept his voice soft. "What are you talking about?"

Kirk laughed. "I'm talking about you married. Tell me that isn't a hoot!"

Dean evened his breathing with an effort. It was not uncommon for his father to make fun of him. It didn't need to affect him more today than on any other occasion. "I'm

afraid you've made a long trip for nothing." Dean spoke very, very softly. "You see, I have absolutely no need of your help."

Kirk raised his eyebrows. "Don't you, though?"

"No."

The two men looked at each other. Dean waited for Kirk to back down, for his cowardly, ineffective father to break. Instead, one side of Kirk's mouth quirked. "Coulda fooled me."

Dean said nothing. He knew what Kirk was doing. His father often wanted to get his goat. He couldn't stand the fact Dean had grown out of him—despite Dean having grown out of him thirty-odd years before. Dean knew he shouldn't feel angry, and he *wouldn't* have felt angry if the little worm of panic, the one he'd been fighting off for weeks now, hadn't used this opportunity to crawl its way to the surface.

Kirk scratched the side of his mouth. "She's...quite an eyeful."

Dean forced his voice to calm. "And why shouldn't she be?"

Kirk shrugged. "No reason. Just, uh, something that might have hurried you down the aisle."

Dean clenched his jaw. "I was in no more of a hurry than you have been in, on occasion."

Kirk flashed a grin. "See, that's what I'm talking about. Like father, like son."

Dean had to make himself breathe. *No, I wouldn't say that. I wouldn't say that at all.* He wanted to declare it. But his mouth wouldn't open to say the words.

Kirk laughed. "Who'da guessed?"

Dean glared at him, but his heart was pounding madly. Indeed, who would have guessed? Dean hadn't—until that moment. No wonder he'd been so unreasonably disturbed that his father had come home. The man was like a—a symbol. A living announcement of Dean's folly. Oh, how very like his father he had acted—and was still acting!

Kirk clasped his hands over one knee. "Can't say I blame you. The girl's something else. Hard to think straight around a female like that."

Dean was starting to feel sick. "I can think clearly enough." But it wasn't true. He hadn't been thinking clearly at all.

Kirk seemed to know it, too. He laughed. "Who'd have thought *you* could be impulsive?"

He hadn't been impulsive. Dean wanted to say that. But impulsive precisely described his marriage to Kelly. Hell, he'd been *hypnotized*. How much more impulsive could a man get? And since then...well, since then there'd been the fantasy.

Kirk gave him a patronizing look. Meanwhile Dean tried to remain logical. So, he'd acted impulsive. It had worked out. Kelly had even said she was staying.

But the panic was rising, climbing up his gorge. So what if Kelly *said* she was staying. What did that signify?

Kirk hooked his elbows over the back of his chair. "I tell you it was worth the trip to see this: you actually acting human."

Dean glared at him. "I have always been human. I've just never wanted to—"

Kirk raised his eyebrows when Dean stopped. "You've just never wanted to...what? Make a mistake? Admit you had needs?"

Dean stood up from his chair. The fear was like an animal inside him, clawing through his gut, fighting up his throat. He hadn't made a mistake. Nor did he have needs.

He *wanted* Kelly, that was all. He was independent. He was in control. He didn't count on fantasies.

*I'm not like you.* Dean wanted to say that. He wanted to shout it at Kirk. But he didn't.

Kirk stood up, too. He'd stopped smiling. "All right, fine. You don't need me. You never have. But I'm here, all the same. And I've already told Robby about the trip and he's thrilled, so I'm taking him."

*No you're not.* Dean wanted to say that. He wanted to keep Robby with him, keep him on track toward a stable routine come fall. He wanted to claim that *his* life was stable, that it was all settled and not like Kirk's life at all.

Dean wanted to say that, but he didn't.

Scowling now, Kirk threw up his hands. "I'm taking Robby. So you've got your wife to yourself, whether you wanted her that way or not."

Dean was still standing behind his desk when Kirk left the room. The fear was like a chain of mail, wrapped around him. He didn't need his wife to himself. Their relationship wasn't that temporary. He'd wanted to say that.

But he hadn't.

He couldn't.

### CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Dean took so long with his father that Kelly fell asleep. Propped on a half-dozen pillows and clutching a paperback, she slept until the switching off of the lamp on her night table woke her.

"Mpf." She struggled upright, disoriented. Where was her pink lampshade nightlight? Where was the smell of cabbage that always seemed to come from Mrs. Rosen's place downstairs?

"Kelly," a deep voice said, and she remembered she wasn't in her apartment in Las Vegas. She was in Dean's luxurious, ugly house. His hand landed on her hip.

"Dean." Kelly tried to remember why he was coming in late, why he hadn't fallen asleep by her side. Oh, that was right. His father— She tried to wake more fully. They had to talk.

But then Dean's tongue licked the rim of her ear. It was a familiar gesture, a prelude. Muzzy as Kelly's brain was, her body got the message immediately. She plunged into a state of need. "Dean..."

He understood her unspoken desire. He pulled her close. She could feel the rough hair of his chest through the thin material of her negligee. She could smell his own special scent. Sparkles of sensation quivered over her skin.

"Never mind," Kelly gasped. Whatever they were supposed to talk about, it could wait. She wiggled against him.

Dean growled. In a sudden, almost violent burst of motion, he lowered Kelly to her back.

In the dark, their eyes met. Kelly could see in Dean's a strange and heavy need. She almost stopped everything. He looked to be in pain. Then Dean nudged her thighs apart. The expression on his face turned intent, determined, utterly masculine. Kelly felt her own need rise, stopping her questions. She helped him find his place. In one smooth motion, he plunged in.

"Oh, Dean," Kelly sobbed.

"Very— Yes."

It had become familiar, this ecstasy at the joining of their bodies, but it was still a spinning that went up to her head. Dean grunted and began to pump. Kelly's eyes widened. "That's so...good," she rasped out.

"Yes," Dean agreed on a hiss. He grabbed Kelly's hips and continued the mating rhythm; hot, heavy, desperate.

Indeed, it was rough and hard, not the way they'd been these past few weeks. It was...raw emotion. "Keep...going," Kelly begged. She curled her fingers over his shoulders and squeezed. Above her she felt the movement of his muscles, the damp of his exertion. Her nerves began to tighten, every fiber reaching. She began to gasp. This was going to be amazing.

And it was. Her whole body went off like a firecracker. At the same moment Dean arched and went taut against her.

"Kelly," he groaned.

She felt her eyes begin to tear. She wasn't even sure why. Their coupling had been amazing, fantastic. Still, it made her weepy. Something wasn't right. "Dean," she murmured, and relaxed her fingers to stroke her hands down his chest.

"Shh," he said, and pulled her against his body.

"But I don't—"

"Shh," he said again, low. "Just... Let's be quiet."

Let's be quiet? She wanted to know what was wrong. But Dean clearly didn't want to tell her. He only held her close, and at length the warmth of his body and the exhaustion of her own got the better of her. She fell fast asleep.

~~~

The next morning Kelly woke up alone in her big bed. She squinted at the empty place beside her, then looked around the room. No sound came from the bathroom. Dean wasn't even in her suite.

With a groan she sat up. She couldn't believe it. She'd wanted to talk to Dean last night. She'd been determined to make him open up. He needed to talk about his father and whatever was bothering him.

Instead she'd let the man have his fine way with her and now he was gone.

Kelly rubbed her forehead and wondered if Dean had planned it that way. Had he wanted to avoid the issue?

She got dressed and went downstairs, upset she even had to consider Dean might be back to using sex in order to avoid a meaningful conversation.

At the bottom of the stairs, she saw a bunch of suitcases. Kirk was standing next to them in the front entry, talking to Jackson.

Kelly bit the inside of her cheek. It seemed Dean was following through on at least one determined course. He was getting rid of Kirk.

Warily, she approached the pair talking in the entry. Would Kirk blame her for getting the boot? And if so, would he be justified? She really should have gotten Dean to talk last night. If she had, he might have tried dealing with his father, instead of getting rid of him. That would have been healthier.

Kelly was wondering what she could say to Dean's father when there was something in the nature of a small explosion behind her.

"Kelly! Kelly!"

She turned to find Robby bounding down the stairs.

"Didja hear? Didja hear?" he shouted.

Kelly couldn't help smiling as Robby ran up to her, grinning from ear to ear. He grabbed hold of her hands. "Didja hear the news?" he asked, and squeezed. "I'm going to Greece!"

"G-Greece?" Kelly's smile dropped and she blinked several times rapidly.

"Yup, Greece," Robby repeated. "My Dad is taking me, on his *yacht*."

"Oh. I—" Kelly was dumbfounded. *Kirk* was taking Robby? "I— What? How?" she asked.

"On a plane." Robby took her question literally. "It's going to take all day, and part of tonight. Then we have to take a bus and then a boat."

"Ah." This was all moving too fast for Kelly. Kirk was taking Robby to Greece? No. Robby was supposed to be getting a dose of much-needed stability. Dean had agreed.

Or had he?

Kelly frowned. "Uh... Does Dean know about this trip of yours?"

"Dean knows." It was Kirk's voice. He came up to throw an arm around the still-glowing Robby. "Not to worry, he's given his hearty approval."

"He has?" Kelly couldn't believe it. At the same time she felt a blow to her mid-section. At least a part of her *could* believe it.

Kirk smiled his charming smile. "Dean knows what's good for him. And Robby, as you can see, is delighted."

Yes, Kelly could see that. Robby was practically walking on air. But she wouldn't accept Dean had willingly agreed to this. He'd committed himself to Robby.

Hadn't he?

"Wait here," she told Kirk.

He raised his brows. "Jackson's got to leave with us in fifteen minutes."

"This won't take long." Kelly gave him a sickly little smile and backed away. No, it shouldn't take long because the whole thing was impossible. Dean wouldn't give up his responsibilities. Besides, he'd come to admit he loved Robby.

Hadn't he?

Kelly was panting by the time she got to the morning room. Dean was there, leaning against a windowsill. His expression as he looked out at the view was as cold and remote as Alaska.

Kelly's heart sank. She tried valiantly not to believe any of what Kirk had told her—but Dean looked just like the person he'd been when she'd first come to the house; a castle unto himself.

"I— What's going on?" she asked, still panting.

Dean turned his head. "Excuse me?"

Kelly gestured in the direction of the front door. "You're letting him take Robby?"

Dean shrugged. "Kirk is Robby's father."

"Huh! Technically."

Dean raised his brows. "Technically is enough."

Kelly crossed her arms over her chest. She evened her breathing. "Is this what's bothering you? Kirk demanding Robby? 'Cause you don't have to put up with it if you don't want to."

Dean gave her a strange look. "You think Kirk taking Robby to Greece bothers me?"

"Well, yeah." Kelly swallowed. How could he act so cool? "I think it bothers you, because in every real sense of the word, Robby is *your* son."

Dean hesitated. Then he laughed.

Kelly felt her face heat. He was being difficult, and they didn't have a lot of time. "You don't have to put up with this. If you set your foot down, Kirk will leave him here."

Dean pushed off the window frame. "Kirk isn't doing this to piss me off."

"Oh, come on."

"No, really. He's trying to help."

"To help?"

Dean stepped toward the table. "He wants to give us some time alone, to enjoy our marriage..."

Dean's voice trailed off and Kelly's brows knit as she tried to follow this. To enjoy their marriage?

Dean smiled. "While it lasts."

Kelly's lower jaw dropped. It took her a while to raise it up again. When she did, she had plenty to say. "Why, of all the arrogant, interfering, cynical—"

Dean leaned his palms on the tabletop. "Is he?"

Kelly's jaw dropped again. She blinked. "What?"

Dean straightened. "Is Kirk being cynical? Or is he being...realistic?"

"What?"

"Come on." Dean made a wiping motion in the air. "How long can our marriage really last?"

For a long moment Kelly could only stare at him. He couldn't be saying this, he couldn't be thinking it. Like he didn't believe in them. Hadn't he asked her two nights ago to stay and make the marriage real?

Or had he asked something a little bit different?

Kelly felt a scared sinking in her stomach. Dean was gazing at her in his old, sardonic way. She remembered: he hadn't asked her to stay. He'd said he wanted to *keep things going*. Open-ended, uncommitted.

Fool, a voice inside her shrieked. *You did it again, big-time, let a man use you.*

Kelly shook the voice aside. She knew Dean loved her. Despite the fact he'd never said the words aloud, she knew it from every gesture and deed. What was happening here was an outbreak of insecurity. It had started with the marriage proposal, or lack thereof, and gotten worse with the arrival of his father. Dean was afraid of being vulnerable to her. That's why he hadn't asked her to stay married. It was why he was standing here, brows raised, as if he really expected an answer to his question: how long will it last?

Kelly drew in a deep breath. She should have realized. Dean wasn't as confident as he sometimes appeared. He was still very insecure in matters of emotion. His father, with his insinuations and mockery, had only made things worse. "I think," she said slowly, "I haven't been exactly fair to you."

Dean went absolutely still.

Kelly took another deep breath. She could see now that she was going to have to be the adult here. Because, well, she *was* the adult here, the emotional adult. Dean would have been one if he could have. He loved responsibility and taking care of things, but he'd never been given the tools to figure out how to take responsibility for this.

So it was up to her. She gazed at his cold, forbidding—and no doubt terrified—features, and felt her love for him swell.

"I should have told you before," she said. "It's just that I was waiting—" She shook her head. No use telling him what she'd been waiting for. She raised her chin and looked Dean straight in the eye. "I love you, Dean. I want to stay in the marriage. I want it to be a real marriage, for good."

He just stared at her. Kelly saw something move, behind his attempt at impassivity. He wasn't as unaffected as he wanted to appear. She waited, sure then that he was going to soften. He was going to say how glad he was, maybe even say that he loved her, too.

Instead he seemed to pull into himself. She could practically see the walls going up. "I see," he said. "Yes. But that doesn't answer my question."

"What?"

"How long?" Dean repeated. "I understand it would be difficult to name a specific date, but I'm sure you could give me a general time frame."

"What?"

He pushed back from the table. "Yes, I know we've been...close these past few weeks. But that was only because— Never mind. The important thing is that I'm over it now. I'm back to reality again."

"Reality?" Kelly couldn't believe this was happening, that he was saying this sort of thing—now.

Dean drew himself up. "It's not that I'm implying you're lying. I think you do believe you love me, whatever that means. But this isn't going to last. It couldn't." He gave a strange, dry laugh. "Especially not considering the way it started."

Kelly felt light-headed. They shouldn't be arguing. She'd just given her all, surrendered. Hadn't that *meant* anything? "You don't even know how it started," she had enough presence of mind to point out.

"No." Dean smiled. "*You* don't know how it started."

Kelly's brows drew down.

Dean tapped his index finger on the table top. "It started," he said, "with Troy's hypnotic suggestion."

The hairs rose on the back of Kelly's neck. "You never told me what was Troy's suggestion."

"True." Dean looked to the side. "And he warned me, told me you needed to know."

Despite herself, Kelly felt chill. "So, what was it?"

"Troy told me to do what I wanted for forty-eight hours. To do what I wanted, instead of what I should."

Kelly felt ice all the way through. She wasn't even sure why. So, Dean coming on to her, courting and marrying her, had been something he wanted to do. What was bad about that? That was...*good*, and certainly better than having been compelled to do something against his will.

But Dean laughed harshly. "I did what I wanted, without considering the consequences, without thinking about the future. Acted unlike myself." He paused. "I acted, in fact, just like my father."

Kelly felt herself trembling. She stared at his hard, inaccessible features. "No," she said. "You can't believe that. It wasn't that way."

Dean's fingertips rested on the tabletop. "No? I think it was. I know it was. Because I've been acting exactly the same these past few weeks. I've been doing what I wanted, and not bothering with the consequences."

"But—"

Dean laughed again. "Come on, Kelly. How long could a marriage between us last? Eventually you'll have to meet my peers, the social throng. Nor would I pass muster, I suspect, with your crowd, all of whom, by the way, you've left behind. Where will you find new friends?" His head cocked. "Among the wives of my executives? Or maybe you think Robby and Troy and I are enough for you?"

"You're talking details."

"Important details."

Kelly felt the air rush in and out of her lungs. "We could work through that, manage, if we loved each other."

"Love." Dean sighed. "Kelly, let's be honest."

Honest? She'd given him everything, all she had to give—and he couldn't even accept it. He had to make up this—this fantasy that their marriage was like one of his father's shallow affairs. "Right," she said. "Honest." The ice inside of her was closing around her chest.

"Feelings don't last," Dean went on. "As soon as the sexual part cools down we'll see where we really stand."

"So you're not asking me," Kelly said. "You're telling me."

Dean inclined his head. "Just trying to be honest."

Kelly made herself breathe. He was trying to push her away. She saw that, clear as crystal. He couldn't believe she would stick by him, probably because his father had taunted him, saying something to make him doubt himself. Now he was reaching for excuses.

At the same time, how much was a girl supposed to take? She'd been so patient with him, waiting, and not asking for anything back. Then she'd given him her heart. But it hadn't meant a thing. God, she could see herself years from now, still giving her all, still requiring nothing back from Dean, a doormat.

"I see," she told Dean. "I understand." And she did, at last. Even now, she could feel sympathy for the man, and for his weakness. Oh yes, and in sympathy she could easily follow past history here, never stick up for herself, never demand what was only her due. "And I appreciate your honesty. Really, I do."

Dean tilted his head.

Kelly smiled, though her heart was breaking in two. She loved him, but no love should lead to self-destructiveness. It had taken her a long time to understand this, and now she had to act on it. "I have to agree with you," she told him. "Yes, I do."

Dean lifted his brows.

Kelly hung onto her smile. "This marriage is not going to last. You're absolutely right."

Something happened to Dean's superior demeanor, like a ripple under calm water. He'd probably expected her to put up more of a fight. But he blustered past it. "I'm glad you see reason."

Kelly nodded. "It takes me awhile but I get there eventually."

His brows drew down, ever so slightly.

Kelly took a step back. "Now, if you don't mind, I want to say goodbye to Robby." She had to get out of there, before she fell apart.

"Oh yes. Yes, of course." Dean leaned his palms on the table. "And Kelly? I'm glad we had this talk, got everything straight."

"Yes." Kelly nodded. "So am I."

~~~

"I'll give you two weeks pay, of course." Dean was on the phone with Aaron Schneider, Robby's tutor. "It's inconvenient, I understand, but can't be helped. Robby's father wanted to take him." Dean paused. "If it's at all possible, we'd like you back in September."

Schneider gave a lukewarm assent and Dean rang off. He stared at his hand as it remained on the handset. September. So he'd made his own estimate of the length of his marriage. He had until September. Kirk would be bringing Robby back by then, and Kelly would be leaving.

As Dean lifted his hand from the telephone, he saw that his fingers were shaking. All right, seeing Robby off that morning had been more painful than he'd imagined. And the conversation with Kelly hadn't been easy either. Excruciating, actually. But he was relieved they'd had it out. It was a conversation that had been long overdue. They owed it to themselves to stop fantasizing and look at the truth. There was no such thing as a fairy tale ending.

And to think, this had all come about due to Kirk. Yes, Kirk had done something responsible for once in his life. He'd made Dean look at the facts. Feelings didn't last, even the best of them. Dean had learned this at an early age, he just hadn't wanted to remember it. Things had been going so well with Kelly, he hadn't wanted to face that one day it was going to be over. One day Kelly would look at Dean and she just wouldn't care any more.

Dean released a laughing sigh. For a crazy little while there, he'd actually imagined it could be different. Permanent.

Well yes, he *had* been crazy.

A banging, clunking sound in the hall caught Dean's attention. The sound moved toward the front door.

"What the—?" Dean got up, strode to the study door, and opened it.

Kelly was struggling toward the front entry, pushing one beat-up suitcase ahead of her and dragging two other, mismatched suitcases behind her.

"What the—?" Dean repeated. He stalked out of the study and down the hall. "What are you doing?"

Kelly paused in her travail and turned. "No problem. My taxi should be here any minute."

Dean halted. "Your taxi?"

Kelly drew herself up. "You made yourself clear, Dean, crystal clear."

"Oh?" He felt stiff as ice. *Her taxi?*

She adjusted her purse strap over her shoulder. "This marriage isn't going to last. In point of fact, it shouldn't."

Dean tried, but couldn't, incline his head to agree. Of course it wasn't going to last. That was a given.

But he hadn't meant she should leave *now*.

"The trial period is over, for all intents and purposes." Kelly laughed. "I think we know each other as well as we're ever going to."

Again, Dean couldn't move, couldn't utter a word in reply. She was talking about leaving *now*. When he'd thought he had until September.

But he heard the sound of tires, a car pulling up in the front driveway. The taxi? There was a peremptory honk.

"I, uh—" Kelly looked away from Dean, toward the front door. "I meant what I said earlier, in the morning room."

Dean's head was spinning. Her suitcases were in the hallway. There was a taxi outside. And she was asking him to remember what she'd said in the morning room? For the love of—

There was another honk from the taxi outside. Kelly turned to look at Dean. For a moment the defensive defiance in her eyes fell away. She seemed to open toward him, waiting. Dean felt a spike of hope. He could prevent this, stop her exit—if he only knew what she was waiting for.

Kelly's lashes fell over her eyes. She gave a short shake of her head. "No," she said. "I didn't think you would."

*I will*, Dean wanted to roar. Whatever she wanted. But he didn't. How could he? There were her suitcases and a taxi was waiting outside. How was *he* supposed to stop this progress of events?

Kelly sighed, then opened the front door. She shouted out to the cabdriver, "I have some things. Could you lend a hand?"

Yes, Dean thought, ice inside. She was leaving. There was nothing a man could do to stop a woman who wanted to leave. He'd learned that long ago. He could only watch numbly as the burly cab driver shuffled into the house and began gathering Kelly's bags.

Kelly turned to Dean. "Goodbye," she said. She smiled, she waved, and then she went out the door.

Dean's ears were ringing. He felt dizzy. The cabdriver managed to gather all of Kelly's bags at once. Grunting, the man followed Kelly. A wide slice of sunlight spilled into the entry. The driver had left the door open.

Dean could only stand there like a fence post. He heard the trunk slam, then a car door, followed by the sound of spitting gravel as the cab pulled away. Still he stood there, staring at the swathe of sunlight. Of course he'd known this day was coming. He'd just this morning told Kelly all about it, enunciated the truth she hadn't wanted to face. But still, he felt as if his legs had just been cut from under him.

She'd left him, gone. It was over.

## [CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR](#)

Kelly was in a daze during most of the flight to Las Vegas. She could hardly believe her own actions. She'd walked out. She'd really and truly done it.

For once in her life she'd taken charge in a relationship.

Kelly got off the plane at McCarran airport in Las Vegas and wondered why her self-assertiveness wasn't making her feel any better. As she trudged through the bustling airport, she wondered if she felt bad because in fact she'd done the wrong thing.

God, maybe she had. Surely it was a mistake to walk away from the most loyal, most honest—and incidentally wealthiest—man she'd ever been involved with. And only because he hadn't believed their marriage would last, when it would have. If left alone, it would have.

Perhaps she was crazy.

Out on the smog-scented concourse, Kelly got a cab. She gazed dully out the car's window on the drive home. No, she concluded. She wasn't crazy. The marriage would not have lasted. Dean didn't trust her. He couldn't believe that *she* loved *him*.

She couldn't have lived with that. If she'd tried, she would have ended up desperately unhappy. And Dean would have been unhappy, too.

The cab pulled up outside Kelly's apartment building. She looked at the familiar faded lemon siding. It was a far cry from Dean's mansion outside of Boston but it was home. Yes, home, where she belonged.

~~~

The morning after Kelly left him, Dean went to work the same as any other day. Why not? He was fine. Nothing unusual or unexpected had occurred, after all. At work, he even paid attention and accomplished something. At the end of the day he came home. No one jogged along the winding entrance drive in her sweat suit. No one played video games in the entertainment room. And no one came down to the dining room for dinner.

Dean took his usual seat at the head of the table and waited for Roberto to bring in the soup. Not even Troy showed up. Dean's cousin was probably off having a good time with one of his thousand friends.

Alone then, Dean looked down at his soup. He was fine, he had to be fine. Nothing unusual or unexpected had occurred. But that soup wasn't going to go down his throat. His stomach rebelled at the very idea. Dean pushed his chair back from the table. All right, then, no soup. No food at all. But he was fine, perfectly fine. He was simply...on a diet. In fact, instead of eating, he'd go work out.

But in the basement gym, Dean realized working out wasn't such a good idea, either. While lifting weights, he was left to stare at the treadmill, which had been Kelly's favorite. How many times had they come here to work out together and he'd lasciviously watched her trotting nowhere? Too many times, clearly. Dean got up from the bench seat.

In fact, he left the gym entirely and went upstairs. It was no surprise Kelly had left him, he reminded himself. There was no reason to have a big emotional response here. Wives left their husbands every day of the week. And Dean had known from the beginning his wife was more likely than most to be a leaver. Lord, she hadn't even married him, really. Not *him*.

In his bedroom again, Dean stripped and turned on the shower. He pressed his lips together because after he and Kelly had worked out together, they'd often taken a shower together, too. Those shared showers, not just sex, but fun...

Never mind. Forget it. Gone now. Dean stepped under the spray and washed quickly. He'd be fine. Sex and fun were all well and good, but they weren't necessary. A man could live without them.

He put on a sweat suit and went down to his study. The twenty-six inch television screen loomed at him as he sat behind his desk; Kelly's television, where she'd sat so many hours just wanting to keep him company. Dean drew in a deep breath, then another one. He told himself he was going to be all right. Suddenly he heard a loud, booming noise. The papers on his desk jumped and he felt a thudding pain in his hand. He looked down to find he'd slammed his fist onto the desk.

Dean stood up. He breathed hard. He was not going to break down. He was not.

The next second he was in his chair again and his head was in his hands. She'd left him. God, she'd left him, just as he'd always known she would. They all did, they all left, every last one of them, but Kelly, Kelly...

He lowered his head until the back of his hands hit the desk top. It seemed the pain was going to come, whether he wanted it to or not. He was crumbling inside, just disintegrating. Oh, God, it hurt.

He closed his eyes and wondered how he could have let this happen, when it was exactly what he'd been trying to avoid from the very beginning.

~~~

When Felicia got the second big check for the Boston Family Aid shelter, she knew she was going to have to bite the bullet and thank Troy. Emery Hunsington wasn't as much of a penny-pincher as Joe Esterley, but it was still an achievement, and brought her ten thousand dollars closer to a down payment for the expansion of the Family Aid shelter.

The easiest way to accomplish the thank-you gesture was to run into Troy at the Club. That way her acknowledgment could seem casual, spontaneous, and without any personal nature. Felicia was determined this not become a romantic interlude. Troy was still who he was.

So on Saturday night Felicia, dressed in a deceptively simple green Versace, ambled with seeming aimlessness through the rooms of the refined country club. All the while she kept watch for a dark-haired, gypsy-eyed male.

It only took her about ten minutes to find him. He was sitting by himself, oddly enough, in a far corner of the bar lounge. His ankles were crossed on a hassock and a full martini glass was on an end table beside him. He held a copy of *The Economist*.

Felicia came to a frowning halt. She'd never imagined Troy reading anything so serious. Was this another aspect of his transformation, the transformation she didn't really believe was happening?

Then Troy closed the magazine and threw it to one side with a gesture that revealed he'd simply found it sitting on the chair and had picked it up out of idle curiosity.

Felicia took in a deep breath. Troy wasn't serious about anything. He was a devil-may-care man-about-town. He was not for her.

She took another deep breath and started toward him. With no magazine to hold his attention, he saw her immediately. He clearly tensed. Something brief passed over his face.

Fear? No. Felicia shook the idea aside. Troy had nothing to be afraid of. Oh, well, yes, he'd claimed he was in love with her, but surely that was an over-dramatization of some far more mundane emotions. He'd probably gotten over it by now.

So she smiled her best cool, elegant smile as she walked up to him. "Good evening, Troy."

With his gaze close on her, he dropped his feet from the hassock. "Hello, Felicia." Slowly, he stood.

Their eyes met and Felicia felt all the old prickliness crackling through the air between them. She now understood the prickles to be sexual electricity, and that it wasn't all manufactured by Troy. It was both of them. An unfortunate chemistry.

"How have you been?" she asked.

"Okay." His eyes narrowed. "And you?"

"Oh, great. Just marvelous." Her lashes lowered. She couldn't hold his gaze while she said what she had to say. "I've been remiss. I should have thanked you by now for the check you got out of Joe Esterley. And now for the one from Emery Hunsington."

"Me?" Troy sounded surprised. When Felicia looked up, his expression was all bafflement. "What is this about me, and checks from Esterley and Hunsington? I have no idea what you're talking about."

If she'd had any lingering doubts, Troy's little act just now erased them. He had, indeed, been the one to arrange for those checks to be sent. He'd taken her advice and exerted himself for a cause.

But he didn't want to admit it.

Felicia's polite smile quirked. "Fine. Whatever. You still have my thanks, and that of everyone who needs that shelter."

But Troy was hanging on to his baffled look. "Please don't thank me. I didn't do a thing."

Felicia could feel her smile freeze. This was beyond modesty. He was adamant she not acknowledge what he'd done for the shelter. With a blow that was almost physical, she realized why. He didn't want her to imagine he'd done it for her. He didn't want her to imagine he'd been trying to impress her or make her think he could be a better man, one with some ideals.

A man she might consider, romantically.

Or one who was still in love with her.

Struggling not to show her hurt, she showed anger instead. "In that case," she said crisply. "I take back all of it. No thanks is given from me to you."

Her icicle tone appeared to relieve Troy. "Great. I'd hate to think you've been feeling beholden to me, or anything."

Their eyes met again. Felicia hadn't felt beholden. She had felt...impressed, though. Even admiring. And now with Troy watching her so coldly and her stomach shrinking, she realized she'd been feeling a great deal more. Deep down, she'd been hoping he was giving her an excuse to like him...an excuse to allow him to kiss her. She'd been hoping he was changing into the kind of man with whom she could have a relationship.

"No," she agreed slowly. "I wouldn't want to feel beholden to you, either."

Troy rocked back on his heels. "Glad we got that straightened out."

"Yes," Felicia said.

Troy smiled. "Have a nice evening, Felicia."

Felicia glanced up sharply. Troy was smiling in his old, careless way, utterly unmoved. For a moment she felt disoriented. Even suspicious. Was this all some sort of act? He *had* been moved by his tour of the Boston Family Aid shelter. He *had* gone out and gotten those checks for their expansion.

He'd even told her he loved her.

Memories of their recent interactions swirled dizzily through her mind: his anger and tenderness, spite and humanity. She couldn't make heads or tails of this man. And, suddenly, she didn't want to make heads or tails of him. Even putting the best light on things, he was mercurial, erratic...unreliable. Not for her.

With a heavy churn of clashing emotions -- anger and injury, confusion and yearning, she put on the cool smiling mask she'd perfected over the years. "Yes, Troy," she told him. "And you, too. Have a nice evening."

Then, having accomplished her mission, a mission that never had to be repeated, she turned and, all serene elegance, strolled out of the room.

~~~

Troy watched Felicia imitate a vengeful goddess as she swept from the Club lounge. She looked absolutely magnificent. He felt like an idiot coward.

Why couldn't he have accepted her thanks? It would have been the gracious thing to do.

But he'd been too terrified to act gracious. What if she imagined he'd gotten those checks through some kind of talent? Or, worse yet, through hard work? It had only been dumb luck. He'd come across Joe Esterley when he was still reeling from April 15 and had been looking for write-offs for the coming year. As for Emery Hunsington, oh, he was just a soft touch. It didn't mean a thing that everywhere Troy went lately he'd found himself mentioning the shelter, dropping seeds into the minds of people with fat checkbooks. He hadn't taken on a responsibility. He'd simply become...weirdly obsessed.

With a flicker of green, Felicia's skirt disappeared around the edge of the lounge door. She was gone. Troy let out a deep breath and sank back into his chair. Instead of putting his feet up again, he perched on the edge of the chair, his forearms on his knees.

No, Troy certainly didn't want Felicia thinking he'd started any kind of career here. He didn't want her thinking he was taking that fundraising job, for heaven's sake. He could not afford to have people rely on him. Unh unh.

Least of all could Troy afford for Felicia to think *she* could rely on him. Coaxing a few checks out of some friends did not constitute Troy's transformation into a trustworthy man of integrity. No, siree. He wasn't the solid, dependable man Felicia should have in her life, the fellow who could heal the scars that her clay-footed father had laid on her.

Troy put a hand over his suddenly unhappy stomach. Surely he didn't want to be such a man. No, not even considering that with each check he'd obtained he'd felt a rush of pride. It couldn't be true that he had such ridiculous aspirations.

Perhaps he was a coward, but he'd been right to push Felicia away. He was still just a lazy goof-off. Troy grimaced and rubbed his stomach. He was certain he'd done the right thing.

~~~

Dean did not go into work the day after his epiphany of pain. Oh, why should he? He was tired. He certainly didn't feel up to being efficient, controlled, or brave. In his bathrobe, he puttered around the house.

While idling in the family room, he ran into Robby's cache of video games. Dean fingered the colorful boxes and decided to put in a disc. Why not? The computer whirled and a variety of fearsome dinosaurs popped onto the screen. Dean quickly figured out his character was the one armed with a submachine gun. He laughed out loud when he shot down his first T. Rex. My, but that was gratifying.

He got to the fifth level in the dinosaur game before he finally quit at two in the morning.

The next day Dean played through to the highest level in the dinosaur game. Fortunately, Robby had other discs. Dean pawed through them. Some lifted his eyebrows. If he'd known Robby owned this stuff he would have tossed it. As it was...Dean tried them all.

A little over a week later Troy appeared. He'd kept himself scarce since Kirk's visit, but now stood in the hall behind Dean. "What are you *doing*?" Troy asked.

Dean was sitting on Robby's wheeled office chair, faced away from the hall. He didn't stop punching the button on his joystick. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

"I know what it looks like, I'm just having trouble believing my eyes. Is that 'Babes in Uniform' you've got on there?"

Dean narrowed his eyes and hit a key. Instantly a colored floating ball replaced the field of overly-endowed women warriors. He adjusted the collar of his bathrobe and rolled his chair around to face his cousin. "What do you want?"

Troy shook his head. "Nothing."

"Why are you smiling?"

"Who, me? I'm not smiling." But Troy was definitely smiling.

"Glad to see me down?" Dean cocked his head.

Troy beamed. "Well, yeah. It's not unpleasant to see you looking miserable."

"Great. You've seen it, now go."

But Troy didn't budge. "Oh, the pleasure doesn't stop after only one glance." With his hands in his trouser pockets, he rocked back on his heels. "Yes, I'm definitely enjoying this, a kind of misery-loves-company thing, I suppose."

"Excuse me?" Dean said.

"The funny thing is, I can see the solution to your problem crystal clear," Troy told Dean. "While I have no idea what to do about my own."

"*Excuse* me?" Dean said.

Troy laughed and waved a hand. "Come on, Dean. Don't you think you could be doing something a little more constructive with your feelings than play video games?"

Dean glared at him. "What feelings?"

"Hm," Troy said.

He sounded so superior, so smug. Dean felt his hands clenching into fists. With surprise, he realized his dark depression was lifting. It was transforming into anger. What business had Troy to make fun of him? This whole thing was Troy's fault to begin with! He'd been the one to give that idiotic hypnotic suggestion. He'd started the whole boondoggle mess.

Dean showed his teeth at his cousin. "Fine. You think I ought to be doing something more constructive?"

"Uh—"

"More—physically healthy, perhaps?"

"Uh, Dean—" Troy took a step back.

Dean rose from the padded office chair. He tightened his silk belt. "How about we go a few rounds?"

Troy's eyes widened. "Fight? Right here?"

"No." Though Dean wouldn't have minded. But he could see he'd have to convince Troy. "In the gym, with gloves."

Troy swallowed. "No way."

"I'll pay you," Dean said.

"What?"

"I'll pay you. You're always up for an addition to your allowance."

Troy held up his hands. "I don't think some extra pocket change would be worth this."

"Ten grand," Dean said, knowing precisely how much Troy received from his trust fund every month.



Troy's lower jaw dropped.

"Twenty," Dean said, not wanting to fiddle around. He wanted his hands in the gloves, hitting something.

Troy shook his head. But his mouth said, "You're on."

~~~

Fifteen minutes later they were on a mat in the gym, circling each other. Troy had insisted on helmets, otherwise they were down to their gym shorts.

Dean admitted he was a little stiff. He hadn't worked out since he'd discovered Robby's video games. That had been over a week ago. And Troy would be more supple, being younger. But he'd have no discipline. He never used the downstairs gym. Dean doubted his lazy cousin did any sort of exercise, besides a game of tennis now and then.

Dean made an experimental jab toward Troy's jaw. He was surprised when Troy parried expertly.

"Might not be as easy as you thought, eh?" Troy kept circling.

Dean shrugged. He'd known Troy would be faster, but he wouldn't be stronger. Dean tried another jab, this one down low. He missed contact again.

"Face it," Troy said. "You're not as all-powerful as you think."

"Huh," Dean said. Troy sounded way too pleased about the fact. "All I have to be is powerful enough to knock your block off."

"You think that'll make you feel better?" Troy grimaced as they circled each other. "Fact is, I had the same thought, but I don't believe it's going to work."

"I believe it will." Dean made another jab. Troy blocked it again and then added a shot of his own, one that connected. Dean grunted. His cousin had more juice than he'd expected.

"Ready to call off this stupid idea?"

Dean drew in a steadying breath. "I haven't got my twenty grand worth yet."

"No." Troy sighed. "That'll only come after I knock you out, I suppose."

Dean smiled. "Right. Come and get me, girlfr—"

Troy's arm flashed toward him. Dean's head snapped back. His feet slipped out from under him, and then everything went black.

~~~

Dean opened his eyes to see Troy in his helmet, looking worriedly down at him.

Helmet still on. He hadn't been out that long, then.

Troy's worried look eased. It turned annoyed. "Idiot," he said.

Dean shrugged. Or at least he tried to.

"Come on, let's get you on your feet." Troy lifted Dean's shoulders. Dean groaned as the pain in his head surged. "You know, this really wasn't productive," Troy grumbled.

"You can say that again." Dean winced as he struggled to sit up.

"Getting beat up is not going to make you feel better about Kelly."

Dean closed his eyes. The terrible pain swept back again, and this time it wasn't from Troy's fist. "Then what is?"

Troy didn't say anything. When Dean opened his eyes, he saw his cousin's lips were pressed tightly together.

"What?" Dean demanded.

Troy shook his head, as if he refused to say, but then blurted, "Maybe I should try to hypnotize you again."

Dean stared at him.

"Give you the same suggestion." Troy looked steadily into Dean's eyes. "Do what you want instead of what you should."

Dean just kept staring. But a shiver passed through him. He knew what he wanted to do...and it was crazy, illogical. What would it accomplish? Feelings didn't last—and hers were over. She was done with him.

But there was something in Troy's eyes, a...fellowship that made it hard for Dean to disguise his thoughts. Slowly, just slightly, Troy smiled. "Ah, but I don't need to hypnotize you. You already know what you want to do."

"But—it wouldn't make any sense to see Kelly."

Troy's brows lifted. "You think?"

Yes, yes of course Dean thought so. Kelly was done with him. She'd gone so far as to leave him, just as he'd always thought she would. She didn't want to see him.

Or was that true? Dean put a hand up to his temple. That blow to his head must have been worse than he'd thought because suddenly he was remembering his last conversation with Kelly.

He'd been trying his best to forget it, but now one moment of that horrible conversation stood out clear in his mind. Kelly had stood there, waiting. She'd looked at Dean with such...expectation. Yes, she'd looked at him as if there'd been something Dean could have said or done that would have kept her with him...

Slumped on the gym mat, Dean frowned. No, that was ridiculous. There was nothing he could do to keep a woman with him if she wanted to leave. And Kelly had wanted to leave.

Hadn't she?

He felt an abrupt wrenching of the gut. What had that strange moment of her looking at him been about? Had there been something he could have done to keep her? Had she wanted to stay?

Dean rubbed his forehead. Hope wrestled with pain, but neither was stronger than a new and burning set of questions. For the first time in two weeks Dean wondered what Kelly was thinking, what she was feeling. Had he hurt her that day?

Was that why she'd left?

Was she miserable, too?

Dean felt another wrench in his gut. Oh, God, had he made Kelly unhappy? If that were true— His gaze shot up to Troy. "I have to go see her."

"Well, yeah." Troy sat back on his heels. "I was wondering when you'd figure that out."

"Now," Dean said.

"Almost now," Troy countered, smiling strangely. "First you gotta pay me that twenty grand."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

It had been a hectic day for Felicia, one board meeting after another. She'd been juggling budgets that were too small, and smoothing feathers that were constantly getting ruffled. By nine p.m. she was ready for a long soak in the tub and the rest of the evening spent curled in her bedroom armchair with a good book.

Her mother was out at her bridge night, which was a mixed blessing because when the doorbell rang it was up to Felicia to deal with it. Giving a longing look toward her armchair—she hadn't had time to open her book—she started down the stairs.

She soon saw she'd interrupted her pleasure for nothing. Murchison, the butler, was still up. He was opening the front door just as Felicia, in a pink sweat suit, was descending the staircase. But she halted, dumbstruck, when she saw the face beyond Murchison's heavy-set shoulder.

Troy? Troy, grinning from ear to ear? Troy, who, with his sparkling eyes and flashing teeth couldn't be looking more wildly different than the mocking, distant man she'd last seen a week ago at the Club? Indeed, he was mercurial, unpredictable, and erratic.

"Troy," she said, in as dampening a tone as possible.

Troy ignored her tone. His reply was as warm and engaging as hers had been distant. "Felicia," he said. "You look...great. Say, can we talk?"

Good God. Felicia didn't want to talk to Troy. But Murchison had apparently decided Felicia's greeting of the man constituted acceptance of his presence in the house. "Miss Thurgood," he mumbled, and marched off. Felicia was left to contend with Troy who, still grinning, had waltzed into the front foyer. He stood there, his hands dug into his trouser pockets, gazing at Felicia with all the bonhomie in the world.

"So?" he asked. "Can we?"

Felicia tried, and failed, to come up with a plausible reason to refuse his request. With an expression she hoped was suitably off-putting, she gestured toward the living room. "Please," she said. "Be my guest."

Troy grinned and gestured. "After you."

Felicia stifled a sigh as she descended the rest of the stairs and led the way into the spacious living room. Halfway into the room she turned and found Troy ogling a Tiffany lamp.

"Wow," he said. "Your mother's house is way classier than my uncle's."

Felicia's teeth clamped together. She didn't think she had to accept small talk from him, not when it was taking every ounce of strength she owned to maintain a cool and composed exterior. "Troy," she said. "Your purpose?"

"Oh." He glanced over, looking sheepish. "Yeah. Well, first I wanted to apologize for the way I brushed you off the other night at the Club. It wasn't gracious. It wasn't polite. And—" His grin quirked. "And you're very welcome for the checks I managed to bring in. In fact—" His smile widened as he pulled a piece of paper out of his trouser pocket. "In fact, I have another one right here."

Felicia could only stand there, flabbergasted, as he stepped toward her and held out the check. He'd just apologized. He'd just admitted he'd brought in the other checks. And his eyes as they met hers were...sincere.

Stunned, Felicia took the check from Troy's outstretched hand. Her eyes took a second to focus, but eventually took in that it was a check for *sixty thousand* dollars, signed by Dean Singleton.

"It was only supposed to be twenty," Troy admitted, and rocked onto the balls of his feet. "But when he found out what it was for, he gave me this long, deep look and then tripled the amount."

Gape-jawed, Felicia gazed from the check to Troy. "You did this?" she asked, her voice hoarse.

Troy rocked back onto his heels. "Not only did I do it, but I whipped Dean in the process. He went down like a sack of potatoes. Ah!" Troy chuckled and shook his head. "There I was telling him it wasn't going to make him feel any better to knock my block off, and *I* ended up knocking *his* off. And it *did* make *me* feel better!" Troy laughed out loud then, and with definite relish.

"You *fought* Dean?" Felicia was agog.

Troy tsked. "He begged me to." His head tilted in the direction of the check that was held frozen between Felicia's fingers. "He even paid me for it."

"But— I don't understand."

Troy sighed. "Suffice it to say, Dean needed to get whipped, and...maybe I needed to be the one to do the whipping. And now here I am, starting to believe I may really be good at this, getting people to part with their money for a cause. And—and—it feels *good*." Troy took his hands out of his trouser pockets. "It feels really good to do something for somebody else, to make a difference. You were— Aw, hell, Felicia."

In two long strides, Troy was in front of her. Dean's check wafted to the floor as Troy took hold of her arms, drew her against him, and pressed his mouth to hers.

Felicia was too surprised to do anything but accept Troy's kiss. It was— He was— She was too overwhelmed to know.

Then Troy lifted his mouth and gave her a chance to think. Or try to. Her eyes searched his now-somber face. "I—I thought you didn't want to take credit."

"I didn't. That is, I was afraid to. Afraid of...well, of what more you might expect of me."

"What more?"

"You know." He waved a hand. "Like you'd think people could start to depend on me." His voice deepened. "Like maybe you would start to depend on me."

"Oh, Troy..."

"I know, I know." He rolled his eyes. "You'd never be so stupid as to depend on *me*, and I think maybe that was the sticking point. While I didn't want you to depend on me, I kind of *did* want you to depend on me." He gave her an extremely un-Troy, very serious look. "I *do* want you to be able to depend on me, to rely on me...to trust me. I want to be that kind of man for you."

Felicia felt everything inside of her go still. Had all of that come out of Troy's mouth? Troy's? But as she looked into his eyes she knew it had. She knew she'd always understood he had this in him. It had been part of his appeal, the most dangerous part of all.

That he had the capacity to become something exquisitely true and fine.

Slowly, Troy set her apart from him. His expression had gone terribly serious. Clearly, he wanted her to take this in, and figure it out. In a way...he was believing in *her*.

Felicia felt a deep pull inside. Oh, how she wanted to believe in him. She wanted to engage with him, to be together with him, both physically and emotionally. But—but—

"I'm scared," she whispered out loud.

The corners of his mouth quirked. "I don't blame you. I'm kind of..." His gaze slid to the side as he appeared to debate what word would describe himself.

"Important," Felicia heard herself tell him.

His gaze flew back to hers.

Felicia drew in a sharp breath. Yes, Troy was important. He was the first, and only, man to have gotten through her physical inhibitions. He was the first, and only, man to

make her challenge herself and her preconceived notions. "You're the only man I've ever wanted," she admitted.

His eyes were intent, still serious, but his lips slowly curved.

Felicia put a hand to her forehead. She'd never expected any of this, from becoming susceptible to Troy in the first place to having him standing here in her living room, telling her he wanted to be the right kind of man for her.

"So-o-o...?" Troy tilted his head. His lips straightened again. "You're still scared."

"Well, yes." Of course she was scared. Troy was mercurial and erratic. Hadn't she recently decided that?

Felicia peered at him from beneath her hand. No, he wasn't really mercurial or erratic, he'd just been scared, too. And he'd gotten past it. He'd made over a hundred thousand dollars for the Boston Family Aid shelter. And he was standing here right now in her living room telling her wanted to be a real, trustworthy man for her.

Felicia sucked in her lips. Her heart beat rapidly. Yes, she was scared—but maybe it was time for her to meet a new challenge, to do what Troy was doing, and become more than she'd previously been. "But," she said slowly, "maybe it's time to get past the fear."

Troy started to smile. So did she. A wonderful wave of emotion rose inside of her. Oh, she wasn't done feeling scared, but she thought she was done letting her fear stop her, letting it rule or limit her life. Felicia took her hand from her forehead and stretched it across the space between them. She let her palm cup the side of Troy's face. Her fingers shook, excited by the very male feel of the roughness there, at the feel of *him*.

"Oh, Troy," she murmured. "But do you think I could be the right kind of woman for you?"

His eyes blazed. "I think you could."

Felicia's hand pressed against the side of his face. She liked his *I think*. He wasn't handing out blanket assurances. "Troy," she whispered, and stepped forward to kiss him.

His lips trembled under hers at first, and then he kissed back. The kiss quickly grew deeper, hotter, more intimate. Troy's hand moved to cover her left breast. It occurred to Felicia, fleetingly and with amusement, that she was probably about to lose her over-ripe virginity.

"Please tell me your mother went to bridge, just like your chauffeur told my chauffeur she always does on Monday nights," Troy muttered in Felicia's ear.

Felicia giggled. "You are wicked."

"Not wicked, honey, just desperate. So, is she gone?"

For a split-second Felicia hesitated, not out of fear or lack of interest, but to savor the moment, the one where she seized life with both hands. She speared her fingers into Troy's silky hair and looked up at him with smiling eyes. "She's gone."

"Thank God," Troy muttered.

An hour later, in her bed with the lacy canopy, Felicia lost her virginity with a happy gasp. Troy, who didn't appear to be the least bit surprised—or fazed—covered her lips very tenderly with his own. "I love you," he said.

"That's good," Felicia replied, draping her arms around his neck. "Because I love you, too." She truly did. She loved everything about him. Though at that moment, admittedly, what held her attention was the feel of him, heavy and real, deep inside of her. Wriggling, she kissed him back. Troy hissed, and no more was said after that, in words, for a long, long while.

~~~

Once he'd decided, Dean felt urgent. He didn't wait for morning but dressed and went to the airport right then, though he couldn't find an actual flight for several hours. During that time a nice bruise began to form on the left side of his jaw. Dean didn't care. He wanted to get to Vegas. He had to check on Kelly. Was she all right?

Once in the air, Dean looked out the tiny window of the plane. He felt like he'd been asleep for two weeks. He hadn't once asked himself exactly why Kelly had left. He'd just assumed— He wasn't sure what he'd assumed. Whatever it was, it had been illogical, unreasonable.

Sure, he'd expected Kelly's feelings for him to change, but not in the span of a single day. At the mountain resort, Kelly had agreed to stay in the marriage. Two days later she'd walked out the door. Now Dean had to consider what he'd done during those two days to make that happen.

He sucked in his lips as he remembered. He'd told her he didn't believe the marriage was going to last. He'd basically told Kelly the marriage was over. She'd simply taken him at his word.

Dean frowned as he watched dawn stealing over western Massachusetts. No, it hadn't been so simple. She'd...argued. What had she said?

He shook his head and frowned harder, but he couldn't remember. At any rate, he hadn't listened. And so she'd left.

Now the issue was to decide if he meant what he'd told Kelly. Did he consider the marriage over? Did he want it to be over?

Dean felt a shudder run through him. No, he didn't want it to be over. Being utterly, painfully honest with himself, he wanted his marriage to Kelly to last his entire lifetime. He wanted to stay with her always, to grow old together, even to have kids.

It was only that he couldn't believe it could happen. He was inadequate in so many ways; behind Kelly emotionally, unexciting, stodgy... Even if they hadn't had this big blow-up, surely she'd have come to see all his deficiencies, eventually. One day her love would dry up. She'd chafe and want to leave. Dean scowled and rubbed the back of his neck. Perhaps there was no point to this little trip, after all.

Do what you want instead of what you should.

Dean jerked up his head. Where had that come from?

You're just full of excuses, aren't you? And none of them are going to get you what you want.

Dean lowered his hand from his neck. Apparently the words were coming from inside his own head.

His heart began to beat hard. Do what you want instead of what you should. Without having to get knocked unconscious, he was considering the idea.

What do you have to lose?

Dean drummed his fingers on the armrest. He knew what he had to lose. Safety, security, the certainty of what his life was going to hold, empty though it might be.

Playing video games until two in the morning.

In short, nothing...and everything. Everything he had ever known.

What do you want, Dean?

Dean closed his eyes. What did he want? What the hell did he really, deep down want?

He didn't open his eyes again until the plane began its descent into Las Vegas' McCarran Airport. By then, he knew.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

It was the oddest thing. Despite how Dean didn't measure up as a husband, despite how he was so incredibly deficient, Kelly missed him. She missed him something awful.

There were days she was so far gone she wanted to go back to him.

Oh, she was in bad shape. She wasn't the strong, assertive woman she'd wanted to become. On the contrary, it took every ounce of will power Kelly possessed to resist doing something stupid.

The girls wanted to make the crumb cake for her again. Kelly thanked them, but declined. "He wasn't a crumb," she told them. She repeated the sentiment to her friend Valerie, as they sat at a bar table drinking Perriers in the casino after work-out that day.

Dark-haired and exotic, Valerie pursed her lips and appeared doubtful.

Kelly drummed her fingers on the marble table top, thinking how to put it. "He wasn't bad, just wounded. Too wounded."

"Funny. You look like the wounded one."

Kelly shook her head and laughed without humor. "I'll bet Dean is looking a heck of a lot worse than I am."

"Well, I certainly hope so," Valerie replied with a huff.

Kelly blinked. *I don't.*

Valerie leaned over the little table. Her dark-eyed gaze got suspicious. "Have you seen a lawyer yet, Kelly?"

A lawyer? Kelly thought. What for? Then she realized: the divorce. "I will," she said, feeling her cheeks flush. "Just give me some time, all right?"

Valerie shook her head. "Hopeless. Kelly, you're hopeless."

"Hey. I left him, didn't I?"

"In body," Valerie sighed. "But not in soul."

Kelly didn't have anything to say to that. It was too true. On the one hand, she knew she'd done the right thing. The marriage would never work. But on the other hand, she couldn't get past the feeling they belonged together. Oh, it was crazy.

She came home from practice and her conversation with Valerie feeling more tired and sore than usual. Despite trying to keep in shape while she'd been gone, it had been hell getting back to the physical demands of her profession. At least the thermometer hadn't hit one hundred today. Amazing for July. Kelly went straight from her front door to the bathroom and turned on the water full hot. The apartment's air-conditioning was actually working today and she needed a good soak.

She'd stripped and was just stepping into the tub when the doorbell rang.

Kelly closed her eyes. She'd ignore it. Probably just a salesman. But when the doorbell rang again, Kelly sighed, took her toe out of the deliciously hot water, and reached for her robe. If she wanted to be able to relax in the tub, she was going to have to answer the door to get rid of the guy.

Opening the front door with a pleasant rejection on her lips, Kelly stopped dead. On her doorstep stood Kirk, with a sulky-looking Robby lounging beside him.

Kirk was smiling double-time. "Kelly, my dear, you are indeed a sight for sore eyes."

Kelly shut her eyes. But when she opened them again the pair was still there. Kirk still wore his wide smile but Kelly thought the charm was getting a little ragged around

the edges. Robby regarded her suspiciously. Kelly could only stand there, her heart beating way too fast, and wonder what was going on.

"May we come in?" Kirk asked.

Kelly's heart was still racing madly but her brain did kick in. This had nothing to do with Dean. He would never have asked his father to do anything, much less to come to see Kelly, his not-yet-ex-wife. Whatever this was, it was unrelated to her marriage.

She took in a breath and stepped back from the door. "Come on in."

Kirk exhibited a moment of bald relief and waltzed through. Robby gave Kelly a narrow-eyed look and followed after.

"So." Kelly closed the door and turned. "To what do I owe the honor?"

Kirk lost no time in making himself comfortable on Kelly's floral sofa. Her question, however, seemed to leave him nonplussed. "Mmm. Robby?" he offered.

But Robby only hunched his shoulders and stalked to the corner, where he began to stare at a print of some wild ponies.

Kirk turned back to Kelly. He appeared to consider his answer. "Well," he finally said, "we called the estate, quite discreetly you understand, looking for you. We heard you were here, having left Dean—don't blame you a bit, my dear—and, hmm... Well we thought you wouldn't mind taking care of Robby for a while." Kirk held up a hand and spoke quickly. "I'm not dumping him, all right? He *wanted* to come here."

In his corner, Robby snorted.

Kelly crossed her arms over her chest. She was beginning to get the picture. Kirk was here to get rid of Robby, and he thought she was a soft touch. One side of her mouth lifted. "Bit off more than you could chew, eh?"

Kirk's gaze averted. "He drove off Marisa and even the boat captain. What was I supposed to do?"

Kelly bit the inside of her cheek. She could easily see Robby doing that, especially if Kirk had been neglecting him. Oh, she was going to get mad if Kirk had been too awful.

Stop, sang a voice in her head. *This isn't your problem!* But Kelly was excruciatingly aware of Robby tensed in the corner. She was his friend, if nothing more. She had promised him that much. "I would love for Robby to stay here," she said, perfectly sincere. "I've been missing him, but why don't you take him home to Dean?"

Kirk looked amazed. "And admit I couldn't handle it?"

Kelly raised her brows.

"All right." Kirk winced. "I'm a coward but you said you'd take him, so I'll just—" He stood up.

"Oh, no you don't." Kelly stopped Kirk with an upraised hand. "You aren't going anywhere without checking if this is all right with Dean."

Kirk blinked in alarm. "Dean? What does he have to do with it?"

"You know darn well what he has to do with it. And I'm not taking Robby unless Dean knows about it, and approves."

"Oh, all right." Kirk sighed, disgruntled. "You can call him."

"Me?" Kelly's eyes widened. "Oh, no."

Kirk went puppyish. "But you could—"

"No."

In his corner, Robby snorted again.

Kelly turned to look at him. "What?"

Robby hunched his shoulders higher and stared with more intensity at the wild ponies. "You can't even talk to him."

Kelly's nostrils flared. "And why should I talk to him? You were the one who kept bugging me, kept telling me he ought to say he loved me. Well, he didn't. He didn't!"

Robby turned to point at her. "*You* didn't wait the whole two months!"

"One week more? It wouldn't have made any difference—"

"Oh, yeah? Well—"

The argument was interrupted by the sound, once again, of the doorbell.

"Who is that?" Kirk wanted to know.

Kelly shrugged. "Given my day so far, it could be anybody." Angry now, she strode to the front door and swung it wide. Her mouth was open to tell off whoever stood there.

Dean stood there. Beautiful, sober-faced, suit, tie, and everything. Kelly couldn't close her opened mouth. Her heart thudded painfully against her ribcage. No, her mind told herself. He couldn't be here. He hadn't sent Kirk and Robby, so he had no reason to be here. And was that a bruise on his jaw?

Dean's gaze was completely unfathomable. Then he looked past Kelly and his expression changed dramatically. "What are *you* doing here?"

Kelly heard Kirk's drawl. "Same thing you are, no doubt. Begging."

Dean's gaze switched back to Kelly. For an instant she thought she saw...acknowledgment? Then the mask came down again.

"Excuse me." Dean shifted past Kelly and let himself into her apartment. "You are leaving," he told his father. "Now."

"Hey, wait a minute." Kelly turned on her doorstep. Dean had just walked in, and intended to clear everyone else out. Panic banged in her chest. She didn't want to think about why her husband might be here, or what he'd have to talk to her about—alone. "This is my home. I'll decide who leaves or stays."

Dean whirled on her. "But we have to talk."

Was that so? With the panic banging harder, Kelly set her hands on her hips. "So happens Kirk and I have to talk, too."

Dean's gaze went incredulous. "What could you and Kirk possibly have to talk about?"

"Me." Robby stepped forward from his corner. "They're arguing over who has to take care of me."

Kelly saw Dean's jaw drop. "You?"

"That's not what we're talking about," Kelly said quickly.

"Is so," Robby argued.

"Actually," Kirk weighed in. "We were talking about who had to tell Dean you were here. That's a much different subject."

"Sounds the same to me," Robby sniffed.

"Wait," Dean said.

"We were not arguing over who had to tell Dean," Kelly spoke to Kirk. "That was decided."

"Oh? Then what did the two of us have to talk about?" Kirk sounded interested.

"Wait," Dean said again, louder.

"I don't know what," Kelly told Kirk. "But I'm sure it was something. And you got here first."

Kirk looked pleased. Dean shouted louder, "Wait!"

His voice reverberated against Kelly's peach-colored walls. For a moment there was silence. Then Dean slit his eyes toward his father. He spoke low, but clearly. "I don't know what kind of trouble you're here to stir up, but I give you fair warning, I won't allow it."

Kirk puffed himself up. "I'm sure I don't have any idea what you mean."

"It's not as if Dad knew you were coming," Robby told Dean, adopting his own lecturing tone. "Come to think of it, what are you doing here?"

"Yes," Kirk wanted to know, too. "Why are you here?"

Dean looked at Kelly. Her heart was too high in her throat for her to say anything, but she was asking the question hardest of all. What was he doing here? The marriage was over. He'd told her so. And she'd agreed. Kelly swallowed. This had to be about their divorce.

"There's something—I'd really like to talk to you," Dean said softly. "Couldn't we speak alone?"

Kelly tried to breathe. No. She didn't want to discuss a divorce. She didn't want that to be what he'd come all the way across the country to discuss. "No, I— No," she said.

Kirk snorted. "There. What does that tell you, son? She doesn't want to be alone with you."

Kelly lifted her chin. Kirk was right, but for the wrong reasons. "Whatever you have to say," she told Dean, "can be said right here and now."

Dean's accusing look nearly killed Kelly, but she wasn't going to budge. If he really wanted to end everything, permanently, she didn't want to take it alone.

His jaw tightened. "You're making this extremely difficult."

"I—I'm sorry, but this is the way it has to be."

Dean's lashes lowered. "I see." Then he raised his eyes again. His lips firmed. "Fine. If this is the way you want it."

Kelly straightened. "It is."

"Go ahead," Kirk sighed. "Get it over with, already."

Dean shot his father a fulminating look, then turned back to Kelly. "All right. I'll say it. I want you to come home."

A moment of intense silence followed this pronouncement. Kelly felt her heart stop right in her chest. He wanted her to come home. It was the last thing she'd expected him to say.

Dean turned red but he barreled on. "I want you to come home with me. It—it makes sense. You know it does. We're married. We made vows. We—we get along. There is no reason—" Dean's eyes narrowed. "No reason we shouldn't be together."

Kelly still couldn't breathe. Not a divorce. He didn't want to talk about separation. He wanted her back! She felt a moment of supreme elation.

Then Kirk started to laugh. "You want her back?" Dean glared daggers at the man but Kirk went on. "Because you *get along*? Because it's *reasonable*?"

"Yes," Dean retorted, a hiss.

Kirk laughed again. "As a beg, son, that hardly cuts it."

Though her heart was still racing, Kelly felt brought up short. Kirk was right. Dean wanted her to come home...because it was *reasonable*? Where was love in this equation? Where was trust? Oh, he hadn't changed, not one little whit. And she hadn't changed, either. She'd been so impressed she'd nearly fallen right into his stubborn arms. Kelly narrowed her eyes. "You tell me," she asked Dean. "Is that it?"

Dean's blue eyes were nearly black as he stared at her. "You need something more?"

Kelly stared back at him. Inside she was shaking. She wanted to tell him, 'No, I don't need a thing more, only you.' She wanted to feel his arms, strong and sure, around her. But her brain was whirling. She had to withstand the temptation.

Didn't she?

She had to stand up for what she deserved, which was something other than what Dean offered her.

Wasn't it?

Suddenly the determination that had defined Dean's face stripped away. The expression left was raw anguish. "Forget it," he muttered. "I never should have—" He shook his head and turned away, making for the door.

The door. Kelly's body jerked in reaction. Wait! She didn't want him to go. At least that's what her heart was shouting.

She felt herself stiffen into immobility, for she was supposed to doubt her heart, wasn't she?

Before Kelly could decide what she should or shouldn't do, Dean was out the door. He was gone.

"Booted him," Kirk said, and gave a low whistle. "Wish I knew how to do that."

~~~

Dean rushed down the stairs of Kelly's third-story walk-up and ran right past his rental car parked on the street. He wanted to get away, as far and as fast as possible.

Stupid. He was an idiot. And a coward. The minute he'd seen Kelly—and then his father—every well-rehearsed speech had gone flying out the window. He'd simply been overcome by all he wanted. All he needed. *Come home*. How more brutish could he have gotten?

Already breathing hard, Dean started to run. He felt a pressure increasing in his chest, choking up his throat. He'd botched it. His one chance and he'd thoroughly botched it. He could still see Kirk smirking at him. And Kelly, her face so...disappointed.

And why shouldn't she have been disappointed? He hadn't told her anything important.

Dean ran until he was out of breath. On a street corner under a giant plastic donut, he bent over, gasping for air and hating himself.

Then he heard her voice. It was way down the sidewalk. "Dean!" She sounded breathless but determined.

At first, still bent over, he didn't believe his senses. It couldn't be Kelly. That would mean she'd come running after him and she wouldn't have done that, not after his terrible performance in her apartment.

"Dean!" somebody shouted again, and this time she was much closer. Skeptical, Dean straightened. Disbelieving, he turned.

Ten feet down the deserted sidewalk from him Kelly stumbled to a stop. She was still in her bathrobe, her hair was wild, and there was a crazy look in her eyes. She was panting.

*No*, Dean thought. But there she was right in front of him. Beautiful, sweet, and unattainable. He felt his throat work but nothing came out.

She didn't say anything, either, just looked at him. All of Dean's wishes, all his desires, his everything, was standing there in the person of this woman. He thought he

was going to explode if somebody didn't say something. "How are you?" he finally managed to croak out.

Kelly looked incredulous. "What?"

"How are you?" Dean took a deep breath. "That's what I really came out here to find out. I know I hurt you two weeks ago. I—I wanted to make sure you were all right."

Kelly's eyes widened.

Dean saw her surprise and a ragged laugh escaped him. "Kind of hard to believe, huh? I—I guess I didn't leave you with the impression I cared." His voice lowered. "But I do."

Kelly continued to stare at him. Her disbelief launched another arrow into Dean's already aching heart. He felt that organ twist with all he'd never told her, all he'd been too afraid to admit, even to himself.

Well, if ever there was a second chance this was it. Dean closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath. "I care, Kelly. I really care. I...love you. That's it. Love. Just—*love*. That's how I feel." He gave another whispery laugh and opened his eyes.

Kelly was staring at him in a way that made Dean's heart sink. He'd failed, once again.

Then she launched herself at him. It was too fast for Dean to do anything but gasp, clutch her close, and try to keep them both from landing on the pavement.

"Oh, Dean. Dean, Dean, Dean." She rained kisses all over him; eyebrows, nose and both cheeks.

Dean crushed her gently. Her warm, lithe body was actually in his arms. How was this possible?

"You said it." She squeezed him tightly. "You actually said it."

It took Dean a second to understand what she meant. Meanwhile he didn't dare let go. "Oh," he said. "Did you like that?"

Kelly pulled back to stare at him. "Did I like it?!"

Dean felt his face turn warm. "I guess what I mean is, love is a feeling and, well, feelings, they're not very reliable, are they?"

Kelly gazed at him round-eyed. "You think feelings aren't *reliable*?"

Dean had to look away. "Well, *mine* are..."

"Dean." She turned his chin so he had to look at her. "*My* feelings are reliable, too. And I love you. I do."

Dean felt a very strange pressure, deep in his throat. She loved him. He hadn't known how...big it would feel to hear the words. Or how hard it would be to believe them.

"But—you left," he tried to disagree.

Kelly's lashes dropped. "I did. Because you couldn't hear that. You weren't believing it."

He hadn't. He wasn't. How could she love him—forever?

Kelly raised her eyes. "You still don't believe me."

Alarm flashed through him, but she suddenly grinned. "All right. I guess you're just going to have to do the experiment and find out."

"The experiment?"

She hugged him gently around the neck. "Take me home and find out if my feelings last. It's a long experiment. Might take forty or fifty years, but eventually you'll get your answer."

Dean knew he was staring at her. He'd let her down, but she was just smiling at him, so beautiful, so generous, so...loving. He tried, and failed, to swallow. "You're...coming home with me?"

She tapped his chin. "How else can I prove my feelings are forever?"

"Kelly—" Then Dean couldn't say any more. He pressed his face into the curve of her neck. He hadn't driven her off? Amazing. On her waist, his hands trembled. "I'll do anything, anything, to make this work," he vowed.

"Oh, Dean." He could feel her stroking his hair. "All you have to do is be yourself. I love you just the way you are."

Dean went very still. The words echoed in his brain. Oh, he could almost...*remember* them. That's right, standing in the hot desert air, next to a building with a huge wooden yellow sun tacked to it, and Kelly. Oh, Kelly looking up at him with her clear, sincere eyes.

Slowly, Dean drew back from their close embrace. He looked down into her face. She blinked up at him, quizzical. In that moment he understood. Oh, the memory blew away, ethereal as smoke, but the understanding remained. Her words, the sentiment—it was what had driven him to follow Troy's hypnotic suggestion in the first place. It—*this*—was what he'd wanted. Not wild sex, not an irresponsible alliance, but this: the love of a good woman.

"Oh," Dean said. "*Oh*." It was so absurdly simple. So...rational. He started to laugh.

"What?" Kelly demanded. "What?"

Dean felt emotions swell up in his chest. Humor, understanding, need. And love. That's what it was all about, wasn't it? Love.

"What?" Kelly asked again.

Dean made a low noise in his throat. "This," he said, and lowered his head. Kelly's lips felt like coming home. Well, a combination of coming home and flying to the moon. Dean drew in a sharp breath and moved in closer, exulting when Kelly pressed back. Oh yes. She, like he, wanted a perfect union.

For a long time they stood there, trying to forge that union with their mouths. Finally, reluctantly, Dean pulled back.

Kelly made a protesting noise, but Dean set her apart, resolute. "I'm not done— My speech," he panted out.

"Your speech?" Kelly looked dazed.

Dean laughed a little. "On the way over I had a few hours to put one together."

"Mm?" Kelly was making a visible effort to clear her brain of the kiss.

Dean brushed a finger down her cheek. "I may actually be able to say it now."

"Hm?" Kelly blinked back to full awareness. "To say what?"

Dean sighed and shifted her in his arms. "Yeah, I may be able to say it, since I'm trusting and taking chances here..." He slipped one hand into his inside jacket pocket. He watched Kelly closely as he pulled forth a red silk handkerchief. "You, uh, left this in my office a couple months ago."

Kelly watched, frowning, as Dean unfolded the handkerchief. In the center was a simple gold band. From the look that then crossed Kelly's face Dean was pretty sure she remembered throwing it at him during their first meeting in his office.

He cleared his throat. "You know me, always wanting to cross the t's and dot the i's. I brought it along thinking—" His heart took a long, deep dive. "Well, thinking, Kelly— Will you marry me?"

She looked up from the ring to his face. "Oh, Dean."

The expression on her face nearly blew him away, but Dean managed to remain standing. Feeling both elated and terrified, he shrugged. "I know we already are married, but I still don't remember the ceremony and I'd really like to remember marrying you, Kelly."

"Oh, Dean."

He cleared his throat again. "Is that a 'yes?'"

She threw her arms around his neck. "Yes!" she cried. "Yes, yes, yes!"

Dean struggled not to fall as she jumped onto him. Grinning madly, he decided he could get used to this taking chances business.

~~~

They had the wedding at the Little Chapel of the Dawn again. This time, however, Kelly invited her friends. Dean had Troy fly out to be his best man. And there was a little family confab beforehand.

Dean and Kelly gathered all involved parties in her apartment the night before the wedding. Even Felicia Thurgood attended, though her presence was a surprise, given that she'd always been the arch-enemy of the man who'd brought her along, Dean's cousin, Troy. But that evening Felicia and Troy, arm in arm, were beaming in the way that only a couple in the beginning stages of a love affair can beam.

Dean took a look at the two of them, his expression somewhere between astonishment and comprehension. "I knew something more was behind that check," he muttered, and gave Troy a slap on the back that made him stagger.

"Thought you did," Troy grumbled, and looked about to slap Dean back—amiably, of course—until Kelly stepped between the two of them.

"It's so good to see you two actually talking to each other..."

"As opposed to throwing punches," Felicia finished, with a pointed look toward Dean's colorful jaw.

Dean massaged his jaw with a sheepish expression while Troy coughed into his fist, just as sheepishly.

"Anyway," Kelly went on, linking an arm through Troy's. "We're glad you could come—both of you."

"Uh, that's right," Dean agreed, though he gave Felicia one more baffled look.

Kelly mentally shook her head, thinking Dean should be the last one to question a long-shot romance.

Eventually, everyone who'd come to the meeting found places in Kelly's apartment to sit. Dean seated himself last, settling on the edge of Kelly's Lazy-Boy. He planted his elbows on the chair arms, steeped his fingers, and looked straight at his father. "I want responsibility for Robby," he announced.

Kirk, who'd been lounging on Kelly's sofa with his arms along the top of it, shot up his eyebrows. "And just what is that supposed to mean?"

"It means we're going to formalize what I already should have been doing. Robby is going to live with me. Permanently. And I'll be the one to make decisions concerning him." Dean paused. "Including when you can whisk him off to Greece with you."

Kirk's eyes got narrow. Robby, meanwhile, looked stunned. "Why?" Kirk asked.

Dean gave his father a direct stare. "Because, face it, you're not much of a parent."

Kirk snorted. Dean ignored him and went on. "Unfortunately, I've been following your example, refusing to take full responsibility. Well, I'm through being like you, or

even thinking I'm like you. I'm going to do what *I* want now." His gaze went up to Kelly, standing by his side. She smiled back down at him. Their fingers met and laced.

Kirk's brows drew down. "And you *want* to take care of Robby?"

Dean turned to Robby. White-faced, Robby stared back at him. To one side, Troy raised his eyebrows.

"Yes," Dean said.

Kirk tapped his fingers on top of the sofa. "Well, I don't know."

"No more telegrams demanding you come home." Dean's attention switched back to Kirk. "You can do whatever *you* want."

Kirk's eyes got even narrower. "Happens I like the telegrams."

Dean blinked. Unhampered by surprise, Kelly stepped in. "Fine. We'll continue with the obnoxious telegrams, sent at random intervals. We won't forget you."

Kirk looked at Dean questioningly. Dean frowned, obviously confused, but he nodded. "Yes," he told Kirk carefully. "We'll stay in touch."

Troy, nudged by Felicia, cleared his throat and offered, "Yes, Uncle Kirk. We'll keep in touch."

Kirk's gaze shot to Troy, then back to Dean. After a long moment he lifted his arms from the sofa and stood. "You want Robby? Fine. You got him."

There was a beat of silence, then Robby whooped, and ran to throw his arms around Dean's neck. Dean's eyes went wide, but he hugged Robby back.

Kirk, looking distant, shrugged. "Well, I'm off. Who knows? I may even catch up with Marisa."

The next morning at the quaint little chapel with the big yellow sun tacked onto its side, the wedding ceremony proceeded without a hitch. Completely done with his sulks, Robby was the ring bearer. Troy and Felicia, trading meaningful glances, played the part of the attendants. Both bride and groom looked suitably besotted.

Upon being pronounced husband and wife, the groom kissed the bride with a warmth and passion that convinced everyone present how deeply in love he was. As Dean led his new bride down the aisle and toward the front door, however, a peculiar expression crossed his face.

"What?" Kelly asked.

Dean frowned and started to shake his head. Then he leaned down to whisper in her ear. Kelly immediately turned a bright shade of red. "You remember!" she accused.

"I do," Dean admitted, looking rather pink in the face himself. "That much, anyway, and only just this minute. But that's beside the point. What do you say? Could we?"

Kelly gave a quick glance to the side to make sure no one could hear them. "Fur-lined handcuffs? What else do you remember?"

Dean got very close to her ear. "That we never got around to using them. But we will this time, darling, we surely will."

Kelly could tell by his smile, confident now—maybe a wee bit *too* confident—that, indeed, they would get around to using them 'this time.' She raised her brows, then smiled and snuggled closer to his side. Dean might surprise her now and then, but he was never going to be a stranger again. She knew just who he was now: the man who loved her, really loved her.

Kelly's smile turned smug as they walked out onto the sun-filled sidewalk. Fur-lined handcuffs, hm? She couldn't wait to see what else he might remember.

The End

[About the Author](#)

Alyssa Kress completed her first novel at age six, an unlikely romance between a lion and a jackal. Despite earning two degrees from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and spending nearly a decade in the construction industry, she's yet to see her feet stay firmly on the ground. She now lives in Southern California, together with her husband and two children.

You can learn more about Alyssa Kress and her other novels at <http://www.alyssakress.com>.

[Other Books by Alyssa Kress available at Amazon](#)

[The Heart Heist](#)

[The Indiscreet Ladies of Green Ivy Way](#)

[Asking For It](#)

[Love and the Millionairess](#)

[Working on a Full House](#)

[Your Scheming Heart](#)

[I Gotta Feeling](#)

[Preview of The Heart Heist](#)

by Alyssa Kress

Wind whipped ice across Matt's face as he rappelled down the sheer wall of cliff. Even though his heart raced, he slowed his speed since a blast of that wind could knock him into the cliff like a paper toy. At the same time he couldn't afford to be too careful. Five minutes was all he had. Five minutes before the explosive set by the Holiday bomber would go off.

Sweat beaded his forehead as he dangled hundreds of feet above the ground, searching the cold granite face of rock. Four minutes now. If Matt didn't find the hurt climbers soon they'd all be blown into pieces the size of confetti.

He was about to give up hope when he caught a glimpse of color, deep in a crevasse. Matt swung toward that color, counting down the seconds in his head, expertly adjusting his fit teenage muscles. Only three minutes now. His arms reached out to take hold of—what? Helpless woman, terrified child, wounded youth? He couldn't see—

The sound of his bedroom door opening swept Matt abruptly from the edge of the cliff.

"Matt, aren't you coming to dinner? I called you five minutes ago."

Quickly composing his face, Matt turned from the bedroom window. "Five minutes, already?" A rush of adrenaline still pulsed through him as he swiveled his wheelchair to face his sister. The expression on her face was quizzical.

Gee, it would be nice if people around here knocked before opening other people's bedroom doors. Matt sighed, wheeling toward her. He was sixteen years old, after all. Didn't he deserve a little privacy?

"Are you all right?" Kerrin put a hand to his forehead. "You look all flushed."

"I'm fine." Drawing his head out from under her palm, Matt flushed even more, hardly wanting her to guess what he'd been doing right before she'd horned in on him. If

his older sister got an inkling of Matt's secret fantasies she'd be all over him to go back to physical therapy. Kerrin was a decade older than he was, but full of naïve delusions. She'd get a gooey look in her eyes and spout a lot of nonsense about how Matt could recover the use of his legs. She'd probably tell him he could become an Olympic star. Kerrin was completely crazy.

"I made spaghetti and meatballs," his sister now informed Matt, leading the way down the hall.

Matt stifled a groan. "You made dinner?"

Kerrin turned around with a hurt expression. "Is there something wrong with that?"

Matt was too smart to answer. "What happened to Mom? She go into town?"

"Mom and Dad drove to Bishop. They've got one of their outer space meetings."

Brother and sister exchanged a look. Matt grinned. "One has to admit, we've got the most interesting parents in town."

"Out of this world," Kerrin agreed. "Oh dear, I think that's my garlic bread I smell burning."

Still grinning, Matt watched her race down the hall, her tawny curls flying. All right, so she was completely hopeless in the kitchen, but she managed it with a certain screwball charm. There was no reason on earth Kerrin should be adding 'town spinster' to the list of other town titles she'd begun to collect, he thought, as he wheeled down the redwood panelled hall.

In the airy kitchen, the garlic bread smoked on the counter while Kerrin busily threw some spaghetti into a bowl. The resigned way the noodles fell told Matt that Kerrin had managed to overcook them. She'd probably had her nose stuck in a book and forgotten to turn off the heat. The woman had two master's degrees and ran the Mono county school system with the strategy and skill of a four-star general, but she couldn't quite manage pasta.

She couldn't handle living on her own, either, and though she claimed she preferred the company of her family, Matt suspected something else was going on. It was probably just as well. She would have starved.

Matt rolled to a position by the kitchen table. "Dad says you're going to L.A. tomorrow."

Kerrin started. Guiltily, Matt thought. "He told you that?" Her eyes avoided Matt's as she brought the food to the table.

"Uh huh." Matt watched as Kerrin attempted to dish him some sticky, and hence uncooperative, noodles. "But he wouldn't tell me why you were driving two hundred miles to a place I know you loathe. So I figured—" Matt paused, watching her face closely. She'd been touchy as a kitten for a week now. He had one guess why. "So I figured it must be a man."

Kerrin choked and nearly dropped her load of noodles onto the Formica surface of the kitchen table. Matt could hardly believe his eyes as color rose to her cheeks.

"My God," he exclaimed, astonished. "It *is* a man!"

"No!" Kerrin gave a determined shake to the serving ladle, and managed to divest it of clinging noodles. "It is not. That is—" Her color deepened. "All right. I suppose he is male in gender, but it's not what you think."

"C'mon Ker." Matt was grinning from ear to ear. "You can tell your own brother. Where did you meet?"

"We haven't met—yet. And it's not a date." The thought seemed to make her flustered as all get out. "It's...town business."

A lie. All right, so Kerrin had been fool enough to let Ollie, the town's auto mechanic, talk her into becoming mayor instead of him this year, but there was no possible 'town business' that could involve Los Angeles, two hundred miles to the southwest.

"Give," Matt said.

"It's an interview," Kerrin elaborated. "I'm interviewing someone."

Another lie. "Really? For what?"

Her green-gold eyes glanced at him and away. "Summer school teacher."

Matt stopped eating. He was so discomfited he didn't even notice the faint, whispery tone of Kerrin's answer, indicative of a third lie. "Summer school?" he squeaked. "I thought the state wasn't giving us any money for summer school." In fact, he'd been counting on it.

"They aren't." Kerrin seemed to catch herself, and added, "That is, a special committee came up with the cash. We're very lucky."

"Right. Lucky." Matt slammed his fork onto the table. "Forget it, Ker. I'm not going to summer school."

The argument was familiar and Kerrin seized on it. Anything to change the subject from her trip to L.A. "Sure you are. By taking Health this summer you'll have a free period to take Driver's Ed in the fall."

"Driver's Ed? Are you crazy?"

"One way or another you're going to be driving."

His lips thinned and his golden eyes bore into her. Considering the fact that she'd just been lying her head off, Kerrin thought she handled the searching look well. Besides, Matt wasn't trying to find out about the alleged summer school teacher any more. No, now he was busy doing what he'd been doing the past three years of his life. He was trying to get out of having to spend time with the other, able-bodied kids his own age.

"You just don't get it, do you?" he said, his voice soft.

Kerrin gave him a guileless look as she forced some spaghetti into her mouth. "Get what?"

His straight mouth quirked into a smile. "Mom and Dad won't make me."

This was most certainly true, so Kerrin didn't bother to refute it. "I suppose you have something better to do?"

"As a matter of fact, yes." Matt grew a smug smile. "Private research."

"Oh, brother. Not about that pyromaniac, Mr. Holiday?"

Matt raised his brows. "Mr. Holiday is not a pyromaniac. Pyros merely set things on fire. Blowing them up requires a great deal more sophistication."

"I see."

"And he takes photographs of his successes." Matt picked up his fork and gamely shoved it into the noodles. "At the instant of explosion. I showed you the one of the dam on the Columbia River. He sent it to the AP wire service. Ballsy, huh?"

"If you say so." Kerrin got up from the table, hoping Matt didn't remark how little she'd eaten. She could never eat when she was nervous, and nervous was a pale word for how she felt about her trip to L.A. tomorrow. Summer school teacher? Hardly. The man she was going to meet in L.A. was about as far as you could get from anyone Kerrin would hire to teach young minds.

At the sink Kerrin stopped and wondered, for the hundredth time, if she were doing the right thing even meeting the guy. For the hundredth time she closed her eyes and assured herself this was her only possible course.

Tomorrow she would meet that man and...she'd talk him out of taking the job in Freedom. He'd never even set foot in her town.

"Hey, Ker, you okay?"

She flinched. God, Matt was quick with that wheelchair. He'd slipped up right behind her.

"Fine," she pronounced automatically. "I'm just fine."

But Matt looked up at her, still concerned. "Because if you're nervous about meeting this, er, summer school teacher, I could give you a few pointers."

Not back to the summer school teacher. Buying time, Kerrin shook her hands free of water, then turned to give her brother a raised-eyebrow regard. "Could you, now?"

"Sure." Matt's concerned expression eased into a grin. "Hey, I'm a guy, aren't I?"

"I told you, this is a job interview." She barely stumbled over the lie this time. "It's not about *guys*." Matt had to be the only male in the world who thought Kerrin had a chance for romance in her life. Unfortunately, he thought so with single-minded determination.

"Right." Matt rolled half a wheel back and looked down her slight figure. "But just pretending for a minute that it is about, ya know, guys, there's a few things you could do. To encourage the fellow."

A brief, harsh laugh escaped Kerrin and she quickly closed her mouth. The only thing she wanted to 'encourage the fellow' to do was leave them all alone.

Matt shook his head. "For starters, Ker, you could dress a little more...open. Like you're not afraid to show your skin?"

"Ahem. Could I?"

"Hey." Matt reached out to tap her jeans-clad knee. "It's nice skin."

"Thanks." *Nice skin.* Well at least she had something going for her.

"Of course that skin could use some rounding out," Matt went on, rubbing the chin he'd had to start shaving the year before. "How about some ice cream?"

"Right now?"

"Sure. You didn't eat much dinner, anyway, did you?"

So he'd noticed. Kerrin bit the inside of her cheek and felt another stab of guilt, just as she had at the sink. Was it normal, she wondered, for the victim of blackmail to feel guilty? For she'd been blackmailed by those people in Los Angeles, pure and simple. "Okay, Matt, ice cream. But let's take it outside. It's hot in here."

Pleased, Matt wheeled with practiced grace between the freezer and dish cabinets. Kerrin watched him and wondered how much longer the town was going to be safe for a kid in a wheelchair. No matter how agile and strong Matt kept himself, he'd still be vulnerable to a man with two legs. For that matter, everyone in town would be vulnerable, once that fellow from L.A. got here.

And Kerrin was the only person in town who'd know who he was, and the danger he presented.

"Come on." Wheeling, Matt led the way outside.

On the porch, the air smelled of sage and pine and a little hot dust. From somewhere up the hill, where the sun still poked above the peaks of the Sierra Nevada, a bird called. But Kerrin looked down, to the bottom of the valley.

"Here." Matt thrust a bowl at Kerrin from his lap. "Eat."

Startled, Kerrin accepted the bowl. Sinking to a seat on the wooden steps below Matt and thinking about her meeting the next day, she continued gazing toward the valley, and the Owens River.

Lazy, the Owens meandered between desert-dry banks until it hit the chunky concrete physical plant that straddled it, corralling the river into servitude. From there an aqueduct carried the water of the Owens Valley to a thirsty Los Angeles, two hundred miles away. The plant and the aqueduct beyond it were owned by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. They'd built it and they ran it.

It certainly was vulnerable. Kerrin had to admit it. If anything happened to that plant no water would go through to Los Angeles.

Matt licked his spoon and his gaze, too, fell to the bottom of the valley. "Say, wouldn't this view be different if they'd never built the aqueduct?"

Kerrin froze, her hands cupping the cold ceramic bowl.

"There'd be fields down there instead of sagebrush," he went on, oblivious to her stark silence. "By now Freedom would have become a big city, 'stead of a rinky dink town."

"But there is an aqueduct." Kerrin's voice was hoarse. She nodded toward the structure. "After ninety years we've come to depend on that thing." Yes, at her meeting with them last week the mighty Department of Water and Power had made that clear to her. The economic life of Freedom depended on the fact that two hundred miles away Angelenos drank their water. If the DWP pulled out of the town, the jobs and money that came with their presence would likewise disappear.

Matt shrugged. "It's not a natural relationship. Them dependent on us. Us on them."

Kerrin could only agree, silently. But that dependency was already a fact of life in Freedom. If the DWP wanted to send an "expert" in security systems to check out the safety of their facility, there was little the town mayor could do to stop them. No, not even when that "expert" was an expert at *evading* security systems!

All Kerrin had been able to wrangle was a meeting with the man. All she could hope was that this meeting would convince him not to take the job, not to come to her town.

"Aw, Kerrin, you haven't taken a single bite."

Kerrin looked down at her untouched Rocky Road, then up at Matt. He looked so frustrated that she forced a spoonful of the sweet stuff into her mouth. Her eyes searched his to give her credit.

"How are you *ever* going to get a guy?" Matt lamented.

"I don't know." Kerrin swallowed her bite of ice cream. "It'll take a miracle, probably."

"And knowing you, you probably believe that one will happen, too. A miracle."

A smile started at one corner of her mouth. "It might." *She was counting on it.*

"Like some knight on a white charger is going to come and sweep you up off your feet."

"Maybe." *She was sure of it.*

Matt's face expressed disgust as only a man of sixteen years could manage. "And that's about what it would take," he pronounced. "A white knight."

"No doubt." In fact, Kerrin couldn't agree more. It would take a full-blown white knight to brave the dragons that scared off all other men, an armored hero to breach the wall of her defenses. But that such a man existed Kerrin didn't doubt.

For him she wouldn't be too smart or too skinny. To her white knight it wouldn't matter that Kerrin had three college degrees, that she actually wanted to live in a small town in the middle of nowhere or that, worst of all, she was a complete dunce in all things physical. No, Kerrin didn't know his name or point of origin, his profession or his age, but she knew that one day he would come for her. And he would be...perfect.

Kerrin's dreamy gaze roved over the majestic natural landscape. *From somewhere out there he would come.*

And then, unfortunately for her daydream, her eyes tripped over the concrete aqueduct. Far more immediate problems came crashing back to mind. The DWP, that man, the town. Kerrin closed her eyes and tried not to moan.

It didn't matter. Her white knight was still on his way. She'd believe that through every trial and tribulation. *He would come.*

Though it sure would be nice, Kerrin thought, if he'd choose to come soon.



This is an authorized free edition from
www.obooko.com

Although you do not have to pay for this e-book, the author's intellectual property rights remain fully protected by international Copyright law. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only: it must not be redistributed commercially or offered for sale in any form. If you paid for this free edition, or to gain access to it, we suggest you demand an immediate refund and report the transaction to the author and obooko.