



Blaze®

AFTER DARK



.....
WENDY ETHERINGTON

Wendy Etherington

After Dark

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Aidan Kendrick may be rich, mysterious and hot as anything, but he's also surly, brooding and deeply troubled. Not the kind of guy Sloan Caldwell can really afford to get mixed up with. She's head of the historical society, so her sole interest in the enigmatic newcomer, she keeps reminding herself, is the heritage home he's renovating on Palmer's Island. Right. He's tall, dark and gorgeous spelled with a capital G. Soon Sloan's attention is focused only on the bedroom as she and Aidan give in to a lust that's as intense as it is immediate, and pleasure is the only object... until tragedy interrupts, and they have to catch a killer!

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**He was standing behind her.
All six-foot-three-amazing-inches of him.**

Sloan drew a quick breath as Aidan turned her to face him. She lifted her chin and his lips captured hers, silencing her in a flash. Her heart leaped in her chest, and she was pretty sure she let out a moan of longing.

He didn't hesitate to tangle his tongue with hers. He tasted of the lemon he drank with his tea. He smelled of sawdust and spicy sandalwood.

She clutched his T-shirt in her fist, grasping to get closer. She wanted to feel his bare, sleek skin against hers, to have that intense gaze focused on her, to feel his muscles harden beneath her... to have him tremble and gasp along with her.

His hands molded her to his body and she felt the need, the hunger and the wild lust they'd been trying to deny. It had been too long, and she wasn't going to miss her chance now that it had come, to satisfy her desires...and his.

Blaze

Dear Reader,

I'm a Southerner with roots so deep my mother has directly traced me (since I'm the oldest grandchild) back seven generations to my great-several-times-over grandfather, who was one of the first non-Native Americans to live in Reeseville, Alabama.

Along with family histories, telling stories is a Southern tradition, and now that I live in South Carolina, I'm learning new tales to share. Palmer's Island is my fictional combination of two real islands off the coast near Charleston—Isle of Palms and Sullivan's Island. Beautiful and quiet, they represent a beloved living history in this part of the country.

Like any real Southern town, I infused my island with nosy but caring citizens, church ladies who love to bake casseroles and a beauty salon as gossip central. It was also the perfect place for my grieving hero, Aidan Kendrick, to hide and brood in a dark, damaged house behind a wall of tangled foliage. Fortunately for him, however, Sloan Caldwell and her fellow islanders are like the island itself—abundant with sunshine and forgiving of mistakes.

I hope you enjoy my tale of love and redemption—with an old-fashioned mystery mixed in to keep everybody guessing.

Best wishes,

Wendy Etherington

After Dark
Wendy Etherington



www.millsandboon.co.uk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wendy Etherington was born and raised in the deep South—and she has the fried-chicken recipes and NASCAR ticket stubs to prove it. The author of nearly twenty books, she writes full-time from her home in South Carolina, where she lives with her husband and two daughters. She can be reached via www.wendyetherington.com or by regular mail at P.O. Box 3016, Irmo, SC 29063.

To my cousin, Mark Durham, a true Southerner
who knows how to tell a good story

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1

SLOAN CALDWELL yanked at the hem of her little black dress, then lifted the worn brass knocker on the big oak door. The resulting tapping noise sounded like a series of gunshots, echoing in the misty, dark night.

Every small town in the South had a crumbling, spooky old mansion on a hill, and hers didn't disappoint—though their hill was more of a dune. To think, they now had a genuinely dark, eccentric and notorious owner to go with it.

It was spine-tingling stuff for Palmer's Island, South Carolina.

As a barrier island just over three miles wide, with five restaurants, one bar, no high-rise hotels, one public park that was beach-accessible and its largest house—the one she was standing on the porch of—not backing up to the beach, the island itself was considered a bit eccentric. But the residents who lived there and the tourists who visited liked it that way.

After several long minutes, the door was flung open. The tall, dim shadow of a broad-shouldered man filled the frame. “What do you—” He stopped, cocking his head. “Who are you?”

Sloan really wished she could see his face, specifically his eyes—though she knew from the TV, newspaper and Internet how gorgeous he was—but the lack of light on the porch or in the foyer left most of the details about him to her memory and imagination.

She swallowed and held out her hand. “I'm Sloan Caldwell, Director of the Palmer's Island Historical Preservation Society.”

“You're a society matron?” he asked, his disbelieving tone clear.

Like blue hair was a requirement for social awareness. “Miss, actually.” She tried a smile and put her hand on her hip. She had nice hips. Men usually noticed. “May I come in?”

He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the door frame. “No.”

“No?”

“I'm busy at the moment. Come back another time.” He started to turn away.

She reached into the briefcase hitched on her shoulder and pulled out a file folder, which she handed him. “But you contacted me. About the renovations to the house?” she added when he remained silent.

Sighing audibly, he reached behind him and flipped a switch, which turned out to belong to a small desk lamp sitting on a sawhorse in the foyer. “My lawyer sent this,” he said, staring at the papers in the file, then flicking his gaze to hers. “I didn't contact you.”

Silver. His eyes were a cool and piercing silver.

Again, she'd known this both from his recent notoriety courtesy of twenty-four-hour cable news and from the research she'd done on him. But the pImages** hadn't done him justice. The pictures weren't full of annoyance and sensual power. Nor had she been prepared for the breath-stealing impact of having that gaze focused on her. Not to mention the fact that those eyes were surrounded by a lean face, the sculpted jaw shadowed by dark stubble and tons of tousled, wavy black hair.

She shivered. And not in a bad way.

Clearing her throat, she tried to remember she was there on business. “As your lawyer is no doubt aware—even if you aren't—all renovations to Batherton House must be approved by the committee before any work can be done.”

“So?”

“Your neighbors heard hammering.”

“What neighbors? The property encompasses three acres.”

“But past the intimidating, spooky and overgrown bushes and trees, there are houses on either side of you. You just can't see them.” She smiled in the face of his frustration. “Sound tends to echo

out here on the island.” She accepted the documents he thrust back into her hand. “I thought I should come out here personally and take a look at your plans.”

She could practically see the wheels in his brain spinning, striving desperately to find a way to get rid of her. She found his efforts surprising and interesting. Very few men had the urge to slam the door in her face.

And not just because she was the sheriff’s only daughter.

“Do you always come to business meetings at nearly nine at night, dressed like that?” he asked, drawing his eyebrows together.

“I preserve the past, Mr. Kendrick,” she said huskily, stepping closer, so that their bodies nearly touched. “But I live very much in the present.”

His eyes shone with interest for a split second, then he stepped back.

She walked past him, the faint scent of whiskey brushing by her nose. Drinking alone in a dark old house? Aidan Kendrick certainly lived up to his eccentric reputation.

“I bet you were surprised by the working electrical system,” she said, walking across the foyer’s wood floors and into the parlor, where she flipped on the switch for the bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. “Old Doc Marcus replaced it about twenty years ago.”

“Nothing surprises me, Miss Caldwell.” He paused. “At least not until you appeared on my porch.”

Smiling, she glanced over her shoulder at him. “I have that effect on some men.”

He nearly succeeding in looking amused. “I’ll bet.”

She wandered around the room, noting the stacks of boxes in one corner, the collection of hand and power tools gathered in another. Wondering about the lack of furniture, she strolled past him. She peeked into the dining room on the opposite side of the foyer, but finding nothing but a creaking and broken chandelier and an impressive collection of cobwebs, she moved into the central hallway and headed toward the back of the house, where she knew the kitchen was located.

Here, at least, there was a battered oak table and a set of chairs that looked reasonably sturdy. There was also evidence that someone actually lived in the house.

A brand-new stainless-steel refrigerator took up one corner. Empty water bottles were strewn across the scarred, yellowing, linoleum countertops. A partial loaf of bread sat next to a plate bearing a half-eaten ham sandwich. A nearly empty bottle of whiskey rested beside a stack of red plastic cups.

The whole place was depressing. It was hard to believe the Atlantic Ocean ebbed and flowed only a few blocks away.

She lowered herself into one of the chairs, set her briefcase beside her, then looked up at him. “It was rude of you not to invite me in. I thought you were from Atlanta.”

He frowned. “I am.”

“They never taught you Southern hospitality up there?”

“We’re a rare breed, I guess,” he said, his sarcasm clear. “For instance, we rarely come uninvited to someone’s house, then walk around like we own the place.”

She shrugged. “I came to see the house. I didn’t see any point in not getting started. Do you ever offer uninvited guests something to drink?”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “I have whiskey and water.”

She needed water for her dry mouth. Heavens, the man was so tempting. But she knew he’d smirk at that request. “I’ll have whiskey.”

“One finger or two?”

“One.”

Without comment, he moved to the counter, then poured a splash of the amber liquid into a fresh plastic cup. When he returned to her, he held out the cup.

She didn’t quite suppress a wince. “No ice?”

“I haven’t hooked up the ice maker yet.”

She took the cup, glanced into it, then tossed back the contents in one swallow. Her throat burned, then her chest. But she didn't cough or flinch.

On occasion, she liked the rich, smoky taste of whiskey. However, she preferred it with a serious game of poker. Or a hot fire and a warm guy. Or, even better, a hot guy and a blazing fire.

"Do I pass?" she asked, handing him back the cup.

"Pass what?"

"The test on not being afraid of you."

"I'm not testing you," he said, his annoyance intensifying. "I'm not doing anything with you."

But you could be. She'd never gone after a guy who clearly wanted to see the back of her. In fact, she'd had enough of guys she wanted, but who'd suddenly realized they didn't want her.

Guy, really.

After wallowing in Rejected Land a few months back, she'd decided she liked her guys fun, enthralled and uncomplicated. Which Davis had been. Before he'd decided to run off to Atlanta after some other woman—and a job with the man glaring at her now.

Which brought up a whole new complication. Why had Aidan Kendrick decided to come to Palmer's Island? Did it have anything to do with Davis? How well did the two men know each other?

When her life decided to come full circle, it had apparently chosen to jump on the upside-down roller coaster, rather than the merry-go-round.

"Oh, so you're not trying to intimidate me into running back to town and leaving you to your brooding and hammering?"

"Sure I am." His lips curved. "And, yes, you would greatly aid my efforts if you'd saunter back to town."

The effort at humor was intriguing. Appealing. If he could be any more appealing, that is. "I don't saunter."

"Yeah, well, I'm renovating, not hammering."

"What about brooding?"

He lifted his shoulders in a careless shrug. "The Irish are entitled."

"I suppose we are."

"We?"

She held out her hand. "Sloan—warrior."

This time he took her hand and shook it. The contact sent a bold shock up her arm. "Aidan—little fire."

He looked pretty cold to her, but there was heat in there somewhere, behind the ice of his eyes. No man could have been through what he had, come through still standing, and not have a flame burning deep inside.

"And I doubt there's much you're afraid of," he added.

"True." She reached for her briefcase, and—again—wished he wasn't so sexy, amazing... dangerous. "The blue-steel Glock nine millimeter I carry in my glove compartment doesn't hurt."

SOMEHOW, Aidan found himself sitting opposite her at the beat-up kitchen table. Unwanted desire crawled over his skin, even as part of him craved her brightness.

She was the very last thing he needed.

And the very thing he longed for.

"I'm sorry to call so late," she said briskly, flipping her long blond hair over her shoulder, then digging into her bulging briefcase. "My day job forces me to keep irregular hours when dealing with the historical society business. And since you have no phone, I had to—"

"Day job?"

She glanced up. "I'm a librarian."

"No way." He'd figured pole dancer. Well, her body screamed pole dancer. Maybe, subconsciously he was hoping for a pole dancer. He let his gaze drift over her buxom figure—all that

he could see above the table. Beneath, he knew there were miles of firm, tanned legs. “No damn way,” he added.

“I’m beginning to think you’re a man who leans toward stereotypes.” Casually, she pulled a yellow-paper legal pad from her case before setting the bag on the floor. “I’m sorry I can’t oblige you,” she said as she uncapped a pen and met his gaze. “But if it’s important, I can tell you that our town historical society doesn’t have the cachet of nearby Charleston. They have the wealthy past, the port and the bustling tourism industry, after all. We have our own place in history—this house being one of the premier monuments, since it lasted through the War of 1812, the Civil War and countless hurricanes. We have a strong community and a need to preserve our beginnings. To respect our ancestors and all they sacrificed.

“That’s all.” Her bright blue eyes burned with pride. “No hidden agenda. No fund-raiser planned to lure your money into our accounts.”

Maybe he’d misjudged her, and maybe he hadn’t, but he refused to feel shame. There was a time when he would have considered cynicism a flaw. Now it was a vital part of life. That’s what the past had done to him, stolen his openness, turned him wary and hard.

That guarded part of him spoke now, sensing that keeping her at a distance was vital. “It’s good to know I won’t be fleeced by you and a bunch of blue-hairs.”

She wrote on her pad in a neat, looping style. Very feminine. “There’s a committee of five. All volunteers. One blonde, two brunettes, a redhead and one with silver hair. The ages range from Penelope, who’s sixteen, to Sister Mary Katherine, who’s eighty-two. Would you like to know their qualifications?”

“No. But...Penelope?”

“Lovely girl. Brilliant with computers—quite a contrast to her old-fashioned name. She’s digitized all our historical photos and documents. She’s very shy.” Her gaze met his. “And she will not be coming to see you.”

“Why not?”

Wait. Why should he care? Why was he already picturing some tiny girl with big glasses and mousy brown hair?

“I’m sure you can guess,” Sloan said, smirking.

“No, I really can’t.”

“You’re entirely too...intense for a young girl.”

Right. Of course he was. He didn’t want some kid hanging around any more than he wanted an interfering librarian smiling at him, drinking his whiskey, smelling like fruit, flowers and heaven.

She ripped off the paper she’d written on, reached into her briefcase again, then crossed the room and stuck the note to the fridge, apparently with a magnet. “This is my home phone, cell phone and e-mail address. You’re going to need them as we move through the renovation process.”

Who carried magnets in their briefcase? He was distracted enough by the note and the sensual sway of her hips to ask, “What else do you have in that bag?”

She turned and smiled. “All manner of things, Mr. Kendrick. You’ll find I’m thorough and efficient.”

“Part of the librarian code of honor?”

“Naturally.”

Again, he realized she’d effortlessly made him curious about something that, fifteen minutes ago, he would have sworn wouldn’t have interested him in the least.

She returned to her seat. “We really should discuss, in detail, the plans you have for Batherton House.”

“My research shows it’s called Batherton Mansion.”

“It used to be. In its present state, I think that’s a bit premature, don’t you?”

He could hardly argue with that, but he leaned back in his chair and fixed her with an irritated scowl. “And yet I don’t see why I should discuss, in detail, any of my plans with you.”

“Didn’t your lawyer explain that all changes to the property have to be approved by the committee?”

“Yes, but I’m not changing any of the original structure, and he told me I got approval for the paint colors, trim and light fixtures last month. Everything else is simply repairs.”

“That’s true.” She cleared her throat. “Pardon if this sounds rude, but how do I know you’re not changing any of the original structure unless I inspect the property on a regular basis?”

Taking my word, I guess, is too much to ask.

Thanks to the well-documented media coverage of the tragic headlines involving his family, and his own mysterious, misunderstood behavior, he could hardly blame her. But the resentment, which was mostly self-directed, burned.

He shouldn’t be here with her, talking as if the past three months hadn’t happened. He needed to be alone with his ghosts, fury and guilt. He didn’t want her sly smiles and sparkling eyes bringing humor and lightness into the dark where he’d retreated.

Where he belonged.

And he was damned tired of feeling as if she’d taken control of everything since the moment he’d opened the door.

“Not taking the word of a crazy man?” He shifted forward, watching her eyes widen. “Despite what you read in the papers, my parents being murdered didn’t send me over the edge.” He almost smiled. “Not yet, anyway.”

2

SHE LET OUT a gasping breath.

She extended her hand and her fingers brushed across his fist, clenched on the table. “I never intended—”

When he lurched to his feet, she fell silent.

He shouldn’t have brought up the ugly darkness. Why had he?

To be cruel? To dim that bright, clever smile? Had his family’s pain and tragedy really turned him into such an unfeeling ass?

With his back to her, he forced his emotions to the pit of his stomach. “I understand you and your committee have a job to do. So do I. And I need to do it alone.”

“I don’t plan to burden you with my presence on a daily basis. Weekly inspections will be fine.”

He suppressed a wince. “Inspections?”

“Visits,” she amended.

There had to be a way around this historical accuracy nonsense. He only wanted to work and sweat, bring back elegance and beauty to something in this world.

“Suppose I ignore these rules? And your visits?”

“You could, I guess. But Sister Mary Katherine would consider that dishonorable, and you really don’t want to get on her bad side.”

Blue-hairs, teenagers, librarians and nuns were going to rule his life for the foreseeable future. It was completely, jaw-droppingly ridiculous.

“Also,” Sloan added, “My daddy is the sheriff, and my granddaddy is the county judge. You really don’t want to get on their bad side.”

And the law. Great.

He’d seen enough cops in the last year to last a lifetime. If only her cousin was a reporter, his torture would be complete.

Heading toward the whiskey bottle, he said, “The blueprints are in the library. Look at them all you want, make copies, pass them out to your fellow committee members, alert the media.”

“Thank you. That would be helpful.”

He poured his drink, then rested against the counter to sip it. “The carpenter is coming tomorrow. I’m sure you can discuss all my insidious plans with him.”

“I’ll be sure to do that,” she said cheerfully.

“So go.”

She angled her head. “Does drinking improve or sour your mood?”

“Go!”

Shrugging, not looking at all offended by his surliness, she rose from the table, then walked down the hall.

She was right. She didn’t saunter. She strutted.

He poured more whiskey.

Rage and regret were living, breathing things. And both volatile. He longed to remember what his life had been like before, when his family had been happy and secure, when his communications company, which he’d inherited from his father and which had supported them all, had flourished. When he’d been full of himself and the fortunes he’d been surrounded by. When he hadn’t thought being on time to dinner would be the difference between life and death. When he hadn’t realized the power a total stranger had over everything that mattered.

Berating the police for lack of justice hadn’t solved anything. Avoiding the media hadn’t made them any less likely to go away. Selling the company hadn’t soothed his grief. Working himself to exhaustion hadn’t, as yet, tempered his anger.

Give it time, his friends said.

So he was.

As he sipped his drink, he forcefully pushed his thoughts to the work he'd accomplished the last few days and ignored the briefcase sitting on the floor a few feet away. He'd sanded the floor in the dining room, preparing it for staining. He'd accepted delivery of a mattress and box-spring set and assembled it into the antique mahogany bed frame he'd bought a couple of weeks ago at an estate sale. He'd repaired the bookcase in the library.

Where Sexy Sloan was now.

Why didn't she leave? Why did the sensual, tropical fruit scent of her perfume linger, even when she wasn't in the room?

He stiffened as he heard her move down the hall toward him.

"These are really good," she said, holding the rolled-up plans. "You've done a lot of work already."

"I haven't changed anything," he said sharply. "Just simple repairs."

She held up her hand. "I can see that. I saw the pictures of the new stair and balcony railing. Did you have it built?"

"I bought it at an estate sale."

"I have a hard time seeing you puttering around old houses on weekends."

He paused in the process of sipping his whiskey. "I don't putter."

"No." Her gaze drifted down his body, leaving heat and need in its wake. "I imagine you don't."

"You've got what you want," he said harshly, irritated by her ability to arouse him so effortlessly.

Now go.

She seemed to sense his unspoken words and crossed to her briefcase, which she set on the kitchen table. "I'll get the plans back to you tomorrow."

"Fine."

Straightening, she faced him. "I'm not your enemy, Aidan."

It was the first time she'd called him by his given name, and the moment sent a pulse of excitement through his veins. A moment he didn't want and shouldn't feel.

"I'm sorry about your parents," she added.

He never knew what to say to this. Thanks? They lived a long and full life? Since neither of those were true, he remained silent.

Hitching her briefcase on her shoulder, she started out. "It's a nice town. You'll be—"

"Happy?" He shook his head. "I want to be alone."

"I was going to say you'll be accepted," she said softly. "If you make an effort."

"I want to be alone."

"Yeah?" She cocked her head, her eyes bright with challenge. "How's that workin' out for you so far?"

He tossed back the rest of his whiskey. "Fine," he lied.

With a half smile, she nodded. "I'll leave you to it." She turned and headed down the hall and toward the front door.

Finally.

And yet some mad, invisible force pulled him after her.

Watching her hips sway as she walked, he reflected on times when he'd been whole and happy. He used to run a successful, international communications company. He used to wear custom-made designer suits and attend all the important events in Atlanta. He used to be sociable. He used to relish the attention of smart, beautiful women like Sloan.

Today, the shell of him that walked through the dark, dusty halls of this ancient house had consumed him.

But wasn't it right that he was here? Hadn't his thoughtless attitude put his parents in danger? Hadn't his failure to see the cold world realistically reminded him in a brutal way that he had to embrace darkness to see it clearly?

Didn't he deserve to be alone?

She brushed her fingers across his cheek. "Where'd you go?"

Unnerved by her touch, by the tenderness in her expressive blue eyes, he jerked back. "Nowhere pleasant."

She sighed, as if exasperated by his continual—yet completely failing—efforts at distance. "When was the last time you had a decent meal?"

He thought of the ham sandwich he'd had for dinner. "Define decent."

"I'll bring you something from Mabel's Café for lunch tomorrow. Along with returning your plans," she added quickly, as if sensing the protest that rose to his lips. "My apology for showing up unannounced tonight. Besides, if you're going to work yourself into the ground, you need nourishment. If you get sick, you can't work."

Since he could think of no immediate argument to that, he nodded. "Fine."

There was a lot of fineness going on, actually. And none of it on his part.

As they talked, he'd been keeping his gaze focused—deliberately—on her face, but now he let it slip over her curves, her long, seemingly endless legs.

Merciful heaven.

His whole body, already aroused, hardened like steel. He wanted her beyond sense and reason, beyond his self-imposed isolation. Certainly beyond what he deserved.

"Do you get a lot of teenage boys hanging out at the library?"

Since she was halfway down the steps when he spoke, she had to glance over her shoulder to look at him. She smiled, no doubt completely aware of the effect she had on the male population. "They're my best customers."

"SORRY TO DRAG all of you down here so early," Sloan began, glancing around the library's conference table at her fellow committee members. "But I felt we should get on top of this project immediately."

It was 7:00 a.m. on Tuesday, the only time everyone could gather before work and school to discuss the all-important restoration of Aidan's house.

"Batherton Mansion could be a jewel for us," said Courtney, a fiery redhead who owned the local hair and nail salon.

"If we can get Kendrick to cooperate," Helen, their local real-estate agent added. "I've dealt with him, and only through his attorney, but this guy is tough."

"But he obviously cares about history," Penelope pointed out, blinking behind her large steel-framed glasses. "Why else would he buy this house over some posh and trendy beachside resort?"

"We don't have posh and trendy," Helen said.

Penelope nodded. "Exactly. He probably wants peace and quiet." She lowered her voice. "Especially after being chased by reporters for the last few months."

"And that's precisely the problem, ladies." Sister Mary Katherine folded her hands in front of her. "We simply can't have our reputation gaining at the expense of Mr. Kendrick. He's been through enough."

"Still, we have to attract some new members to the committee," Helen reminded them. "Rich ones, if possible."

"Or a corporate sponsor," Courtney said. "We can't let the few historical properties we have fall into disrepair. Not after all we've been through."

Looking uncertain, Penelope bit her lip.

Sloan, being the lone member who'd actually encountered the prickly former executive, who'd obviously longed to throw her bodily from his precious house, tended to lean toward Helen and Courtney's side. She sympathized with his grief, but the committee had its own problems.

She was also annoyed that she lusted after the man.

And she was trying desperately to hide it.

"We just want to put his house on our brochure to attract more tourists and new members in the area, not exploit his personal life." Helen continued, "And wouldn't it be nice to hold a fund-raiser out there when everything's finished? Sort of an elegant wine-and-cheese party?"

"Or a tea," Courtney suggested. "With those sweet little biscuits Mabel makes."

Sloan frowned. "That's going to be tricky. I specifically told him we were neither using him for a fund-raiser nor after his money."

"We're not using him," Helen insisted. "We're using the house."

"Though if he wanted to make a sizable donation," Courtney added, "we certainly wouldn't say no."

"But isn't one of our goals more media exposure?" Penelope asked, as always, wise beyond her years. "If we call attention to Batherton Mansion, it will naturally call attention to the owner. I don't think Mr. Kendrick is interested in any more TV or newspaper coverage."

"Perhaps after we get to know Mr. Kendrick a bit better," Sister Mary Katherine offered, "we'll feel more comfortable asking for his help in raising our profile in the area."

Sloan didn't think it was appropriate to share with the nun just how well she wanted to get to know Aidan Kendrick, so she remained silent and let the discussion buzz around her.

She couldn't imagine losing her father so tragically, then having her life and business practices scrutinized on a daily basis. Maybe Aidan Kendrick could have handled things better—a few well-timed, but brief statements.

Instead, he'd tried to hide, and that only made the reporters more determined to uncover the dirt he was concealing. Did reckless playboy Aidan Kendrick owe money to the mob? Were his parents' supposed mugging and murders really pay-back? Was he into drugs and had crossed the wrong dealer? Had he dated a woman with a jealous boyfriend—or even a husband?

The police had discounted all these wild theories and called the case a simple mugging, but Kendrick had kept quiet, so they persisted. He'd sold his successful company, disappeared for a month, then, a couple of weeks ago, wound up on tiny Palmer's Island.

She didn't want to cause the man more problems, but if the committee didn't do something quickly, if they couldn't attract more members and their funds, they'd likely lose the historical properties they owned and maintained.

Though they'd had a lucrative budget to buy the first church established on the island and a historical home once owned by a pirate, several of their benefactors had passed away in the last few years. Those properties needed constant maintenance, payment of water and power bills and a staff of tour guides.

To keep the revenue coming in for those expenses, they had to attract new tourists to their area and sign up a whole bunch of new, dues-paying members. A really rich benefactor would be a dream come true, hence the interest in both Aidan's property and Aidan himself.

"I think we should call for a vote," Sloan said after a few minutes.

She, Helen and Courtney carried the motion three to two. "So, we plan to use Batherton Mansion in our next publicity campaign. And, ladies, let's keep this between us for now. We're going to need to approach Mr. Kendrick slowly and carefully."

"And make sure we can protect his identity," Penelope said, with concern.

"Naturally," Sloan said easily.

Approaching Aidan with this idea now would never work. In his present state, there was no way he would be open to photographers and historians tramping through his precious halls.

The ways she might soften him up flitted through her mind, heating her blood, sending anticipation soaring.

She cleared her throat and forced her attention back to business. “Now, what do all of you think of the plans?”

They discussed the various materials and styles Aidan was using and all agreed they were aesthetically superior, as well as historically accurate. The fact that this house would soon be returned to its glory, and on their little island, was exciting and encouraging.

When the meeting broke up, Penelope and Sister Mary Katherine walked out the door together and Helen took the opportunity to grab Sloan’s arm and hold her back. “So, how hot is he?”

Courtney, brown eyes sparkling with interest, leaned in to hear all the good stuff.

Remembering the wicked heat that flared intermittently in Aidan’s silver eyes, the silky-looking texture of his inky hair and his long, lean body, Sloan barely suppressed a shudder of longing. And since both women were always on top of the latest island gossip, she didn’t see any point in lying. “Off the scale.”

They groaned simultaneously.

Sloan could hardly argue that reaction.

“Since you got there first, I guess this means he’s off-limits to the rest of us,” Helen said.

“You are the mankiller in this town,” Courtney added, then grinned.

Sloan stared at her. “I am not.” Well, maybe lately she had been dating quite a bit. When a girl was unceremoniously dumped, she was entitled.

Courtney’s gaze turned speculative. “Your ego and heart aren’t still bruised over Davis, are they?”

Knowing she definitely didn’t want that nugget dropping around town, Sloan crossed her arms over her chest and made an effort to look bored. “Please.”

Helen leaned her shoulder against the door frame. “Oh, so you’re not upset he’s back in town?”

Sloan swallowed hard. Her susceptible, traitorous heart thumped with almost painful intensity. “He’s back?” she managed to ask, suddenly realizing Helen had been dying to share this information for the last half hour.

“Definitely,” Helen replied.

Courtney shrugged. “He worked for Kendrick Communications, which has now been sold. There was bound to be some fallout with the employees.”

Again, Sloan couldn’t help but think Aidan and Davis in the same town wasn’t a coincidence. Were the two men friends? Davis, for all his faults, had been an islander his whole life. She supposed he’d mentioned his hometown to his boss at some point.

“I’m sure Davis will come looking for you,” Helen said, her smile sly. “You’ll give us all the details when he does, won’t you?”

“Sure. You bet,” Sloan agreed absently, still trying to wrap her mind around the idea that Davis was on Palmer’s Island.

What was he doing here?

There was no doubt he could land a job with another big-time company in Atlanta. Returning to his roots was a step backward.

Not to mention her daddy still had vague ideas about reinstating the firing squad for the sin of Davis hurting and humiliating his precious daughter.

She said good-bye to Helen and Courtney, then headed to the main desk to actually start doing her job. She reorganized the entire medieval research area, dusted seventeenth-century fiction and helped two students find the history of bacteria and antibiotics for the science fair.

But the whole time, she thought of Helen’s news.

Davis is here.

He could be standing on the front steps even now. He might have left her a message—she checked her cell phone six times. He could drop by her condo at any moment.

Davis, with his charming smile, sandy-blond hair and cheerful elegance was a polar opposite to dark and brooding Aidan Kendrick. Was that why she was so attracted to Aidan? Was she subconsciously leaning toward a man totally unlike the one who'd broken her heart and left her beloved island for more excitement and another woman?

At eleven-thirty, one of the Junior League volunteers arrived, so Sloan quickly made copies of Aidan's plans, then headed toward the café. There, she took Mabel's advice and ordered two blue plate specials—country-fried steak with sawmill gravy, collard greens, creamed corn and hot yeast rolls. And, of course, sweet tea.

Hey, it wasn't part of the low-carb, low-fat diet, but it was comforting.

As she pulled into the driveway at Aidan's, she checked her cell phone again—though it hadn't rung. If Davis was here, why hadn't he called?

Her mind half on historical society business and half on Davis, she wasn't paying too much attention to the door she'd knocked on.

Until it opened.

Aidan stood in the opening. Luscious and beautiful, even with his fierce scowl.

The stubble on his face was slightly thicker. She wanted to stroke it as much as she wanted to see that magnificent jaw clean-shaven. He wore a snug navy T-shirt, showing off his lean torso and leanly muscled arms, and she couldn't help but wonder about the heat and feel of the skin the shirt covered.

"I'm trying to work here," he said rudely.

Her gaze darted up to his. Wow, oh, wow. He did have those intense eyes. Davis's eyes were a nice, safe, sort-of-boring brown.

Then the scent of Mabel's special hit her.

"I brought lunch. Like I said." Sloan held up the bag. "You have time for a break now?"

His eyes flashed with irritation. "No."

In her other hand, she held up his original plans. "I'm also returning these."

He took the rolled-up plans and considered her. "That does smell good."

Okay, note to self—don't attempt to seduce the hot, new guy with perfume.

She smiled. "Uh-huh."

He sighed and stepped back, allowing her to enter.

"I'm assuming you have candles and wine at the ready," she said breezily—if sarcastically—as she walked inside.

"I don't."

"No?" She turned, giving him a purposefully surprised look. "I told you that I'd bring you lunch today, so I assumed you'd be expecting me." She paused. "Or at least grateful that I showed up to feed you."

He remained silent. A muscle along his jaw pulsed. Finally, he extended his arm toward the hallway leading to the kitchen. "So feed me."

Her first instinct was to dump Mabel's special gravy over his head, but she resisted the urge and reminded herself that she wasn't much for accepting help, either.

She was her father's daughter, and she could handle anything that came her way. With her mother gone, surrounded by lawmen, the sisters at the Catholic school where she attended were her primary female influences. So, she'd developed the strength and ruthless nature of men and the compassion and sense of community responsibility that taught her to work, not take handouts.

Without commenting, she pulled the plastic food containers from the bag. "I brought napkins and utensils. I wasn't sure if you had them."

"I have forks and paper towels."

"Metal forks?"

“Plastic.”

“Naturally.” She finished laying out the meal and tried to pretend her pulse wasn’t vibrating simply from the sound of his voice. “I must say, Mr. Kendrick, this is by far the fanciest date I’ve been on in months.”

“This isn’t a date.”

She dropped into a chair and looked up to see him scowling at her, as usual. “You’re telling me.” Smiling, she patted the chair next to her. “You’re hungry. Have a seat.”

He hesitated.

She met his gaze. “I’m not going to keep asking.”

He sat.

They ate in silence for several minutes. “This is good,” he said, somehow sounding impressed and reluctant at the same time. “I was starving.”

“You can’t do the work you want without rest and fuel.”

“Is that a speech?”

She paused and looked over at him as she sipped her tea. “Are speeches usually one-liners?”

“I guess not.”

“Then, no, that wasn’t a speech.”

After several more minutes passed, she rose, folding her napkin, dumping her empty plate into the large, gray plastic can he’d so artfully set near the back door. When she turned back, he was standing behind her.

All six-foot-three amazing inches of him.

She drew a quick breath. Her gaze jumped to his. “Your eyes are bloodshot.”

“Up too late last night.”

Since his body heat was making her head spin, she simply took his plate from him and dumped it into the trash.

When she turned back, he was close.

Really close.

“Thank you,” he said, his gaze roving her face.

“You’re welcome.”

He scowled. “I thought about you half the night.”

Her stomach quivered. “That’s a bad thing?”

“Yes.”

This negative attitude toward her was really starting to be annoying. Unrequited lust wasn’t familiar territory for her. And though Aidan obviously wasn’t totally immune to her, her ego was taking a pretty serious hit. Why was she bringing him lunch, trying to make conversation, sympathizing with his pain and, in general, being nice, when his only genuine smile probably came the moment the door shut behind her?

She lifted her chin. “Well, that’s just f—”

His lips captured hers, silencing her in a flash. Her heart jumped in her chest, and she was pretty sure she let out a moan of longing, then she angled her head and sank into him.

He didn’t hesitate to tangle his tongue with hers. He tasted of the lemon he drank with his tea. He smelled of sawdust and spicy sandalwood.

She clutched his T-shirt in her fist, grasping to get closer, to absorb him into her. She wanted to feel his bare, sleek skin against hers, to have that intense gaze focused on her, to feel his muscles harden beneath her...to have him tremble and gasp along with her.

His hands, braced at the lower part of her back, molded her to his body, and she felt his need, the hunger, the wild lust. It had been a long time, too long, since she’d felt desire grab her so effectively by the throat. Since the liquid heat of her body had rushed and pulsed.

She wasn’t sure she’d ever felt so—

Ding-dong.

Aidan lifted his head, his eyes flashing silver like a wolf after prey. “What the devil is that?”

“Doorbell,” Sloan gasped, linking her hands behind his head, tugging him back to her, inhaling the sharp scent of arousal. “They’ll go away.”

Their mouths met again. He nipped her bottom lip with his teeth. Light and gloriously exciting. She wanted—

Ding-dong, ding-dong.

He yanked away, looked down at her and snarled.

Okay, maybe I’m taking this wolf metaphor a little too far...

“I’m going to kill whoever’s at the door.” He stalked away, apparently to do just that.

Sort of curious but mostly to cheer him on, Sloan followed him, pausing at the end of the hall, from where she could see the front door, but avoid the more serious bloodshed.

She did have on her favorite cream pantsuit, after all.

“What the hell do you want?” Aidan barked.

Again with the metaphor.

Sloan shook her head, sure the other voice was a man’s. And familiar.

“She’s busy,” Aidan said. “Come back later.” He started to close the door.

A hand gripped the edge of the door, forcing it open. “Where is she?”

Sloan gasped. That sounded like—

Davis, his hair lighter, his face paler than she remembered, appeared in the doorway. His head swiveled right and left, then he caught sight of her, hovering in the hall.

“Hey, baby,” he said, smiling as he started toward her. “Miss me?”

3

BABY.

What a common, stupid name. Especially for Sloan.

Sloan Caldwell was no baby. For one, there was nothing cute about her. She had smoldering looks, hot legs and amazing, erotic lips.

But Aidan watched—with no small amount of resentment—as his former sales manager, Davis Curnan, slid his arms around the woman he'd been holding only moments before and lifted her off her feet for a hug.

"You look beautiful, as always," Davis said, setting her down and cupping her cheek.

Sloan smiled, though a little hesitantly. "Thanks."

The whole reunion made Aidan's stomach turn—and not just because he wanted Sloan for himself. Last time he'd checked, Davis had been dating a brunette from his accounting department.

"As heartwarming as all this is," he began, walking slowly in their direction, barely resisting the urge to grab Davis and shove him out the door, "I'm afraid the lunch break is over."

Sloan's gaze shot to him, as if she'd forgotten he was there.

Great. Now he was forgettable.

"Oh, Aidan. Ah—" She glanced at Davis, then wriggled out of his arms. "I guess you know Davis."

"Of course," Davis said, then smiled. "He used to sign my paychecks."

Aidan raised his eyebrows. "Actually, they were processed in the accounting department, if you recall."

Davis found humility long enough to act embarrassed. "Right." His gaze slid to Sloan. "Not anymore."

Ah, so the big-city romance is over, and now you've come back to claim the small-town girl.

Aidan had known, of course, that his sales manager was from Palmer's Island. In fact, the few conversations they'd had about Davis's hometown had led him to investigate the area for real estate after his parents' deaths and his need for a new beginning. Davis could technically be termed responsible for Aidan's coming to the island.

Davis's involvement with Sloan, however, was a nasty surprise Aidan didn't like one little bit.

"We have a lot to catch up on," Davis cajoled, sliding his hand to the small of Sloan's back. "Why don't we let Aidan get back to work, darling?"

"Darling?" Sloan's expression went from pleasantly embarrassed to seriously pissed in the space of a heartbeat. She grabbed his hand and flung it off her. "You ran out on me, dumped me for somebody else and now you dare come back here over six months later, calling me baby and darling, thinking I'm gonna jump into your arms?" She narrowed her eyes. "Think again."

Feeling much better, Aidan rocked back on his heels, dying to see how the clever salesman would slide his way out of this tight spot.

Davis turned bright red. "Sloan, honey—I don't really think this is the place—"

"Sure it is. You came here to find me." She held out her arms. "Here I am."

Davis actually winced. Aidan had never seen him so rattled. But then fury from a goddess like Sloan was bound to put any man off his stride. Hadn't Aidan himself spent half the night debating whether he should put his efforts into seducing her or running in the opposite direction?

"Aidan," Davis said, turning toward him. "Would you mind giving us some privacy to settle this?"

Aidan leaned boldly against the rickety stairway railing he was due to replace that week. "I'm fine right here."

“That chick you dumped me for worked for him, didn’t she?” Sloan asked, her voice vibrating with anger. “What was her name?”

“Rebecca,” Aidan supplied—with more cheer than maybe he should have.

He wished he didn’t relish this confrontation so much, but that warm hug between Davis and Sloan, coming just after his and Sloan’s incredible kiss, had jolted him with jealousy.

Five minutes ago, he’d simply wanted time to wrestle with his demons and consider assuaging some of his loneliness in Sloan’s arms. Now, suddenly, if he wanted her, he was too late. And, regardless, he might not have a prayer of her wanting him anyway.

The ex had arrived.

“This isn’t about her,” Davis said, facing Sloan, turning his back on Aidan.

“Oh?” Sloan looked surprised. “You haven’t come to announce your engagement? Invite me to the wedding? Have a quick roll between the sheets before you commit?”

“There’s no wedding.” Sighing, Davis attempted to steer Sloan out of the foyer, but she simply shook her head and crossed her arms over her chest. “Things between Rebecca and I were never quite right,” he said quietly after a quick, embarrassed glance back at Aidan. “I only broke it off with you because I was tired of our long-distance relationship.”

“It was your idea to go work in Atlanta in the first place.”

“What was I supposed to do? Take over my dad’s insurance office? Hang around boring Palmer’s Island all my life?”

Sloan’s eyes flashed dangerously. “Yes.”

“Well, I wasn’t ready to do that.” He rolled his shoulders. “However, things change. I realized I made a mistake.”

“You’ve been gone for months, Davis. It took you quite a while to work out that mistake.”

“It was okay at first. I was happy, and I thought you were probably better off, too. We needed to see other people, find out what else was out there.”

Sloan glanced down, but not quickly enough that Aidan failed to see the hurt in her eyes. “I didn’t.”

“I’m sorry.” He laid his fingers under her chin and lifted her head. “I screwed up.”

“Did she break up with you?”

“No.” He stroked her arm. “Things just kind of...fell apart.”

“Got boring?” she challenged.

Davis shrugged. “I don’t know. I only know I missed you.”

“Convenient that this missing me started after Aidan sold the company.”

“I missed you before that.”

The simple explanation and clear sentiment behind it was hard to argue with. Sloan obviously felt the same, since she didn’t protest.

“I got back to the island last night,” he added, “and couldn’t wait to see you.”

Sloan moved away from him, wandering around the foyer. “I heard.”

“Already?”

“Gossip is the only thing that travels fast in this town. Helen told me this—” She whirled toward him. “Why did you come here? To this house? In another fifteen minutes I would have been back at the library.”

Or in my bed. And Aidan wished like hell he’d taken Sloan’s advice and ignored the door, forcing the intruder to go away.

Again, Davis glanced at Aidan. “I did go to the library. The clerk said you were here with the new owner, who turned out to be Aidan. So I decided to come right over.”

Now that was interesting, Aidan thought. Davis obviously hadn’t rushed over with a housewarming gift. Was it possible Davis considered him a threat to his big, happy reunion plans?

To complicate matters, he and Davis had had some minor wars over business decisions in the past. While he respected the other man's understanding of sales and dealing with customer issues, his overall marketing strategy was too impulsive and not clearly defined. If not for his family tragedy, Aidan was sure he would have eventually fired Davis.

Was this trip back home another impulse?

Should he share these observations with Sloan? Or was he simply feeling his own level of threat from the easygoing ex?

And why was he getting so worked up about a woman he'd known less than twenty-four hours? Why did he care if she and Davis made up, screwed themselves silly, then settled into cheery, small-town life? Why did he care if Davis got his hands on that luscious body, those lips that—

Hell.

"I'm going back to work," he said, stalking through the foyer.

"No," Sloan said, stepping into his path, placing her hand on his chest. "Davis should go." She glanced at him. "Aidan and I have things to discuss."

Davis's gaze moved to Sloan's hand, then back to her face. "Discuss?"

"About the renovations."

"I can discuss renovations."

"Please go, Davis," she said emphatically.

Davis opened his mouth, no doubt prepared to argue.

"Don't worry," Aidan couldn't resist saying with a fierce look at his former employee. "I'll take good care of her."

Davis glared at him. "I just bet you will." He turned to Sloan. "I'll call you," he said in a gentle tone.

One he no doubt practiced on a daily basis.

"Fine," she said coolly.

Davis let himself out of the house.

"What a mess!" Sloan burst out the moment the door closed, throwing up her hands. "Our relationship was always out of balance. Why that man, of all the others, could always hit me right here—" she tapped her chest "—I'll never understand."

"All the others?"

Still ranting, Sloan seemed not to hear him. "The downright, outrageous nerve of him, thinking I'd jump for orgasmic joy at the sight of him."

"Orgasmic?" Even as the idea sent ripples of anticipation through his body, she rolled on.

"I wonder if he expected to have to apologize right away, or if he thought I'd fall onto my back immediately."

"He acted sincere," Aidan said, shrugging. "But who knows?"

"A bit slick and convenient, but, I guess, sincere." She stopped, then waved her hand and continued pacing.

Whether she was brushing aside the slickness or the sincerity, Aidan wasn't sure. Her anger at Davis was good enough for him. His competitive nature was one of the qualities that had helped him to run his company so effectively.

He'd spent last night resisting Sloan. Was he now going to give in simply to win?

The idea troubled him as much as it excited him.

It had been a long time since he'd been excited.

As the arguments rushed through his head, he watched her move. She'd taken to pacing in circles. His body throbbed, watching her hips sway. When she flipped her hair over her shoulder, he groaned silently, barely resisting the urge to bury his fingers in the silky strands. Imagining those blond locks cascading across his stomach as she moved—

"I'm sorry about all that," she said as she approached him, startling him out of his fantasy.

“It was—” He made an effort to think about hammering. Well, no, that wasn’t good. He concentrated on the image of sweeping. Sweeping, like her hair would brush across his body, tickling, arousing... “—no problem,” he somehow managed to say.

“I shouldn’t have pulled you into the middle of the argument. I’m sure you felt awkward.”

Since she was close enough now to touch, he concentrated on her face, though he found that equally distracting. “I enjoyed myself mostly. My personal favorite moment was when you mocked him about his pet names for you.”

“Mmm.” She smiled with remembrance. “I was working on the fly, but I thought that had a nice touch of anger and disbelief.”

“It did.”

“May I ask you a question?”

“Why stop now?” he asked, though the sarcasm didn’t have the same heat it might have had last night. That insane, amazing kiss had broken down a barrier he didn’t think he wanted to reconstruct, even if he could.

“Davis worked for you,” she said. “Did you not like him?”

“I did until he started ringing my damn doorbell.”

Her gaze connected with his. Fire lit with blue flames. “His timing was never that great.”

“Never?” He lifted the corners of his mouth and lowered his tone. “There are moments when timing is essential.”

Her gaze dropped to his lips. “There certainly are.”

Ding-dong.

Sloan groaned. “You’ve got to be kidding. If that’s him again, I’m gonna—” She flung open the door. “Oh, hey, Pete.”

Pete Willis, wearing an orange-and-white ball cap, worn jeans and a blue cotton shirt, stood on the porch. As Sloan stepped back, he walked inside, carrying an armload of tools. Despite the fact that he was barely twenty, he was reputed to be the best carpenter in town. So far, Aidan had to agree.

“Hey, Miss Caldwell.” He nodded at Aidan. “I’m a few minutes early, Mr. Kendrick. That all right?”

Hell, no. “Sure,” Aidan said, wondering if he could squeeze in a cold shower before getting back to work. “Why don’t you check out the supplies in the parlor? I’ll be right there.”

He laid his hand on Sloan’s lower back and ushered her onto the porch. “Thanks again for lunch.”

“Anytime.” She lifted her hand as if she might touch him, then let it fall by her side. “Sorry about my personal drama.”

“It’s fine. Thanks for returning the plans.”

She nodded. “I promised I would.” Pausing, she added, “I always keep my promises.”

He didn’t. Though he’d wanted to.

He hadn’t taken care of his family, his greatest responsibility. Was that why he felt such an intense need to be with this woman, even as he felt guilty for being alive at all? Lately he’d barely spoken to anyone, much less made an effort to pursue the company of a woman for conversation, a dinner companion or sex. But there was something about Sloan. Why? What made her so special?

Maybe he was just lonely.

Which had to be what prompted him to ask, “When do you think you’ll need to come back for another inspection?”

“When do you want me back?”

Oh, boy. He didn’t want her to leave. “You’re welcome anytime.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Am I really? How’s Friday night? We could have dinner this time.”

That's three days away. "Okay," he found himself saying. "Sounds good." And when did I turn into such a lame idiot? "All I can make is ham sandwiches and spaghetti," he added in a stronger tone. "If you want something else, you'll have to make it."

"Hey." She stepped so close her breasts brushed his chest. "Don't go back to being captain of Team Surly just yet. I happen to like spaghetti."

He was actually encouraging company. The concept had been so foreign over the last few months, he was amazed he was taking the step. He wasn't going to go crazy and actually get out and socialize, but if he was trying to heal his battered spirit, dinner with a hot blonde might be a promising start.

"Then that's what we'll have," he said.

She angled her head. "You're not inviting me to dinner just to tick off Davis, are you?"

"No. Of course not." He grinned. "Though that's a side benefit."

She took a step back so suddenly, he grabbed her around her waist. "What? Too honest? Look, I—"

She raised on her toes and pressed her mouth—lightly—to his. "Not at all. You just have a really nice smile."

THE MEMORY of Aidan's breathtaking smile followed Sloan around like an arc of sunshine all week long. If the man suddenly got cheerful on her, she might have to give the renovation project to somebody else, someone unsusceptible to his allure, since she would find it impossible to talk in his presence.

Sister Mary Katherine was her first choice. And, even for her, that smile was bound to be an issue.

Besides, she could enjoy Aidan and still do her job objectively. She wanted to see where that wildly hot kiss of theirs would go if it was repeated and uninterrupted. And if he smiled and backed her against the wall, pressing that leanly muscular body to hers, she wouldn't complain.

Would she?

As she packed her briefcase and prepared to lock up the library for the day, her thoughts turned from her upcoming date to Davis.

He'd been calling, of course, but she was playing it cool with him. Now that the initial shock was past, and her anger had somewhat abated, she'd been dwelling on her devastation and humiliation at his leaving in the first place. She'd thought he'd been The One. The one who'd be her love-of-a-lifetime, the relationship her parents had had.

But he'd left, and she'd sealed off her heart.

Now, he was suddenly back because he'd missed her?

She'd love to know what had really happened between him and that chick he'd been seeing in Atlanta. Maybe she'd left him for somebody else. He'd said she hadn't broken up with him, but she could have left without notice and sent a note later. That wasn't a breakup; it was abandonment.

She ought to know.

Mostly, she kept waiting for the other shoe to drop, for him to tell her he wanted something from her. Or, worse, for there to be no shoe at all. For him to dart back to Atlanta, or wherever, leaving his small-town roots behind. Again.

Focusing on Aidan was much more pleasurable.

So without effort, she put aside her worries about Davis and left the library to get ready for her date.

She'd hit Aidan with her LBD the first time they'd met, so she debated between something similar or contrasting. Maybe she should go with jeans, a flowy top and wedge heels. Casual sexy. Or she could go all out with a stop-sign-red dress. Obvious sexy. Or a feminine, springlike dress and straw hat. Picnic sexy.

Or was that too Scarlett O'Hara?

Good grief, romance was complicated.

She settled on the jeans outfit. After gathering her purse and the bread and salad ingredients she'd agreed to bring, she headed toward Aidan's house. He was supposed to do the spaghetti and provide wine, which she needed, if the nervous fluttering in her stomach was any guide.

When she reached the porch, she noticed there were lighted sconces by the door and that the lower porch railing had been replaced. Obviously, Aidan and Pete had been working hard the last few days.

Batherton House was a typical Charleston-style double house with both first-and second-floor porches that dominated the front of the house. The central hallway separated the house, with rooms on either side. In the days before air conditioning, this allowed for better ventilation. There were some historic homes in downtown Charleston that still didn't have full central air, but they were museums. Sloan and her fellow committee members were so thrilled to see the house coming alive again, that they certainly weren't going to argue about an absolutely necessary mechanism for comfort in steamy South Carolina.

Thinking of steamy, she immediately thought of Aidan. A bead of sweat rolled down her back into the waistband of her jeans. She waved her hand in front of her face. Maybe she should have worn the skirt.

After ringing the doorbell, she forced herself to think enticing and positive thoughts and planted a bright smile on her face.

Which faded when Pete opened the door.

She glanced at her watch, though she knew it was just after seven o'clock. "Ah...hey, Pete," she said, looking over his shoulder and hoping to see Aidan.

But she didn't.

Pete stepped back, inviting her inside. "Hey, Miss Caldwell. I was closer to the door, so Mr. Kendrick asked me to answer it."

She adjusted the grocery bag on her hip. "Oh."

She was so insignificant as a date that not only was he not ready for her arrival, he also had his handyman playing butler? Why did she always manage to find the insensitive—

"Sorry, I'm not ready," Aidan said, walking quickly toward her from the other end of the hall and wiping his hands on a cloth. "Pete and I were finishing up and lost track of time." He took the bag from her hands.

His face glistened with sweat; his dark hair curled across his forehead. Stubble shadowed his jaw. He looked, as always, alluring, strong and delicious.

Her annoyance vanished.

Was that weak? Probably.

"I'm going," Pete said. "I'll get my stuff." He grinned. "I have a hot date myself."

When he wandered into the parlor, Sloan asked Aidan, "Between us, am I the hot date, or are you?"

"Definitely you. I'm sweaty."

"I could start making the salad while you shower."

Leaning toward her, he smiled that amazing smile, his eyes lighting with sensual sparks. "Or you could join me."

4

SLOAN let her gaze glide over the planes of Aidan's body.

Tempting?

Definitely.

Still, that luscious package came with a whole lotta baggage.

"That's quite presumptuous of you, Mr. Kendrick," she said, though she slid the tip of her finger down his broad chest as she spoke. "I think I'll make the salad instead."

She took the bag back from him and headed toward the kitchen. Behind her, she heard the murmurs of Aidan's and Pete's voices.

As she grew closer, the scent of spaghetti sauce washed over her. Clearly, Aidan had been doing something besides hammering all day.

She set her bag on the counter, then crossed to the stove, lifting off the stock-pot lid and inhaling deeply. She recognized lots of oregano, basil and garlic. A man who knew his history and his sauces was pretty much irresistible.

As she pulled lettuce, tomatoes and cucumbers from the grocery bag, she also noted that her name and phone numbers were still hanging on the fridge door and found it oddly comforting that he'd saved them. Smiling, she pulled out the wide-rimmed wooden bowl she'd brought along with the food.

"You brought a bowl?"

She glanced over her shoulder as Aidan approached. "And silverware and wineglasses. Your provisions are sparse, as I recall."

"Were sparse." He opened a drawer beside her, revealing brand-new silverware. "Already been through the dishwasher and everything. Plus..." He swung open a cabinet beside the sink. "New dishes. The ceramic kind. And wineglasses." He reached into another cabinet and pulled out two, setting them on the counter.

She batted her lashes. "All for little ol' me?"

"Yes."

He looked so pleased with himself, her breath caught. If the man was going to start being charming, she was in big trouble.

You're already in big trouble.

"Sorry I wasn't ready when you got here," he said, moving closer. "We were on a roll today."

She swallowed as her heart rate picked up speed. "The banister to the stairs is up."

His silver eyes flashed with pleasure. "You noticed."

"Of course. It's beautiful."

"It makes a difference. The other railing was rickety, possibly dangerous, and now it looks finished."

"And welcoming," she said.

He drew his brows together. "Welcoming, huh? You don't think people will want to come over and look at it, do you?"

Charm was clearly a brief and impulsive state for him. The man was warily unsociable in the extreme. "Gee, wouldn't that be horrible?"

"Yes." His gaze searched hers. "Really, it's only your opinion that matters."

Seriously? She smiled. Maybe she was making an impression. Maybe—

"Because of your connection to the historical committee," he added.

Then again, maybe not. "Of course."

Yet he'd invited her to dinner. He was obviously attracted to her. He was certainly interested in her. Whether he liked her—or anybody else—was another subject entirely.

He'd been through a traumatic time lately. Parents' deaths. Violent crime. Media frenzy. They were bound to throw even the strongest off stride. And she suspected Aidan was the one who usually threw others off balance.

As did she.

He was a loner. If not before, certainly now. And she was very socialable. Between her dad, her friends, her work and her committees, she was rarely alone.

But she liked being alone with him.

She had no desire to go to a crowded restaurant or music-blasting club. She was content with spaghetti at his kitchen table.

Maybe they weren't so far apart after all. But was that a good thing?

She fought for a casual tone. "So I'll start on the salad while you take your shower."

"Okay." His gaze roved her face for a second before he said, "I haven't done this in a while."

"Showered or eaten?"

He laughed. Actually, laughed. Her body went hot and tingly.

Oh, boy. She was in big, big trouble.

"Had a date," he said lightly, while she scrambled to remember the dark, angry man she'd met less than a week ago.

"I bet it comes back to you."

His lips tipped up at the corners. "I hope so."

After he left, she began assembling the salad—and thinking hard about the step they were taking.

It's a simple date. What's the big deal?

Simple. Of course. Yet it didn't feel uncomplicated or straightforward.

She still sensed his pain, forced right beneath the surface, hovering there and waiting for a chance to spring. And while part of her wanted to know the real story behind the speculation about him, part of her didn't care. She sort of wanted him to talk about his family and what had driven him to change his life so drastically, but in some ways it didn't matter. She wanted to know who he was now. She wanted to live only in the moment.

The sexual tension between them was palpable. If that kiss the other day was any kind of guide, their chemistry was incredible. Did she really want to complicate things with deep conversations about suppressed feelings?

No. She really didn't. Chemistry was welcome. Heat was enough.

Besides, with Davis back in town, she had drama and emotional confusion all on her own.

By the time Aidan returned, she'd opened and poured the wine. And crammed her worries into the back of her mind.

"The sauce is ready," he announced. "All we have to do is boil the pasta."

"Good. I'm starving." She handed him a glass of wine, her pulse skipping a beat. He smelled of musk, oak and sandalwood, and his hair was still damp, jet-black waves brushing his forehead. "When did you have time to make sauce today?"

"I took a break around three." He leaned against the counter next to her. "Are you impressed by my talents in the kitchen?"

She sipped wine to ease her dry throat. She was sure he had talents in lots of areas. "Very."

He raised his glass to her. "You like the wine?"

"It doesn't have the burn of whiskey."

"Subtlety is better sometimes." He glanced at the liquor bottle, sitting several inches away. "Wine suits my mood better tonight."

Did that mean he was going to stop scowling at her? Did that mean the pain of whatever was driving him to whiskey the other night had eased?

Did she really want answers to either of those questions?

“Show me what you did today,” she said lightly, once again ignoring any thoughts that led to complex conversations and hidden emotions.

As they headed out of the kitchen, he asked, “Is this my official visit for the week?”

“I think this is about my third visit this week. I’m already breaking my word to not become a nuisance.”

He captured her hand and squeezed. “You’re not. I like having you here.”

She stopped and stared at him. “You do?”

He frowned, looking as surprised by his admittance as she felt. “Sure.”

“I thought you wanted to brood alone in your dark and scary castle.”

Tugging her hand, he led her into the foyer. “You’ll have me as the lead in a gothic novel pretty soon.”

“Pretty soon? I’m already there, Mr. Williams.”

“Williams?”

“As in Tennessee. If we’re going to talk gothic, we have to stay in the South.”

“Fine by me.” Standing in the doorway to the dining room, he smiled at her. “I figured it was time to let some light into my dark and scary castle.”

As he spoke, he flipped the wall switch, and the chandelier now dominating the center of the ceiling exploded with light.

She’d been distracted when she arrived, which was the only rational explanation for not noticing the fixture before. Dozens of candles with crystal tips simulating flames rested on curved pipes finished in burnished copper. The facets of light flickered so realistically, she wouldn’t have been surprised to hold her hand toward them and feel heat. The entire room glowed with soft, romantic light.

“Wow,” she managed to say.

“It would have been real candles or gas lights back then, of course,” Aidan said. “So I commissioned an artist in New Orleans to replicate the effect.”

Still staring up, Sloan walked around to look at the chandelier from other angles. “The detail is amazing.” It would look fantastic on the historical society brochures.

If Aidan ever let a photographer within fifty feet of it, of course.

“You’re impressed,” he said, sounding pleased.

“I am. A big-city guy with big-time corporate money buys the most historically significant house on the island, and you wonder whether it’s a whim or an investment.”

“It’s neither to me.”

Hearing the anger in his voice, she looked at him instead of the light fixture. “So what is it, Aidan? What brought you here?”

“Penance.”

If any man besides Father Dominick had said that word, she probably would have laughed.

But she had no desire to laugh at Aidan. He was deadly serious.

For a moment, she wondered if the ugly, speculative stories about him were true, but her father claimed it was likely Aidan’s parents had been killed by a mugger, a drug-addled nut who’d gunned down two people outside a restaurant simply for the cash in their wallets.

Walking toward him, keeping her tone as calm and measured as her steps, she asked, “Penance for what?” He turned his head, but she laid her hand against his cheek and brought him back to face her. “What have you done that you need to make up for?”

“Nothing. It’s—” He shook his head, and she was sure if he could he’d have taken back the revealing word. “This house is broken. I want to fix it. That’s it.”

That wasn’t nearly it.

“I needed a new challenge,” he added, bringing fuel to her blaze of certainty that whatever had hurt him was in no way simple. “Big-city executives—we need a thrill a minute to survive.”

Liar, she thought, though she nodded. “I’ll bet. Let’s eat. I’m starved.”

The relief in his eyes was obvious, but she said nothing about it and led the way to the kitchen. While waiting for the pasta to boil, she caught him up on the latest town gossip, involving a salesman from Chicago who’d come into Courtney’s beauty shop last month and, with a disgusting leer, insisted on having the “special hair and massage package.” No doubt, Aidan couldn’t have cared less about the silly story, but since the spotlight was off him, he seemed more relaxed.

“So, while Courtney’s flustered about how to tell the guy to jump in the lake without sounding rude—”

“A special talent among Southern women.”

“—Helen—she’s our local real-estate agent and happened to be in the shop having her hair highlighted—tells the guy that prostitution, with special massages or otherwise, isn’t legal in South Carolina and to get lost.”

“Helen is the agent my lawyer dealt with about this house?” Aidan asked.

“Yep.”

“I heard a lot about her. ‘A tough dame’ was my attorney’s exact quote.”

“Well, this guy hadn’t heard about Helen. He had the nerve to wink at her and say ‘I hear Realtors around here offer even more exclusive services than the beauty shops.’”

Aidan winced. “So, did she punch the guy?”

“Surprisingly, no. She suggested he find his way to I-75 and the topless cafés.”

“And he accepted that?”

“Unfortunately not. But Courtney threatened to call my dad if he didn’t move along. So, apparently, the threat of the cops and the intimidating factor of a fiery redhead salon owner in steel-tipped cowboy boots and an annoyed real-estate agent with her hair sticking out in foil highlight packets was more than he wanted to deal with. He ran out pretty quick.”

“A wise move.”

Sloan sighed. “If only somebody had been there to record the moment visually. You know, for posterity.”

“And the amusement of the townfolk.”

“Naturally.” She smiled, the picture in her mind giving her a pretty good feeling all on its own. “I haven’t laughed so hard since the last time a carload of tourists from Connecticut drove in looking for a tour of the alligator breeding farms.”

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