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ONCE UPON A WEDDING

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Stacy Connelly

**Once Upon a Wedding /
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Once Upon a Wedding / Accidental Princess: Once Upon a Wedding /
Accidental Princess / S. Connelly — «HarperCollins»,

Once Upon a Wedding Stacy Connelly All wedding planner Kelsey wants is to make sure that her cousin's nuptials go perfectly – her business depends on it. So Kelsey has to keep her cousin's rebellious ex-boyfriend, Connor McClane, away from the ceremony. But that's harder than it sounds when Kelsey is falling for the gorgeous bad boy! Accidental Princess Nancy Robards Thompson When a handsome stranger shows up on her doorstep and whisks her away, struggling single mother Sophie is stunned to discover her heritage. Especially because the new princess's protector, Luc Lejardin, is a man to make even cynical Sophie believe in happy ever after.

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Содержание

Available in May 2010 from Mills & Boon® Special Moments™	6
ONCE UPON A WEDDING	7
ACCIDENTAL PRINCESS	8
Once Upon A Wedding	9
Stacy Connelly	10
Nancy Robards Thompson	11
Table of Contents	12
Once Upon A Wedding	13
Chapter One	14
Chapter Two	24
Chapter Three	32
Chapter Four	39
Chapter Five	48
Chapter Six	57
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	58

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Once Upon a Wedding by Stacy Connelly & *Accidental Princess* by Nancy Robards Thompson
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ONCE UPON A WEDDING

Connore McClane had stepped to life from the photograph.

From his form-hugging T-shirt to his worn jeans and boots to the sunglasses covering his eyes. Kelsey tried to swallow. Once, twice. Finally, she gave up and croaked out, “Mr McClane?”

“Yes?” He stopped to look at her, and Kelsey’s only thought was that she still didn’t know the colour of his eyes. Brown, maybe? To match the mahogany of his hair and tanned skin. Or blue?

A dark eyebrow rose above his mirrored sunglasses. A rush of heat flooded her cheeks. “Uh, Mr McClane –”

“We’ve already established who I am. Question is who are you?”

“My name’s Kelsey Wilson.”

He flashed a smile that revved her pulse.

Had she known her aunt was going to assign her this mission, she would have worn something different – like full body armour.

ACCIDENTAL PRINCESS

**“Luc, where have you been?” Sophie’s voice
was barely a whisper. “I’ve missed you.”**

His mouth went dry. As he searched for the words, she reached out and ran a gentle finger along his jaw line.

His head tilted into her touch. He wanted to keep her here. Safe.

Her mouth was just a breath from his. Those lips...so tempting...would taste so sweet. A rush of desire urged him to give in to the taste and feel of her while the rest of the world melted away.

There were so many reasons he shouldn’t...

...but at the moment, he couldn’t seem to remember any of them.

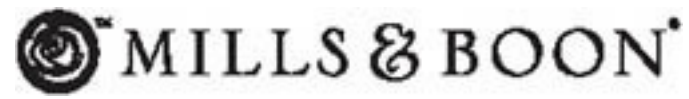
Once Upon A Wedding

By

Stacy Connelly
Accidental Princess

By

Nancy Robards Thompson



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Table of Contents

[Cover Page](#)
[Other Books By](#)
[Excerpt](#)
[Title Page](#)
[Once Upon A Wedding](#)
[About the Author](#)
[Chapter One](#)
[Chapter Two](#)
[Chapter Three](#)
[Chapter Four](#)
[Chapter Five](#)
[Chapter Six](#)
[Chapter Seven](#)
[Chapter Eight](#)
[Chapter Nine](#)
[Chapter Ten](#)
[Chapter Eleven](#)
[Accidental Princess](#)
[About the Author](#)
[Prologue](#)
[Chapter One](#)
[Chapter Two](#)
[Chapter Three](#)
[Chapter Four](#)
[Chapter Five](#)
[Chapter Six](#)
[Chapter Seven](#)
[Chapter Eight](#)
[Chapter Nine](#)
[Chapter Ten](#)
[Chapter Eleven](#)
[Chapter Twelve](#)
[Chapter Thirteen](#)
[Chapter Fourteen](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[Preview](#)
[Copyright](#)

Once Upon A Wedding

By

Stacy Connelly

Stacy connelly has dreamed of publishing books since she was a kid, writing stories about a girl and her horse. Eventually, boys made it onto the page as she discovered a love of romance and the promise of happily ever after.

When she is not lost in the land of make-believe, Stacy lives in Arizona with her two spoiled dogs. She loves to hear from readers and can be contacted at stacyconnelly@cox.net or www.stacyconnelly.com.

To all my friends – Thanks for being as excited about my dream coming true as I have been.

Chapter One

I can't believe I'm doing this, Kelsey Wilson thought as she hurried through the airport as fast as possible in her straight skirt and low-heeled pumps. Her oversized purse thudded against her side with every step. The shoulder strap caught a lock of red hair that had escaped her sensible bun, and she felt as though someone had reached out and grabbed her. Holding her back from the job she had to do.

The family is counting on you, Kelsey. Her aunt's voice rang in her mind. *You know what can happen when a woman falls for the wrong kind of man.*

Kelsey hadn't needed Aunt Charlene's reminder. She had her mother as an example. Olivia Wilson had thrown away everything for a man who left her with nothing. Olivia had been eighteen when she met Donnie Mardell—Kelsey's father, though she never thought of him in those terms. Donnie had promised Olivia a love of a lifetime, as well as freedom from her too-strict parents, and she fell for every word. When her father made her choose between Donnie and her family, Olivia chose Donnie. But while Olivia may have had stars in her eyes, Donnie had dollar signs in his. When the Wilsons offered him money to leave town, he took it without a glance back at his girlfriend or unborn child.

But Kelsey's cousin Emily hadn't fallen for the wrong man. She was engaged to Todd Dunworthy. The only son of a wealthy Chicago family, he'd come to Scottsdale to start his own company and add to his already considerable fortune. Todd was handsome, charming, and Charlene couldn't have handpicked a better son-in-law.

Kelsey had worked nonstop for the past two months to put together the perfect wedding. The dress, the flowers, the music, the cake, everything wove together like the hand-stitched Irish lace in Emily's veil. But Kelsey knew how delicate that lace was. One wrong pull, and it could all fall apart.

She refused to let that happen.

She *needed* this wedding to be amazing. She'd staked her reputation on the success of the ceremony, certain her cousin's wedding was the spotlight that would make her business shine. She'd been so sure of that she'd put most of her savings into a down payment for a small shop in Glendale. Kelsey had felt confident making the huge step. After all, her aunt and uncle were wealthy, influential people with wealthy, influential friends. Once the guests saw the job she'd done, Weddings Amour would flourish.

Even more important, her aunt and uncle would see that she, too, could succeed, that she was more than the poor relation they'd taken into their home. She'd been sixteen when her mother died, sixteen when Olivia finally admitted she was not an only child as she'd led Kelsey to believe. Olivia had an older brother, a sister-in-law and two nieces... total strangers who became Kelsey's only family.

Hold your head high, Olivia had whispered to Kelsey only days before passing away. Her face pale and gaunt, her blond hair long gone, her mother's eyes still blazed with the pride that empowered her to walk away from her family when she'd been pregnant at eighteen. *You may not have been raised as one of the wealthy Wilsons, but you're going to show them what an amazing young woman you are.*

Tears scalding her throat like acid, Kelsey had promised. She'd had no idea how difficult—how *impossible*—keeping that promise would be.

Finally, though, after eight years, she would have her chance to make good on her word. As a wedding planner, Kelsey had found her niche. She was organized, efficient, detail-oriented. Lessons learned as she scheduled her mother's doctor appointments, oversaw her medications and dealt with the insurance company served her well as she juggled caterers, musicians, photographers and the occasional Bridezilla.

Every wedding that ended in *I do* was a tribute to her mother's memory, and Emily's walk down the aisle would mean more than all the previous weddings. But before Emily could say her vows, Kelsey had to deal with one serious snag.

A sudden attack of nerves cartwheeling through her stomach, Kelsey swung her purse off her shoulder. She unzipped the center pocket and pulled out her day planner where, along with every detail of the wedding, she'd written the flight information. According to the listed arrivals, the plane from Los Angeles was on time.

Connor McClane was back in town.

Kelsey flipped to the front of the day planner and pulled out a photograph. Her aunt had said the picture was ten years old, which could account for the worn edges and creased corner. Kelsey feared there might be another reason. How many times had Emily stared at this photograph and wondered what might have been?

Kelsey had never met her cousin's ex-boyfriend, the bad boy from the wrong side of the tracks, but the snapshot said it all. Connor McClane leaned against a motorcycle, dressed head-to-toe in black—from his boots, to the jeans that clung to his long legs, to the T-shirt that hugged his muscular chest. His arms were crossed, and he glared into the camera. A shock of shaggy dark hair, a shadow of stubble on his stubborn jaw and mirrored sunglasses completed the look.

Kelsey could tell everything she needed to know from that picture except the color of Connor McClane's eyes. The man was trouble, as bad a boy as Donnie Mardell had ever been. Kelsey knew it, just like she knew Connor was better looking in a two-dimensional photo than any living, breathing man she'd ever meet.

Stuffing the picture and her day planner back in her purse, she hurried to the waiting area, where she focused on every man headed her way. He'd be twenty-nine by now, she reminded herself, four years her senior. Kelsey didn't suppose she was lucky enough that he'd aged badly or gone prematurely bald.

A beer belly, she thought, mentally crossing her fingers. A beer belly would be good.

But at the first glimpse of the dark-haired man sauntering down the corridor, her heart flipped within her chest and her hopes crashed. No signs of age, baldness or overhanging waistline... just pure masculine perfection. Her mouth went as dry as the surrounding desert.

Connor McClane had stepped to life from the photograph. From his form-hugging T-shirt, to his worn jeans and boots, to the sunglasses covering his eyes, every detail remained the same. A plane took off from a nearby runway, and the low rumble reverberating in her chest could have easily come from a motorcycle.

Kelsey tried to swallow. Once, twice. Finally she gave up and croaked out, "Mr. McClane?"

"Yes?" He stopped to look at her, and Kelsey's only thought was that she still didn't know the color of his eyes. Brown, maybe? To match the mahogany of his hair and tanned skin. Or blue? A bright, vivid contrast to his coloring.

A dark eyebrow rose above his mirrored sunglasses, a reminder that she had yet to answer him. A rush of heat flooded her cheeks. "Uh, Mr. McClane—"

"We've already established who I am. Question is, who are you?"

"My name's Kelsey Wilson."

He flashed a smile that revved her pulse. His head dipped, and she sensed him taking in the red hair she struggled to control, the freckled skin she tried to cover, and the extra pounds she sought to hide beneath the khaki skirt and boxy shirt. She saw her reflection in his mirrored glasses, a much shorter, much wider version of herself, like a carnival funhouse distortion.

Kelsey didn't feel much like laughing.

Had she known her aunt was going to assign her this mission, she would have worn something different—like full body armor. The image of what Emily might have worn to meet her former boyfriend flashed in Kelsey's mind. She shoved the pointless comparison away. Too much like trying to force Strawberry Shortcake into Barbie's wardrobe.

“Well, what do you know?” Connor stood in the middle of the corridor, mindless of the sea of people parting around him. “The Wilsons sent out a welcoming party. Heck, if I’d known I’d get this kind of reception, I might have come back sooner.”

“I doubt that,” Kelsey muttered.

Connor McClane had planned his return perfectly, coming back to ruin Emily’s wedding. Aunt Charlene was certain of it. Kelsey knew only one thing. Her cousin had nearly thrown her future away once for this man, and she could see how Emily might be tempted to do it again.

“Don’t underestimate your appeal,” he told her, and though she couldn’t see beyond the reflective sunglasses, she had the distinct impression he’d winked at her.

Kelsey straightened her spine to the shattering point. “My appeal isn’t in question. I’m here to —”

Keep him away from Emily, Kelsey. I don’t care how you do it, but keep that man away from my daughter!

“To do what, Kelsey Wilson?”

His deep voice made her name sound like a seduction, and suddenly she could think of all kinds of things to do that had nothing to do with her aunt’s wishes. Or did they? How far would Aunt Charlene expect her to go to keep Connor away from Emily?

“To give you a ride from the airport,” she answered with a saccharine smile. “Baggage claim is this way.”

Connor patted the duffel bag slung over one shoulder. “Got everything with me.”

Eyeing the lumpy bag, Kelsey wondered how dress clothes could survive such careless packing. Maybe he planned to ride his motorcycle up to the church in leather and denim, the same way he’d ridden out of town ten years ago? Unless—

“You didn’t bring much with you. You must not plan to stay long.”

Something in her voice must have given away her hope, because Connor chuckled. He adjusted the duffel bag and headed down the corridor, his strides so long Kelsey nearly had to jog to keep up.

“Oh, I’ll be here as long as it takes,” he told her with a sideways glance, “but I won’t need more than a few days.”

A few days. Did she really want to know? Did she really want to throw down the verbal gauntlet? Kelsey took a deep breath, partly to gather some courage, partly to gather some much needed oxygen. “A few days to what?”

“To stop Emily from marrying the wrong man.”

Connor hadn’t known what to expect when he stepped off the plane. He’d given Emily his flight information with the hope she might meet him at the airport. He’d wanted a chance to talk to her away from her family and her fiancé. He was realistic enough to know the whole Wilson brigade might be lined up at the gate like some kind of high-fashion firing squad. But he hadn’t expected a petite redhead. He’d never imagined the Wilson genes could produce a petite redhead.

“So who are you anyway?” he asked, only to realize the woman was no longer at his side.

He glanced back over his shoulder. Kelsey Wilson stood in the middle of the corridor, her brown eyes wide, her lips adorably parted in shock. She didn’t look anything like the other Wilsons, and curiosity stirred inside him. He couldn’t picture her at the elegant country-club settings the status-conscious family enjoyed any more than he’d imagined himself there.

A Wilson misfit, he thought, on the outside looking in. Their gazes locked, and the momentary connection rocked him. Shaking off the feeling, he circled back around and asked, “You coming?”

The flush of color on her cheeks nearly blotted out her freckles. “You don’t actually think you can come back here after ten years and expect to take up where you left off? You weren’t right for Emily back then, and you aren’t right for her now!”

As far as insults went, the words were pretty tame, especially coming from a Wilson. And it wasn’t as if he had any intention of taking up where he and Emily had left off. He’d made his share

of mistakes, and some—like thinking he and Emily had a chance—didn't bear repeating. Emily had been looking for someone to rescue her from the life her parents had planned for her, and he'd been young enough to think of himself as a hero.

Connor knew better now. He was nobody's hero.

Still, Kelsey's reminder stirred long-buried resentment. *Worthless. Good for nothing. Troublemaker.* Gordon Wilson had shouted them all when he'd discovered his younger daughter sneaking out to meet Connor. After being knocked around by his old man during his childhood, he knew a thing or two about male aggression and had arrogantly faced down the older man.

But Charlene Wilson's clipped, controlled words had managed to pierce his cocky facade. "From the moment Emily was born, she has had nothing but the best," Charlene told him with ice practically hanging from her words. "We have given her the world. What could *you* possibly give her?"

He'd tried to give her her freedom, the chance to live her life without bowing to her family's expectations. If someone had given his mother that same chance, things would have been different, and maybe, just maybe, she would still be alive. But when Emily made her choice, she didn't choose him. She took the easy way out—and in the end, so did he, Connor thought, guilt from the past and present mixing. But he wasn't going to fail this time. He was here to help Emily, no matter what the redhead standing in front of him like a curvaceous barricade thought.

"Look, whoever you are," he said, since she'd never explained her relationship to the Wilsons, "you didn't know me then, and you don't know me now. You don't have a clue what I'm good for."

He ducked his head and lowered his voice, not wanting to attract attention, but the words came out like a seductive challenge. He stood close enough to catch a hint of cinnamon coming from her skin. The color faded from her complexion, and her freckles stood out clearly enough to play a game of connect-the-dots. He shoved his hands into his pockets rather than give into the urge to trace a five-point star over one cheek. He tried to imagine Kelsey's reaction if he touched her. Would she recoil in shock? Or would he see an answering awareness in her chocolate eyes?

Right now, sparks of annoyance lit her gaze. "I know all I need to know. You're no good for Emily. You never were—What are you doing?" she demanded when Connor leaned around to look over her shoulder.

"Amazing. You can't even see the strings."

"What strings?"

"The ones Charlene Wilson uses to control you."

"Aunt Charlene does not control me."

Aunt Charlene, was it? He didn't remember Emily talking about a cousin, but they hadn't spent time discussing genealogy. "Funny, 'cause you sure sound like her."

"That's because we both want to protect Emily."

Protecting Emily was exactly why he was there. Adjusting the duffel bag on his shoulder, he started toward the parking garage. "So do I."

"Right." Kelsey struggled to keep up with him, and Connor shortened his stride. "Who do you think you have to protect her from?"

"From Charlene. From you." Before Kelsey could voice the protest he read in her stubborn expression, he added, "Mostly from Todd."

"From *Todd*? That's ridiculous. Todd loves Emily."

Yeah, well, Connor had seen what a man could do to a woman in the name of love. Seen it and had been helpless to stop it from happening... Shoving the dark memories of his mother and Cara Mitchell aside, Connor said, "Todd's not the golden boy the Wilsons think he is. The guy's bad news."

"How would you know?" Kelsey challenged as they stepped out the automatic doors and into the midday sunshine. Exhaust and honking horns rode the waves of heat. "My car's this way."

Connor followed Kelsey across the street to the short-term parking, where the fumes and noise faded slightly in the dimly lit garage. "I could tell from the second we met."

She stopped so suddenly he almost crashed into her back. When she turned, he was close enough that her shoulder brushed his chest, and the inane thought that she would fit perfectly in his arms crossed his mind.

Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. “You’ve never met Todd.”

“How do you know?”

“Be-because,” she sputtered. “Emily would have told me.”

Despite her words, Connor saw the doubt written in her furrowed brow as she walked over to a gray sedan. The car nearly blended into the concrete floor and pylons. Between her plain vehicle and sedate clothes, he had the feeling Kelsey Wilson was a woman who liked to fade into the background.

But he was trained to notice details. He’d bet the brilliant hair she kept coiled at the back of her neck was longer and wilder than it looked, and try as they might, the shapeless clothes did little to hide some amazing curves.

“If Emily tells you everything, then you know she and Dunworthy spent a weekend in San Diego a few weeks ago, right?” At Kelsey’s nod, Connor added, “Well, I drove there to meet them, and we had dinner.” Keeping his voice deceptively innocent, he asked, “Emily didn’t mention that?”

“Um, no,” Kelsey grudgingly confessed.

“I wonder why. Don’t you?” he pressed.

Not that there was much to tell, although he wasn’t about to admit that to Kelsey. When he left town, he never thought he’d see Emily again. But after hearing through the long-distance grapevine that she was getting married, calling to congratulate her seemed like a good way to put the past behind him. The last thing he expected was Emily’s invitation to have dinner with her and her fiancé while they were vacationing in California. But he’d agreed, thinking the meeting might ease his guilt. After all, if Emily had found Mr. Right, maybe that would finally justify his reasons for leaving Scottsdale.

But when Connor went to dinner with Emily, he didn’t see a woman who’d grown and matured and found her place in life. Instead, he saw in Emily’s eyes the same trapped look as when they’d first met—a look he could not, would not ignore.

Kelsey kept both hands on the wheel and her gaze focused on the road, but she was far too aware of Connor McClane to pay much attention to the buildings, billboards and exit signs speeding by. The air-conditioning blew his aftershave toward her heated face, a scent reminiscent of surf, sand and sea. His big body barely fit in the passenger seat. Twice now, his arm brushed against hers, sending her pulse racing, and she nearly swerved out of her lane.

She’d been right in thinking the man was dangerous, and not just to Emily’s future or her own peace of mind, but to passing motorists, as well.

“I can’t believe how much the city has grown. All these new freeways and houses....” He leaned forward to study a sign. “Hey, take this next exit.”

Kelsey followed his directions, wishing she could drop him off at a hotel and call her familial duty done. Unfortunately, playing chauffeur wasn’t her real purpose. Connor had flat-out told her he planned to ruin Emily’s wedding. If she didn’t stop him, her own business would be destroyed in the fallout. Who would trust a wedding planner who couldn’t pull off her own cousin’s wedding?

Panic tightened her hands on the wheel. “Where are we going?” she asked.

“My friend Javy’s family owns a restaurant around here. Best Mexican food you’ve ever tasted.”

“I don’t like Mexican food.”

He shook his head. “Poor Kelsey. Can’t take the heat, huh?”

They stopped at a red light, and she risked a glance at him. He still wore those darn sunglasses, but she didn’t need to look into his eyes to read his thoughts. He was here to win back Emily and show the Wilsons and the rest of the world they’d underestimated him all those years ago. But until then, he’d kill some time by flirting with her.

Kelsey didn’t know why the thought hurt so much. After all, it wasn’t the first time a man had used her to try and get to her beautiful, desirable cousin.

The light turned green, and she hit the gas harder than necessary. “Let’s just say I’ve been burned before.”

A heartbeat’s silence passed. When Connor spoke again, his voice was friendly, casual and missing the seductive undertone. “You’ll like this place.” He chuckled. “I can’t tell you how many meals I’ve had there. If it hadn’t been for Señora Delgado...”

Kelsey wondered at the warmth and gratitude in his words. Something told her Connor wasn’t simply reminiscing about tacos and burritos. An undeniable curiosity built as she pulled into the parking lot. The restaurant looked like an old-time hacienda with its flat roof and arched entryway. The stucco had been painted a welcoming terra-cotta. Strings of outdoor lights scalloped the front porch, and large clay pots housed a variety of heat-tolerant plants: pink and white vinca, yellow gazanias, and clusters of cacti.

Still checking out the exterior, Kelsey remained behind the wheel until Connor circled the car and opened the door for her. Startled by the chivalry, she grabbed her purse and took his hand. As she slid out of the seat, she hoped Connor didn’t guess how rare or surprising she found the gesture.

She thought he’d let go, but he kept hold of her hand as he led her along red, green and yellow mosaic stepping stones that cut through the gravel landscape. His palm felt hard and masculine against her own, but without the calluses she’d somehow expected.

When he opened the carved door, he let go of her hand to lay claim to the small of her back. A shiver rocked her entire body. His solicitous touch shouldn’t have the power to turn on every nerve ending. And it certainly shouldn’t have the inexplicable ability to send her mind reeling with images of his hand stroking down her naked spine...

Full body armor, Kelsey thought once again, uncertain even that extreme could shield her from her own reactions.

Desperate to change her focus, she looked around the restaurant. A dozen round tables stood in the center of the Saltillo-tiled room, and booths lined each wall. The scent of grilled peppers and mouthwatering spices filled the air.

“Man, would you look at this place?” Connor waved a hand at the brightly colored walls, the piñatas dangling from the ceiling and the woven-blanket wall hangings.

He removed his sunglasses to take in the dimly lit restaurant, but Kelsey couldn’t see beyond his eyes. Not brown, not blue, but gorgeous, glorious green. A reminder of spring, the short burst of cool days, the promise of dew-kissed grass. Without the glasses to shield his eyes, Connor McClane looked younger, more approachable, a little less badass.

“Has it changed?”

“No, everything’s exactly the same. Just like it should be,” he added with a determination that made Kelsey wonder. Had someone once threatened to change the restaurant that was so important to his friends?

A young woman wearing a red peasant-style blouse and white three-tiered skirt approached, menus in hand. “*Buenas tardes*. Two for lunch?”

“*¿Sí. Dónde está Señora Delgado?*”

Startled, Kelsey listened to Connor converse in fluent Spanish. She couldn’t understand a word, so why did his deep voice pour like hot fudge through her veins?

Get a grip! Connor McClane is in town for one reason and one reason only. And that reason was not her.

The hostess led them to a corner booth. Kelsey barely had a chance to slide across the red Naugahyde and glance at the menu when a masculine voice called out, “Look what the cat dragged in!”

A good-looking Hispanic man dressed in a white button-down shirt and khakis walked over. Connor stood and slapped him on the back in a moment of male bonding. “Javy! Good to see you, man!”

“How’s life in L.A.?”

“Not bad. How’s your mother? The hostess says she’s not here today?”

“She’s semiretired, which means she’s only here to kick my butt half the time,” Javy laughed.

“I didn’t think you’d ever get Maria to slow down.”

“This place means the world to her. I still don’t know how to thank you.”

“Forget it, man,” Connor quickly interrupted. “It was nothing compared to what your family’s done for me over the years.”

Modesty? Kelsey wondered, though Connor didn’t seem the type. And yet she didn’t read even an ounce of pride in his expression. If anything, he looked... guilty.

“I’m not about to forget it, and I *will* find a way to pay you back,” Javy insisted. “Hey, do you want to crash at my place while you’re here?”

“No, thanks. I’ve got a hotel room.”

Finally Connor turned back to Kelsey. “Javy, there’s someone I’d like you to meet. Javier Delgado, Kelsey Wilson.”

Javy did a double take at Kelsey’s last name, then slanted Connor a warning look. “Man, some people never learn.”

Still, his dark eyes glittered and a dimple flashed in one cheek as he said, “Pleasure to meet you, *señorita*. Take care of this one, will you? He’s not as tough as he thinks he is.”

“Get outta here.” Connor shoved his friend’s shoulder before sliding into the booth across from Kelsey. “And bring us some food. I’ve been dying for your mother’s enchiladas.” He handed back the menu without opening it. “What about you, Kelsey?”

“I’m, um, not sure.” The menu was written in Spanish on the right and English on the left, but even with the translation, she didn’t know what to order.

“She’ll have a chicken quesadilla with the guacamole and sour cream on the side. And we’ll both have margaritas.”

“I’ll take mine without alcohol,” Kelsey insisted. Bad enough he’d ordered her lunch. She didn’t need him ordering a drink for her, especially not one laden with tequila and guaranteed to go right to her head.

“Two margaritas, one virgin,” Connor said with a wink that sent a rush of heat to Kelsey’s cheeks. With her fair complexion, she figured she could give the red pepper garland strung across the ceiling a run for its money.

“I’ll get those orders right up.”

As his friend walked toward the kitchen, Connor leaned back in the booth and gazed around the restaurant. Nostalgia lifted the corners of his mouth in a genuine smile. “Man, I’ve missed this place.”

“So why haven’t you come back before now?” Kelsey asked, curious despite sensible warnings to keep her distance.

He shrugged. “Never had reason to, I guess.”

“Until now,” she added flatly, “when you’ve come to crash Emily’s wedding.”

Losing his relaxed pose, he braced his muscled forearms on the table and erased the separation between them. His smile disappeared, nostalgia burned away by determination. “First of all, there isn’t going to be a wedding. And second, even if there was a wedding, I wouldn’t be crashing. I’d be an invited guest.”

“Invited!” Surprise and something she didn’t want to label had her pulling back, hoping to create some sanity-saving distance. “Who...” She groaned at the obvious answer, and the confident spark in Connor’s emerald eyes. “What on earth was Emily thinking?”

“Actually, she summed up her thoughts pretty well.”

Connor reached into his back pocket and pulled out an invitation. He offered it up like a challenge, holding a corner between his first and second fingers. She snatched it away, almost afraid to read what her cousin had written. Emily’s girlish script flowered across the cream-colored vellum.

Please say you’ll come. I can’t imagine my wedding day without you.

Good Lord, it was worse than she'd thought! The words practically sounded like a proposal. Was Emily hoping Connor would stop her wedding? That he'd speak now rather than hold his peace?

"Okay," she said with the hope of defusing the situation, "so Emily invited you."

"That's not an invitation. It's a cry for help."

"It's—it's closure," she said, knowing she was grasping at straws. "Emily has moved on with her life, and she's hoping you'll do the same."

He frowned. "What makes you think I haven't?"

"Are you married? Engaged? In a serious relationship?" Kelsey pressed. Each shake of his head proved Kelsey's point. He wasn't over Emily.

Kelsey couldn't blame him. Her cousin was beautiful, inside and out. And experience had taught Kelsey how far a man would go to be a part of Emily's life.

Connor slid the invitation from her hand in what felt like a caress. "There's no reason for me not to be here, Kelsey."

Here, in Arizona, to stop the wedding, she had to remind herself as she snatched her hand back and laced her fingers together beneath the table. Not *here* with her.

The waitress's arrival with their drinks spared Kelsey from having to come up with a response. Connor lifted his margarita. "To new friends."

Rising to the challenge this time, she tapped her glass against his. "And old lovers?"

If she'd hoped to somehow put him in his place, she failed miserably. With a low chuckle, he amended, "Let's make that old friends...and new lovers."

His vibrant gaze held her captive as he raised his glass. Ignoring the straw, he took a drink. A hum of pleasure escaped him. The sound seemed to vibrate straight from his body and into hers, a low-frequency awareness that shook her to the core.

He lowered the glass and licked the tequila, salt and lime from his upper lip. "You don't know what you're missing."

Oh, she knew. The taste of a man's kiss, the scent of his aftershave on her clothes, the feel of his hard body moving against her own. How long had it been since a man had stolen her breath, her sanity? How many weeks, months? She'd probably be better converting the time into years—fewer numbers to count.

Odd how Kelsey hadn't missed any of those things until the moment Connor McClane walked down the airport corridor. No, she had to admit, she'd suffered the first twinge of—loneliness? Lust? She didn't know exactly *what* it was, but she'd first felt it the moment she'd looked at Connor's picture.

"Aren't you having any?"

Her gaze dropped to his mouth, and for one second, she imagined leaning over the table and tasting the tequila straight from Connor's lips.

"Kelsey, your drink?" he all but growled. The heat in his gaze made it clear he knew her sudden thirst had nothing to do with margaritas.

Maybe if she downed the whole thing in one swallow, the brain freeze might be enough to cool her body. She sucked in a quick strawful of the tart, icy mixture with little effect. Frozen nonalcoholic drinks had nothing on Connor McClane.

Still, she set the glass down with a decisive clunk. "You can't come back here and decide what's best for Emily. It doesn't matter if *you* don't like Todd. You're not the one marrying him. Emily is, and her opinion is the only one that matters."

Connor let out a bark of laughter. "Right! How much weight do you think her *opinion* carried when we were dating?"

"That was different."

"Yeah, because I was a nobody from the wrong side of the tracks instead of some old-money entrepreneur with the Wilson stamp of approval on my backside."

A nobody from the wrong side of the tracks. Kelsey schooled her expression not to reveal how closely those words struck home. What would Connor McClane think if he learned she had more in common with *him* than with her wealthy cousins?

Kelsey shook off the feeling. It didn't matter what they did or didn't have in common; they were on opposite sides.

"Did you ever consider that Emily's parents thought she was too young? She was barely out of high school, and all she could talk about was running away with you."

"Exactly."

Expecting a vehement denial, Kelsey shook her head. "Huh?"

One corner of his mouth tilted in a smile. "I might have been blind back then, but I've learned a thing or two. Emily was always a good girl, never caused her parents any trouble. She didn't smoke, didn't drink, didn't do drugs. No tattoos or piercings for her."

"Of course not."

From the time Kelsey had moved in with her aunt and uncle, she'd lived in her cousin's shadow. She knew all about how perfect Emily was—her fling with Connor the sole imperfection that proved she was actually human.

"Emily didn't have to do those things. She had me. I was her ultimate act of rebellion."

Kelsey listened for the arrogant ring in his words, but the cocky tone was absent. In its place, she heard a faint bitterness. "No one likes being used," she murmured, thoughts of her ex-boyfriend coming to mind.

Matt Moran had her completely fooled during the six months they dated. With his shy personality and awkward social skills, she couldn't say he swept her off her feet. But he'd seemed sweet, caring, and truly interested in her.

And she'd never once suspected he was secretly in love with her cousin or that he'd been using her to get closer to Emily. So Kelsey knew how Connor felt, and somehow knowing that was like knowing *him*. Her gaze locked with his in a moment of emotional recognition she didn't dare acknowledge.

The question was written in his eyes, but she didn't want to answer, didn't want him seeing inside her soul. "What was Emily rebelling against?"

Connor hesitated, and for a second Kelsey feared he might not let the change of subject slide. Finally, though, he responded, "It had to do with her choice of college. She hated that exclusive prep school, but Charlene insisted on only the best. I suppose that's where you went, too."

"Not me," she protested. "I had the finest education taxpayers could provide." One of Connor's dark eyebrows rose, and Kelsey hurried on before he could ask why her childhood had differed from her cousins'. "So after Emily survived prep school..."

He picked up where she left off, but Kelsey had the feeling he'd filed away her evasion for another time. "After graduation, Gordon wanted Emily to enroll at an Ivy League school. She didn't want to, but her parents held all the cards—until I came along. I was the ace up her sleeve. Guess I still am."

The bad-boy grin and teasing light were absent from his expression, and Kelsey felt a flicker of unease tumbling helplessly through her stomach. Did Connor know something about Todd that would stop the wedding? Something that would tear apart all Kelsey's dreams for success and her chance to prove herself in her family's eyes?

"Emily invited me because her parents are pushing her into this marriage. She's pushing back the only way she knows how. She *wants* me to stop the wedding."

"That's crazy! Do you realize Emily is having her dress fitting right now? And we're going to the hotel tomorrow evening to make final arrangements for the reception? She loves Todd and wants to spend the rest of her life with him."

Leaning forward, he challenged, “If you’re right, if Emily’s so crazy about this guy, then why are you worried I’m here?”

A knowing light glowed in his green eyes, and history told Kelsey she had every reason to worry. After all, on the night of her senior prom, after spending the day having her hair artfully styled and her makeup expertly applied, and wearing the perfect dress, Emily had stood up her parents’ handpicked date...to ride off with Connor on the back of his motorcycle.

Having met Connor, Kelsey could see how easily he must have seduced her cousin. With his looks, charm, his flat-out masculine appeal, how was a woman supposed to resist?

And Kelsey wondered if maybe Emily wasn’t the only one she should be worried about.

Chapter Two

“Honestly, Kelsey, why are you ringing the doorbell like some stranger?” Aileen Wilson-Kirkland demanded as she opened the front door. She latched on to Kelsey’s arm and nearly dragged her inside her aunt and uncle’s travertine-tiled foyer.

“Well, it’s not like I still live here,” Kelsey reminded her cousin.

Aileen rolled her eyes. “You probably rang the doorbell even when this *was* your home.”

“I did not,” Kelsey protested, even as heat bloomed in her cheeks. Her cousin might have been teasing, but the comment wasn’t far off. She’d never felt comfortable living in her aunt and uncle’s gorgeous Scottsdale house, with its country-club lifestyle and golf-course views. Before moving in with her relatives, *home* had been a series of low-rent apartments. And, oh, how she’d missed those small, cozy places she’d shared with her mother.

“I didn’t want to barge in,” she added.

“You’re kidding, right? Like I haven’t been dying to hear how things went! Did you pick up Connor? Does he look the same? Do you think—”

Ignoring the rapid-fire questions, Kelsey asked, “Where are Emily and Aunt Charlene?”

“Emily’s still having her dress fitted.”

“Oh, I’d love to see it.” A designer friend of Kelsey’s had made the dress for her cousin, but so far Kelsey had seen only drawings and fabric swatches.

For such a gorgeous woman, Aileen gave a decidedly inelegant snort as they walked down the hall. “Nice try. Do you really think you can escape without going over every detail from the first second you saw Connor right up to when you left him—” Emily’s older sister frowned. “Where *did* you leave him?”

“At a restaurant.”

“By himself?”

“What else could I do, Aileen? Follow him to his hotel and ask for an invitation inside?”

“Well, that would make it easier to keep an eye on him.”

“Aileen!”

Waving aside Kelsey’s indignation, Aileen said, “I’m just kidding. Besides, he doesn’t have a car, right?”

“Like that’s going to slow him down! Don’t you remember the time Connor got busted for joyriding in a ‘borrowed’ car?” She hadn’t been around then, but her aunt had remarked on Connor’s misdeeds long after he’d left town. In fact, Connor’s name had come up any time Emily threatened to disobey her parents. Like some kind of bogeyman Aunt Charlene evoked to keep her younger daughter in line.

Her cousin’s perfectly shaped brows rose. “You don’t think he’s still involved in illegal activities, do you?”

“I have no idea,” Kelsey said, ignoring the internal voice yelling *no*. Her automatic desire to rush to Connor’s defense worried her. She was supposed to stop him, not champion him.

“You should find out,” Aileen said as she led the way into the study. The bookshelf-lined room, with its leather and mahogany furniture, was her uncle’s masculine domain, but even this room had been taken over by wedding preparations. Stacks of photo albums cluttered the coffee table.

“Why me?” Kelsey groaned.

“You want to help Emily, don’t you?”

“Of course I do!” she insisted, even if she had to admit her motives weren’t completely altruistic.

“And you want the wedding to be perfect, right?” Her cousin already knew the answer and didn’t wait for Kelsey’s response.

“I know Mother exaggerates, but not when it comes to Connor McClane. I wouldn’t be surprised if he tried kidnapping Emily again,” Aileen added.

Kelsey fought to keep from rolling her eyes. “She took off with Connor on prom night and didn’t come back until the next day. I think your parents overreacted.”

“Maybe, but I guarantee he’ll try to stop the wedding somehow.” Aileen pointed an older-therefore-wiser finger in Kelsey’s direction. “But don’t let him fool you.”

He hadn’t bothered to try to fool her. Was Connor so confident he could stop the wedding that he didn’t care who knew about his plan?

Walking over to the coffee table, Aileen picked up a stack of photos. “Here are the pictures Mother wants to show during the reception.”

“Thanks.” Kelsey flipped through images of her cousin’s life. Not a bad-hair day or an acne breakout in the bunch. Even in pigtails and braces Emily had been adorable. As Kelsey tucked them into her purse, she noticed a stray photo had fallen to the Oriental area rug. “Did you want to include this one?”

Her voice trailed off as she had a better look at the picture. At first glance, the young woman could have been Emily, but the feathered hair and ruffled prom dress were wrong. “Oh, wow.”

From the time Kelsey had come to live with her aunt and uncle, she’d heard how much Emily looked like Kelsey’s mother, Olivia. Kelsey had seen similarities in the blond hair and blue eyes, but from this picture of a teenage Olivia dressed for a high school dance, she and Emily could have passed for sisters.

Reading her thoughts, Aileen said, “Amazing, isn’t it?”

“It is. Everyone always said—” Kelsey shook her head. “I never noticed.”

“Really? But they look so much alike!”

“My mother, she didn’t—” Laugh? Smile? Ever look as *alive* as she looked in that photo? Uncertain what to say, Kelsey weakly finished, “I don’t remember her looking like this.”

“Oh, Kelse. I’m sorry.” Concern darkened Aileen’s eyes. “I should have realized with your mother being so sick and having to go through chemo. Of course, she didn’t look the same.”

Accepting her cousin’s condolences with a touch of guilt, Kelsey silently admitted Olivia Wilson had lost any resemblance to the girl in the picture long before being diagnosed with cancer. What would it have been like had her mother retained some of that carefree, joyful spirit? Kelsey immediately thrust the disloyal thought aside.

Olivia had given up everything—including the wealth and family that now surrounded Kelsey—to raise her daughter. Emily’s wedding was Kelsey’s chance to live up to her promise. To hold her head high and finally show the Wilsons how amazing she could be.

With a final look at the picture, Kelsey slid the photo of her mother back into one of the albums. “It’s okay,” she told Aileen. “Let’s go see if Emily’s done with the fitting.”

“All right. But be warned,” Aileen said as she led the way down the hall toward Emily’s bedroom. “The photographer’s in there.”

“Really?” Kelsey frowned. “I don’t remember pictures of the fitting being included. Was that something Emily requested?”

She had long accepted that her ideas and her cousins’ differed greatly, but a seamstress fretting over her measurements would have been a nightmare for Kelsey, not a photo op.

Aileen shrugged and opened the door just a crack. “The photographer said it was all part of the package.”

A quick glance inside, and Kelsey immediately saw what “package” the photographer was interested in. Emily stood in the middle of the bedroom, with its girlish four-poster bed and French provincial furniture. Her sheer, lace-covered arms were held out straight at her sides while the seamstress pinned the beaded bodice to fit her willowy curves. Dewy makeup highlighted her wide blue eyes, flawless cheekbones and smiling lips.

“What do you think, Mother? Will Todd like it?” Emily leaned forward to examine the skirt, testing the limits of a dozen stickpins.

The photographer, a man in his midtwenties, started snapping shots as fast as his index finger could fly. It wasn’t the first time Kelsey had seen slack-jawed amazement on a man’s face. Too bad she saw the expression only when her cousin was around.

“Of course he will. Audra is an amazing designer, and she created that dress just for you. It’s perfect,” Aunt Charlene insisted, keeping a narrow-eyed glare on the photographer.

Charlene Wilson didn’t share her daughters’ beauty, but she was a tall, striking woman. She could instantly command a room with her timeless sense of style and demand for perfection from herself and those around her. Today she wore a beige silk suit that wouldn’t dare wrinkle and her brown hair in an elegant twist at the nape of her neck.

Glancing down at her own clothes, a map of creases that spelled fashion disaster, Kelsey knew her aunt would be horrified by the sight. Fortunately, Charlene was far too busy to notice. Kelsey slid the door shut and walked back down the hallway with Aileen.

“I know all brides are supposed to be beautiful,” Aileen said with a mixture of sisterly affection and envy, “but that’s ridiculous.”

“Please, I’ve seen pictures of your wedding. You were just as gorgeous.”

Aileen gave a theatrical sigh. “True. Of course, I wasn’t lucky enough to have you to plan everything. I ran myself ragged, and you make it look so easy.”

Kelsey laughed even as her cheeks heated with embarrassed pleasure. “That’s because I’m only planning the wedding. It’s far more stressful to be the bride.”

“Still, you’re doing an amazing job. Mother thinks so, too, even if she hasn’t told you. This wedding will make your company.”

That was just what she was counting on, Kelsey thought, excitement filling her once again. “I know.” Taking a deep breath, she confessed, “I put down first and last month’s rent on that shop in Glendale.”

Aileen made a sound of delight and threw her arms around Kelsey in a hug that ended before she could lift her stiff arms in response. After eight years, Kelsey should have anticipated the enthusiastic embrace, but somehow, both her cousins’ easy affection always caught her off guard.

“That is so exciting, and it’s about time! You should have opened a shop a long time ago instead of working out of your home.”

“I couldn’t afford it until now.”

“You could have if you’d taken my father up on his loan,” Aileen said.

Kelsey swallowed. “I couldn’t,” she said, knowing Aileen wouldn’t understand any more than her uncle Gordon had. Starting her business was something she had to do for herself and for her mother’s memory.

Wilson women against the world... Her mother’s voice rang in her head. Opening the shop wouldn’t have the same meaning with her uncle’s money behind the success.

Aileen shook her head. “Honestly, Kelsey, you are so stubborn.” A slight frown pulled her eyebrows together. “But something tells me you’re going to need every bit of that determination—”

Kelsey jumped in. “To keep Connor McClane away from Emily. I know, Aileen. But if Emily’s so crazy about Todd, what difference does it make that Connor’s in town?”

Ever since he’d posed that question, Kelsey couldn’t get his words out of her mind. Okay, so in her opinion, Todd Dunworthy didn’t hold even a teeny, tiny, flickering match to Connor McClane. But if her cousin truly loved Todd, shouldn’t he outshine every other man—including an old flame like Connor?

“Kelsey, we’re talking about Connor McClane. I know you’ve sworn off men since Matt, but please tell me that idiot didn’t rob you of every female hormone in your body!”

Even after two years, the thought of her ex-boyfriend made Kelsey cringe. Not because of the heartbreak but because of the humiliation. Still, she argued, “I’m not discounting Connor’s appeal.” If anything, she’d been mentally recounting every attractive feature, from his quick wit to his sexy smile and killer bod. “But if I were a week away from getting married and madly in love with my fiancé, none of that would matter.”

Aileen sighed and slanted Kelsey a look filled with worldly wisdom. “It’s cold feet. Every engaged woman goes through it. I called things off with Tom three times before we finally made it to the altar. You’ll see what I mean when you get engaged.”

The idea of Kelsey getting engaged was in serious question, but if that time ever did come, she was sure she’d be so in love she’d never harbor any doubts. “Okay, so you called off your engagement. Did you run off with another man?”

“You know I didn’t.”

“Well, that’s my point. If Emily and Todd are right for each other, Connor’s presence shouldn’t matter.”

“It shouldn’t, but it does. You weren’t here when Emily and Connor were together. He’s the kind of man who makes a woman want to live for the moment and never think of tomorrow. When Emily was around him, she’d get completely caught up in the here and now of Connor McClane. But her relationship with Todd is something that can last.” Aileen flashed a bright smile. “Look, you’ve handled prewedding problems before. All you have to do is keep Connor away. You can do that, can’t you, Kelsey?”

What else could she do but say yes?

Connor scrolled through his laptop’s files, going over the information he’d compiled on Todd Dunworthy. He had to have missed something.

Swearing, he rolled away from the desk in his hotel suite and pushed out of the chair. He paced the length of the room, but even with the extra money he’d paid for a suite, he couldn’t go far. From the closet, past the bathroom, between the desk and footboard, to the window and back. He supposed he should consider himself lucky not to have Kelsey Wilson shadowing his every step. An unwanted smile tugged at his lips at the thought of the woman he’d met the day before.

He’d finally convinced her to leave him at the restaurant, telling her he had years to catch up with his friend, Javy. The words were true enough, but he’d seen the suspicion in her brown eyes. He chuckled at the thought of the atypical Wilson relative. She was nothing like Emily, that was for sure. Compared to Kelsey’s fiery red hair, deep brown eyes, and womanly curves, Emily suddenly seemed like a blond-haired, blue-eyed paper doll.

But no matter how much curiosity Kelsey Wilson provoked, Connor couldn’t let himself be distracted.

After his relationship with Emily ended, Connor had drifted around Southern California. Different state, but he’d hung out with the same crowd. Busting up a fight in a club had gotten him his first job as a bouncer. He’d worked security for several years before taking a chance and opening a P.I. business.

Up until three months ago, he would have said he was good at his job, one of the best. That he had a feel for people, an instinct that told him when someone was lying. Listening to his gut had saved his skin more than once. Not listening had nearly gotten a woman killed.

From the first moment he’d met Todd Dunworthy, Connor had that same hit-below-the-belt feeling. And this time he was damn sure gonna listen. So far, though, his background check had merely revealed Dunworthy was the youngest son of a wealthy Chicago family. Numerous newspaper photos showed him at the opera, a benefit for the symphony, a gallery opening. And while the events and locales changed, he always had a different woman—tall, blond and beautiful—on his arm.

No doubt about it, Emily was definitely Todd’s type.

“You sure you don’t hate the guy just ’cause the Wilsons love him?” Javy had pressed on the ride from the restaurant to the hotel.

Connor couldn’t blame his friend for asking. And, okay, so maybe he would dislike anyone who met with the Wilsons’ approval, but that didn’t change his opinion. Todd Dunworthy was not the man they thought he was.

He’d spoken to several of the Dunworthy family employees and none of them were talking. It wasn’t that they wouldn’t say anything bad about their employers; Connor expected that. But these people refused to say a word, which told him one important thing. As well paid as they might be to do their jobs, they were even better compensated to keep quiet.

Most were lifers—employees who had been with the family for decades. But there was one woman he hadn’t been able to reach. A former maid named Sophia Pirelli. She’d worked for the family for two years before suddenly quitting or getting fired—no one would say—two months ago. The silence alone made Connor suspicious, and figuring an exemployee might be willing to talk, Connor wanted to find her.

A few days ago he’d found a lead on Sophia’s whereabouts. As much as he longed to follow that trail and see where it ended, he couldn’t be in two places at once. He wanted to stay focused on Todd, so he’d asked his friend and fellow P.I., Jake Cameron, to see if the former maid was staying with friends in St. Louis.

Grabbing his cell phone, he dialed Jake’s number. His friend didn’t bother with pleasantries. “You were right. She’s here.”

Finally! A lead that might pan out. “Have you found anything?”

“Not yet. This one’s going take some time.”

Frustration built inside Connor. Although he trusted Jake and knew the man was a good P.I., Connor wasn’t used to relying on someone else. “We don’t have a lot of time here.”

“Hey, I’ve got this,” Jake said with typical confidence. “I’m just telling you, she’s not the type to spill all her secrets on a first date.”

Connor shook his head. He shouldn’t have worried. His friend had been in St. Louis for all of two days, and he already had a date with the former maid. “Call me when you’ve got anything.”

“Will do.”

Snapping the cell phone shut, Connor hoped Jake worked his cases as quickly as he worked with women. But he wasn’t going to sit around waiting for Jake; he wanted to find something on Dunworthy, irrefutable proof that the guy wasn’t the loving husband-to-be he pretended.

Scowling, he resumed pacing, lengthening his stride to cross the room in four steps instead of eight. Connor had never been one to back down from a fight, but some battles were lost before they’d even begun. Gordon and Charlene Wilson would never take the word of the kid from the wrong side of the tracks over their handpicked golden boy.

Dammit, he needed an insider. He needed someone the Wilsons trusted to break the bad news. He needed one of their own. He needed...Kelsey.

Connor laughed out loud at the idea, but damned if he didn’t think it might work. Kelsey hadn’t played a part in his past relationship with Emily. She was as unbiased a witness as he could hope to find. She had nothing at stake with Emily’s wedding, nothing riding on her cousin saying “I do.”

No doubt about it, Kelsey was his best shot.

The following evening, Emily twirled around the hotel’s atrium, her arms outspread like Sleeping Beauty. “You were right, Kelsey. This is the perfect place for the reception. Don’t you think so, Mother?”

She looked so beautiful and happy Kelsey half-expected cartoon animals to surround her at any moment. Smiling at her cousin’s unfettered happiness, she breathed a sigh of relief. Connor McClane was wrong, dead wrong. Emily and Todd were meant to be.

“It’s lovely,” Aunt Charlene commented without looking up from her mother-of-the-bride notebook. “I knew we could count on Kelsey to find the perfect place.”

“Um, thank you, Aunt Charlene,” Kelsey said, surprised and pleased by the compliment. Even after eight years, Kelsey and Charlene had a tentative, tightrope relationship that had yet to get past a disastrous beginning.

When Kelsey had first come to live with the Wilsons, she’d been overwhelmed by their obvious wealth, and her cousins’ beauty and grace had left her feeling outclassed. Especially when Charlene took one look at her and declared, “Someone must take this girl shopping.”

Looking back now, Kelsey realized her aunt had been trying to relate to her the same way she did to her own daughters, who loved nothing more than a day spent raiding Scottsdale boutiques. But back then, as an intimidated, awkward teenager, Kelsey had suffered the pain of being seen as an embarrassment by her new family.

She’d survived the multiple fittings and outfit changes—a living, breathing, *silent* mannequin—as her aunt and a shopkeeper went back and forth over which colors, styles and accessories best suited Kelsey. But when she stood with her aunt at the register, when she saw the *hundreds* of dollars a single item cost, a sick sense of disbelief hit her stomach.

How many weeks’ rent would that pair of shoes have paid for when she and her mother were living in tiny one-room apartments? How many months of food? How much better might her mother’s medical have been with that kind of money?

In a quiet, cold voice, Kelsey had told the saleswoman to put every item back, before marching out of the store.

Later, once Kelsey had calmed down and realized how ungrateful her actions must have seemed, she tried to apologize to her aunt. Charlene had declared the matter over and forgotten, but never again did she offer to take Kelsey shopping.

Their relationship had yet to recover from that day. By asking Kelsey to coordinate the wedding, Charlene had helped breach the gap, but Kelsey knew this opportunity didn’t come with second chances. This was her one shot.

“I’ve always thought this was an amazing place for a reception,” Kelsey said, hearing the dreamy wistfulness in her own voice. The glass ceiling and towering plants gave the illusion of being in a tropical paradise, and from the first time she’d seen the hotel, Kelsey had known it was perfect.

Perfect for Emily, she reminded herself.

Although between having so many of her friends working the wedding and Emily’s willingness to let Kelsey make so many of the decisions, the entire event was feeling more like *Kelsey’s* dream wedding.

Except the choice of groom...

The insidious thought wove through her mind along with images of Connor McClane...His rebellious saunter, his too confident grin, his...*everything*.

“I hope Todd likes it.” Emily lowered her arms, a small frown tugging at her eyebrows. “Do you think he will?”

“It’s a five-star hotel, one of the finest in the state,” Charlene said imperiously.

“I know, but Todd’s family is from Chicago. They have all those historic buildings and...Todd can be particular.”

Kelsey’s hand tightened on her day planner at her cousin’s hesitant tone. Suspicions planted by Connor’s too-pointed comments threatened to sprout into tangled choking weeds, but Kelsey ground them down. Finger by finger, she eased her grip before she left permanent indentations on the leather book.

Her cousin was a people pleaser. Of course she worried what Todd would think. “He agreed to let you make all the decisions about the wedding,” Kelsey reminded Emily, who had in turn, left most of the decisions up to her. “So he must trust your choices.”

“I know, but...” Emily took a look around the atrium without the excitement she’d shown moments ago. Trying to see it through Todd’s particular eyes?

“But what?” Kelsey prompted gently.

“It’s—it’s nothing.” Emily shook her head with a laugh. “I just want everything to be perfect. You understand, don’t you, Kelsey?”

Yes, she knew all about trying and failing again and again. But not this time—not with Emily’s wedding. “Of course I do. And your wedding will be perfect,” she insisted, before an already familiar masculine voice filled the atrium and sent shivers up and down her spine.

“Hey, Em! How’s the blushing bride?”

“Oh, my gosh! Connor!” Emily squealed her former boyfriend’s name and ran to meet him. A broad smile on his handsome face, he caught her in his arms and spun her around. “What are you doing here?” she asked.

Keeping an arm around Emily’s shoulders, Connor glanced at Kelsey. “When Kelsey said you’d be here, I had to see you.”

Heat rushed to Kelsey’s face. Bad enough Connor had outmaneuvered her. Did he have to rub it in in front of her aunt?

Connor McClane had been in town less than twenty-four hours, and she could already feel the familiar undertow of failure dragging her under.

“You told him we’d be here?” The words barely escaped the frozen smile on her aunt’s face. Charlene would never make a scene in public. Even if it meant smiling at the man out to ruin her daughter’s future.

“No! I didn’t.” Except she *had* told Connor Emily was making final arrangements for the reception that evening, and he would know where the reception was being held. After all, he’d been invited. “I didn’t mean to,” she almost groaned.

Charlene straightened her razor-sharp shoulders, taking charge of a situation that had gotten out of control. Out of *Kelsey’s* control. Interrupting Emily and Connor’s conversation, she said, “Mr. McClane, you’ll have to excuse us. Emily has a wedding to plan.”

“Mother!” her daughter protested. “Connor’s come all this way to see me. We have so much to talk about. Can’t this wait?”

“This is *your* wedding we’re talking about, Emily! The most important day of your life.”

The most important day of your life. Kelsey understood the sentiment. Every bride wanted her wedding day to be perfect, and she was doing everything in her power to see that this affair was the type every girl dreamed about, but Emily was only twenty-eight years old. Shouldn’t she have something to look forward to?

Why Kelsey chose that moment to meet Connor’s glance, she didn’t know. He flashed her a half smile as if he could not only read her thoughts but agreed one hundred percent.

“You’re right, of course, Mother.” Emily turned to Connor with a smile. “I’m sorry, Connor. We don’t have much time before the wedding, and there’s still so much to do.”

“Don’t worry, Em. We’ll have plenty of time to talk before then. I’m in Room 415.”

“You’re staying here?” Kelsey blurted the words in horror. At the hotel where not only the reception was taking place, but also the rehearsal dinner.

Connor’s grin was maddening—and disturbingly enticing. “Thought it would be convenient.”

“Convenient. Right.” That way he could *conveniently* intrude on every event she had planned for the location and drive her insane!

“Kelsey, Emily and I can take things from here. You have...other matters to attend to now.”

Her aunt’s pointed look spoke volumes. Charlene could handle the final wedding details. Kelsey’s job was to handle Connor McClane. She desperately clutched her day planner to her chest like a leather-bound shield. There were some things in life she could not control, but everything else

made it onto a list. A methodical, point-by-point inventory of what she needed to accomplish, making even the impossible seem manageable. Nothing beat the satisfaction of marking off a completed task.

And although Kelsey certainly hadn't counted on Connor when she prioritized her checklist for Emily's wedding, as long as she kept him occupied for the next week and a half, Kelsey would be able to cross him off once and for all.

Catching a touch of her aunt's righteous indignation, she straightened her own shoulders and nodded imperceptibly. Satisfied, Charlene marched Emily out of the atrium.

Emily cast a last, longing glance over her shoulder, and the uncertainty Kelsey saw in her cousin's gaze strengthened her resolve. Aileen was right. Emily was suffering from cold feet. Her worries about her future as a wife and eventually a mother had her looking back to simpler times. Back when she could lose herself in Connor's live-for-the-day attitude.

But her cousin would only regret it if she threw away her future for a man of the moment like Connor McClane. And Kelsey could not allow Emily to make the same mistake her own mother had.

Chapter Three

“You know, Kelsey, I’ve never been *attended to* before.”

Even with her back turned, as she watched Emily and Charlene walk away, Connor sensed the determination rolling off Kelsey in waves. Shoulders straight and head held high, she looked ready for battle. And yet when he took a closer step, his gaze locked on a curl of hair that had escaped the confining bun. The urge to tuck that curl behind her ear and taste her creamy skin nearly overwhelmed him. He sucked in what was supposed to be a steadying breath, but the air—scented with cinnamon and spice and *Kelsey*—only added to the desire burning through his veins.

Struggling to hide behind the cocky facade that had served him so well in his youth, Connor murmured, “Gotta say I’m looking forward to it.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said stiffly.

“You think I don’t know I’m those ‘other matters’ your aunt was talking about?”

Kelsey opened her mouth, looking ready to spout another unbelievable denial, only to do them both the favor of telling the truth. “You’re right, Connor. My aunt wants me to keep you away from Emily.”

“Charlene wants me gone and Emily happily married. There’s just one problem.”

“That would be you,” Kelsey pointed out. “A problem easily solved if you were actually gone.”

“If I leave, Emily’s problems will have just begun.”

“That’s your unbiased opinion?”

“Yeah, it is,” he agreed. “And not one your aunt and uncle are gonna listen to.”

“Can you blame them?” Kelsey demanded.

No, and that was the hell of it. Connor knew *he* was the only one to blame. He knew what the Wilsons thought of him and he knew why. He could still see the look in Gordon Wilson’s eyes when he offered Connor money to break up with Emily. Not a hint of doubt flashed in the older man’s gaze. He’d been so sure Connor—a dirt-poor loser from the wrong side of town—would take the money.

Connor had longed to shove the money and his fist into the smug SOB’s face. But he hadn’t. He *couldn’t*. And the pride he’d had to swallow that day still lingered, a bitter taste on his tongue.

He’d let Emily down, although from what he’d gathered during their recent conversations, she didn’t know anything about the payoff. She thought their breakup had been her idea...just as she thought marrying Todd Dunworthy was her idea. But Connor knew better, and this time he wasn’t going to be bought off.

“The Wilsons aren’t going to listen to anything I have to say,” he acknowledged. “That’s where you come in.”

Kelsey frowned. “I *am* a Wilson.”

He hadn’t forgotten...exactly. “You’re different.”

Drawing herself up to her five-foot-nothing height, shoulders so straight Connor thought they just might snap, Kelsey said, “Right. Different.” Hurt flashed in her chocolate-brown eyes as if he’d just insulted her, when nothing could be further from the truth.

“Hey, wait a minute.” Pulling her into a nearby alcove, out of the way of nearby guests, Connor insisted, “That was *not* a put-down. Your aunt and uncle turned their noses up so high when they met me, if it rained, they would have drowned. I was trailer trash, and no way was I good enough for their little girl. So when I say you’re nothing like them, you can say ‘thank you,’ because it’s a compliment.”

There were a dozen words he could have said, compliments he could have used, but the stubborn tilt of Kelsey’s chin told him she wouldn’t have listened to a single one. Someone—her family, some guy from her past—had done a number on her.

No, words wouldn’t do it, but actions...How far would he have to go to show Kelsey how attractive he found her? A touch? A kiss? The undeniable proof of his body pressed tight to hers?

“In case you’ve forgotten,” Kelsey pointed out, her voice husky enough to let him know she’d picked up on some of his thoughts and wasn’t as immune as she’d like him to believe, “according to my aunt and uncle you *kidnapped* their daughter.”

“It was not kidnapping,” he argued, though he’d had a hell of a time convincing the police. Fortunately Emily had backed his story, insisting that she’d left willingly. Eventually the charges had been dropped; Emily had been eighteen and legally an adult, able to make her own choices. Not that her parents had seen it that way. “But that’s my point. Your aunt and uncle won’t listen to anything I have to say. Which is where you come in.”

“Me?”

“Right. We’ll be partners.”

“Partners?”

“Sure. After all, we’re on the same side.”

“Are you crazy? We are not on the same side!” Kelsey argued.

“I want Emily to be happy,” he interjected, shaking her thoughts as easily as his sexy grin weakened her composure. “What do *you* want?”

Challenge rose in the lift of his eyebrow, but Kelsey couldn’t see a way out. The trap was set, and all she could do was jump in with both feet. “Of course I want her to be happy.”

“That’s what I thought. Kelsey, this guy won’t make her happy. He’s not what he seems, and I want to prove it. The Wilsons won’t believe *me*, but with you to back me up, they’ll have to at least listen.”

Kelsey longed to refuse. She didn’t trust him. Not for a second. Oh, sure, his story sounded good, but finding dirt on Todd wasn’t just a matter of looking out for Emily—it played perfectly into Connor’s interests, as well.

If Connor did find some deep, dark secret to convince Emily to call off the wedding, not only would he be the hero who saved her from a horrible marriage, he’d also be there to help pick up the pieces. But if Connor couldn’t find anything in Todd’s past, what was to keep him from making something up? Working together, he wouldn’t be able to lie. Not to mention, he’d given her a way to keep an eye on him.

Connor held out his hand. “Deal?”

Sighing, she reached out. “Deal.”

Connor’s lean fingers closed around her hand. Heat shot up her arm, and a warm shiver shook her whole body. Like stepping from ice-cold air-conditioning into the warmth of a sunny day.

“All right, partner.”

“Not so fast.” She hadn’t lived with her businessman uncle for as long as she had without learning a thing or two about negotiation. “You might want to hear my terms first.”

“Terms?”

Kelsey nodded. As long as Connor thought he needed her, maybe she could get a few concessions.

Instead of balking, Connor grinned. “Let’s hear ’em.”

“First, we’re equal partners. I want to be in on this every step of the way. No hearing about anything you’ve found on Todd after the fact.”

“No problem. From this point on, we’re joined at the hip. ’Course, that will make for some interesting sleeping arrangements.”

“Second, this is strictly business,” Kelsey interrupted, as if cutting off his words might somehow short-circuit the thoughts in her head. But they were already there: sexy, seductive images of hot kisses and naked limbs slipping through satin sheets in her mind. She could only hope Connor couldn’t read them so clearly by the heat coloring her face.

“And third?”

“Thi-third,” she said, clearing her throat, “you stay away from Emily. *If* we get any dirt on Todd, *I’ll* break the news to her. Until then, I don’t want you filling her head with your ‘bad feelings.’” Expecting an argument, Kelsey was surprised when Connor nodded. “I’ll keep my distance.”

“Okay, then, we’re partners.” She should have experienced a moment of triumph, but all Kelsey could think was that she’d just made a deal with the devil.

Certainly, when Connor smiled, he looked like sheer temptation.

“Got to hand it to you, Kelsey, you’re one hell of a negotiator. Two outta three ain’t bad.”

It wasn’t until Connor strode away that Kelsey realized he’d never agreed to her second condition.

As Kelsey stepped into the florist shop the next morning, cool, floral-scented air washed over her. She breathed deeply, enjoying the feeling of a refreshing spa treatment without the outrageous prices. She wasn’t a big believer in aromatherapy, but the stress of dealing with Connor might drive her to alternative measures. Anything to stop her pulse from jumping each time she saw him—and to keep her hormones under wraps and in control for the next ten days.

Why couldn’t life be easy? Why couldn’t she plan an elegant, trouble-free wedding? The kind where the biggest worry was the ice sculpture melting too quickly in the summer heat. Instead, she got Connor McClane, a man guaranteed to make women melt with nothing more than a look.

“Kelsey! Thanks so much for coming!” Lisa Remming, Kelsey’s friend and the owner of In Bloom, circled the checkout counter to greet her with a hug. As always, Lisa dressed in clothes inspired by her favorite flower—bird of paradise. Her long brown hair and blue eyes were complemented by a sleeveless fiery-orange blouse and swirling olivegreen skirt. “I feel so bad for calling you.”

“Don’t be silly.” Kelsey waved off her friend’s apology and pulled out her checkbook from her purse. “It’s no problem.”

“I still can’t believe I’m doing flowers for Emily Wilson’s wedding! There isn’t a florist around who wouldn’t kill for this job.”

Hiding a smile, Kelsey teased, “Wow, who knew florists were so bloodthirsty?”

Lisa made a face, then gave Kelsey another hug. “I totally have you to thank for this.”

The two women had gone to high school together, and Lisa was one of the few people in whom Kelsey confided. By the time she’d moved in with her aunt and uncle, Kelsey had gotten accustomed to blending in and going through her teen years unnoticed. Telling her fellow students she was a long-lost member of the wealthy Wilson family would have shoved her under a microscope.

The only worse fate would have been the exclusive prep school her aunt had suggested she attend.

“I really hate asking you to do this,” Lisa said as she reached behind the counter for an invoice.

“A deposit is standard practice.”

“I know, but—We’re talking about the Wilsons. It’s not like they’re going to leave me holding the bill. But with the flowers for the church and the bouquets and the boutonnières, I have to pay my suppliers and—”

“And that’s why you need the money up front.” Kelsey tore off a check. The amount for the deposit alone would have depleted her own meager bank account, but Aunt Charlene had given her access to the special account established for Emily’s wedding.

“Thanks.” Lisa breathed a sigh of relief as she noted the deposit on the invoice. “This wedding is going to mean the world to my business.” She laughed as she pressed a button on the cash register and slid the check inside. “Like I need to tell *you* that, right? You’ll be flooded with calls after Emily’s friends see the amazing job you’re doing. Have you thought anymore about getting your own place?”

Excitement pulsing through her veins, Kelsey nodded. “I’ve put down first and last month’s rent on the space in downtown Glendale, near the antique shops.”

Lisa gave a squeal. “And you didn’t even say anything! When are you moving in?”

“As soon as the current renters move out. The landlord’s supposed to give me a call.”

“You must be so excited! I know I was when I first opened this place. Do you have all the furniture and office equipment you’ll need? Have you thought about hiring a support staff and—”

“Whoa, Lisa! Don’t get carried away,” Kelsey said with a laugh that sounded far too shaky.

“I’m not. Don’t tell me you of all people—with your day planner and your endless lists—haven’t thought of these things.”

In fact, she *had*, and only days ago she’d been riding high on her plans. Now, with Connor back in town, she feared she’d put the honeymoon before the wedding, and her stomach roiled at the thought of losing control. “I don’t want to get too far ahead of myself.”

“What are you talking about?” Lisa challenged. “Emily’s wedding is only a week and half away. You aren’t too far ahead. If anything, you’re behind!”

“Well, thank you for giving me that combination vote of confidence and total panic attack.”

“I’m sorry. But I know how much effort you’ve put into this, and I want to see it pay off for you.”

I want Emily to be happy. What do you want?

With Connor’s words ringing in her head, Kelsey insisted, “Emily’s happiness comes first.”

“Honey, Emily’s happiness *always* come first,” Lisa deadpanned.

“That’s not fair, Lisa,” Kelsey insisted quietly.

Emily and Aileen could have turned their backs when their unknown and potentially unwanted cousin showed up to live with them. Instead, they’d done everything possible to include Kelsey. It certainly wasn’t their fault she’d never fit in.

“I know.” Lisa’s sigh expressed an unspoken apology. “But I also know you’ve played second fiddle to both your cousins for as long as I’ve known you. I don’t want you to be so focused on Emily’s wedding that you lose track of your dream.”

“I haven’t and I won’t.”

Despite her determined vow, a touch of guilt squirmed through Kelsey. She’d kept silent about renting the shop for exactly the reasons Lisa mentioned. Her aunt wouldn’t want her attention on anything other than the wedding. But the shop was nothing compared to Connor McClane. The man was a living, breathing distraction.

“Emily’s wedding *is* my dream,” Kelsey added. “A highprofile event with an extravagant budget and built-in publicity thanks to my uncle’s business contacts and my aunt’s country-club friends—it’s guaranteed to put my business on the map.”

“I agree, and I can’t believe you pulled it off in only two months!”

“It *was* short notice, wasn’t it?” Kelsey asked, fiddling with the zipper on her purse. “Yes, but you did it!”

Kelsey nodded. Thanks to working almost nonstop, she’d pulled off planning the event in a fraction of the time it normally took, but Emily had insisted on a June wedding... hadn’t she?

Sudden doubts buzzed through her mind like annoying insects, unrelenting and unavoidable. Had Emily pushed for the summer wedding? Or was the idea Charlene’s...or Todd’s? Kelsey had been so focused on getting everything done on time, she hadn’t stopped to wonder about the short engagement. Until now...until Connor had stirred up the hornet’s nest of doubt.

Connor hung up the phone after ordering breakfast and ran his hands over his face. He hoped the distraction of food would wipe the nightmare from his memory. It wasn’t the first time disturbing images had invaded his sleep.

The beginning of the dream was always the same. Connor watched his client, Doug Mitchell, arrive at his wife’s apartment through the tunnel-eye view of a telephoto lens; only when he tried to stop the man from attacking his estranged wife, did the dream shift and alter, keeping him off balance, unsure, helpless. Sometimes he froze in place, unable to move a muscle, unable to shout a warning. Other times, he ran through air thick as quicksand, each move bogged down by guilt and regret.

But no matter how the dream changed, one thing remained the same: Connor never arrived in time to stop Doug.

A sudden knock at the door jarred the memories from Connor's thoughts. Undoubtedly the Wilsons had picked the best hotel around for Emily's reception, but no one's room service was *that* fast. Besides, he had an idea who might be on the other side of the door, and it wasn't the maid with fresh towels.

Opening the door, he summoned a smile for the woman standing in the corridor. "Morning."

Emily Wilson beamed at him, looking like a Hollywood fashion plate of old in a yellow sundress layered beneath a lightweight sweater and a scarf knotted at her neck. "Connor! I'm so glad you're here. I know I should have called first, but—"

He waved off her not-quite-an-apology and held the door open. "Come on in."

As she breezed into the hotel room and set her handbag next to his laptop, Connor was glad to see the computer logo flashing across the screen. Last thing he needed was for Emily to see the dossier on her fiancé.

Emily took her time looking around the suite's miniature living area: a cluster of armchairs and end tables encircling the entertainment center. The added touches of a stone fireplace, balcony overlooking the pool and hot tub spoke of the hotel's five-star accommodations, but Connor doubted she was impressed. After all, she'd grown up surrounded by luxury and wealth.

"What are you doing here, Em?"

"I wanted to see you." She blushed as prettily now as she had at eighteen, but somehow for Connor the effect wasn't the same.

An image of Kelsey flashed in his mind, and he couldn't help making the comparison between Emily and her cousin. It was the difference between a sepia photograph—all soft, dreamy hues—and a full-color, HD image that instantly caught the eye.

As a hotheaded teen, Emily had been his unattainable fantasy. But now it was Kelsey and her down-to-earth reality who kept intruding into his thoughts.

Like yesterday evening, when he'd stood on the balcony and watched to see if the Arizona sunsets were still as amazing as he remembered. As he watched the blazing light slowly fade on the horizon, it wasn't past evenings that came to mind. Instead he thought of the way sunshine caught the fire in Kelsey's auburn curls...

"I snuck out like when we were kids."

Emily's words jarred Kelsey from his mind. He told himself the swift kick in the gut was remembered pain and not anything current or life threatening. But, dammit, he didn't need the reminder that as far as the Wilsons were concerned, he'd never be good enough. And while Kelsey might not look like her blond-haired, blue-eyed cousins, she was still a Wilson, and some things never changed.

Judging by Emily's impish grin, she'd enjoyed reliving her youthful rebellion and the walk down memory lane. Too bad the trip wasn't so pleasant for him. Feeling his smile take a sardonic twist, he asked, "Still can't risk being seen with me in public, huh, Em?"

Her eyes widened in what looked like genuine dismay. "No, Connor! It's not like that." She reached out and grasped his arm, and the frantic expression did take him back in time, filling his thoughts with memories of the girl so desperate to make everyone else happy, she'd made herself miserable.

Relenting slightly, he leaned one hip against the arm of the sofa and reminded her, "We're not kids anymore, and we're too old to be sneaking around."

"I know." Fidgeting with her engagement ring, she added, "But I wanted to see you, and I didn't want... anyone to get upset."

"You mean Todd?" Connor asked pointedly.

“You have to understand, he’s very protective of me. I’m sorry the two of you didn’t hit it off when we met for dinner in San Diego last month.”

Connor held back a snort of derisive laughter at the irony. No, he and Todd hadn’t hit it off. In fact, at the end of the night they’d nearly come to blows. Connor could admit he hadn’t walked into the restaurant with a totally open mind. It was entirely possible Connor would dislike any man who met with the Wilsons’ approval on principle alone. But within fifteen minutes of meeting Todd Dunworthy, Connor had stopped thinking about the past and started worrying about Emily.

In that short span of time, Dunworthy bragged about his Scottsdale loft apartment, his top-of-the-line SUV, his various summer homes in exotic ports of call, all of which would have been little more than annoying except for one thing.

He talked about Emily the same way. She was new and bright and shiny just like the fancy Lexus he drove, and Connor hadn’t been able to shake the feeling that Dunworthy wouldn’t have thought twice about tossing her aside for a newer model.

And the bad feeling roiling through Connor’s gut like acid ever since he’d been hired by Doug Mitchell got so much worse. Outwardly, Doug and Todd Dunworthy had as little in common as, well, as Connor and Todd did. But from the moment he met Doug, the cold look in the man’s eyes and the way he spoke about his wife set Connor’s teeth on edge, too reminiscent of the way his father had talked about his mother, the bitter blame he’d placed on her for dying and saddling him with an unwanted kid to raise.

But Connor had set aside his personal feelings and taken the job. *Taken the money*, his conscience accused. If only he’d listened to his gut then...

Taking a deep breath, Connor looked out the window, hoping the daylight might dispel his dark thoughts. Only, it wasn’t the sunshine that broke through the shadows, but memories of the sunset, memories of Kelsey, that eased the weight on his chest.

The spark in her dark eyes, the stubborn jut of her chin, her determination to stand up to him... even if she barely stood up to the height of his shoulder. He didn’t doubt for one second she’d be a formidable opponent, and he was glad to have her on his side.

Turning his focus back to Emily, he said, “I’m sorry, too, Em.” And he was. He wanted her to be happy, and he was sorry Dunworthy wasn’t the man she—or more important, he suspected, her parents—thought him to be.

Something in his tone must have given his suspicions away, because Emily’s already perfect posture straightened to a regal, Charlene-like stature. “Todd is a wonderful man,” she insisted. “I love him. I really do, and I can’t wait to be his wife.”

How many times had Emily repeated that statement before she started believing it was true? The words had a mantralike sound to them. Or maybe more like the punishment meted out by a second-grade teacher: *I will not chew gum in class. I will not chew gum in class.*

“I should go,” she murmured.

“Emily, wait.” A knock on the door broke the tension. “Look, that’s room service. I ordered way too much food. Stay and have breakfast with me.”

Without waiting for her response, he stepped around her and opened the door. The waiter wheeled in the cart, filling the room with the scent of bacon and eggs. He pulled the covers off the steaming plates and revealed a meal large enough for two.

“I shouldn’t,” she protested, eyeing the food with a look of longing. “I need to watch what I eat or I won’t be able to fit into my dress.”

Connor tried to smile; dieting before a big occasion was undoubtedly a prerequisite for most women, but he didn’t think it was the dress Emily had in mind. He’d shared only a single meal with Dunworthy, but he could still see the smug smile on the bastard’s face as he waved the waiter and the dessert tray away with a laugh. “Gotta keep my bride-to-be looking as beautiful as ever!”

“Come on,” Connor cajoled. “You’re not going to make me eat alone, are you?”

Sighing, she slid onto the chair and confessed, “This smells amazing.”

“Dig in,” he encouraged. “Nothing like carbs and cholesterol to start the day right.”

The spark in her eyes reminded him of the old Emily, and she grabbed a fork with an almost defiant toss to her head. “Thank you, Connor.”

“Anytime, Em,” he vowed, knowing her gratitude was for much more than a simple offer to share breakfast.

He picked up his own fork, ready to dig into the eggs, when a hint of spice seemed to sneak into his senses. Normally sides like toast or muffins were an afterthought, something to eat only if the main meal wasn’t filling enough. But the powder-sprinkled muffin on the edge of his plate suddenly had his mouth watering.

He broke off an edge and popped it into his mouth. The moist confection melted on his tongue, tempting his senses with sugar, cinnamon and...Kelsey.

The hint of sweet and spicy had filled his head when he stood close to her, urging him to discover if the cinnamon scent was thanks to a shampoo she used on the red-gold curls she tried to tame or a lotion she smoothed over her pale skin.

If he kissed her, was that how she’d taste?

“What’s Kelsey doing today?”

The question popped out before Connor ever thought to ask it, revealing a curiosity he couldn’t deny yet didn’t want to admit. He set the muffin aside and shoved a forkful of eggs into his mouth in case any other questions decided to circumvent his thought process.

After taking a drink of juice, Emily said, “Oh, she’s likely running herself ragged with wedding preparations, making sure everything’s going to go according to plan.”

Her words sent suspicion slithering down his spine. At a small, low-key wedding, the bride’s cousin might be the one behind the scenes, making sure everything went *according to plan*. But not at the Wilson-Dunworthy wedding, where professionals would handle those kind of details.

“What, exactly,” he asked, “does Kelsey have to do with the wedding preparations?”

Emily frowned. “Didn’t she tell you she’s my wedding coordinator?”

“No,” he said, setting his fork aside and leaning back in the chair, “no, she didn’t.”

“I’m lucky to have her working on the wedding. She’s amazing when it comes to organization, and she’s taking care of everything.”

Everything, Connor thought wryly, including him.

Chapter Four

So much for unbiased. So much for impartial. So much for finding his insider in the Wilson camp, Connor thought. Kelsey was involved in this wedding right up to her gorgeous red head.

“She started her business over a year ago,” Emily was saying. “My father offered to finance the company, but she wouldn’t take the loan. She’s always been weird about money.”

Ignoring his grudging respect for Kelsey’s decision and the curiosity about her *weirdness* when it came to her family’s money, Connor focused on what she was getting from the Wilson family name. “So this wedding’s a big deal to Kelsey, huh?”

“Oh, it’s huge! She’s counting on my wedding being the launching pad for Weddings Amour. The business is totally her baby, and she loves it. Says it makes her feel like a fairy godmother, starting couples out on their own happily-ever-after.”

Connor let out a snort of disbelief. He hadn’t read any fairy tales since he was six and figured it had been nearly as long since he’d believed in happily-ever-after.

“What?” Emily demanded.

“It’s—nothing.” He stabbed at his eggs. “The whole thing is crazy. Fairy godmothers, everlasting love, all of it—”

It was impossible. He’d seen far too many marriage vows broken from behind the telescopic lens of his camera. Those couples had likely had dream weddings, too, but the dream couldn’t survive reality. And sometimes—like with Cara Mitchell—happily-ever-after turned into a living nightmare.

“Well, don’t tell Kelsey her business is a joke. She takes it very seriously.”

“I bet she does.”

Seriously enough that Charlene Wilson had put Kelsey in charge of “attending to him.” He’d overheard the comment yesterday but hadn’t realized he’d be in the hands of a professional.

“Why all the questions about Kelsey?”

“Just curious.” When Emily’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully, he added, “I don’t remember you talking about her when we were going out, that’s all.”

She shrugged. “I didn’t know her then.”

“Didn’t *know* her? She’s your cousin, right?”

“I, uh, I meant I didn’t know her well.”

“Uh-huh.” Emily was a horrible liar and not much better at keeping secrets. He could have pressed. A few pointed questions, and Emily would have told him everything.

Connor refused to ask. Even as curiosity stacked one row of questions upon the next, he wouldn’t ask. Not about why Emily hadn’t known her own relative, not about why Kelsey had gone to public school instead of the exclusive prep schools her cousins had attended, not about why she was *weird* when it came to the family fortune.

He wasn’t back in Arizona to find out about Kelsey Wilson.

Returning his focus to that goal, he asked, “What’s Todd up to today? He must have a lot of free time on his hands while you and your mother and Kelsey take care of all the wedding details.”

“Oh, no. He has a meeting this morning. He’ll be at his office most of the day.”

“Really?” Now, this could be something. Connor forced himself to take a few bites of waffle before he asked, “What kind of meeting?”

“I’m not sure.” A tiny frown tugged her eyebrows. “Todd doesn’t tell me much about his work.” Laughter chased the frown away. “Just as well. I’d be bored silly.”

“I doubt that. You’re smart, Emily. Smarter than you give yourself credit for.”

“Thank you, Connor,” she said softly.

“How’d you two meet anyway? I don’t think you’ve said.”

“At a department store.” She smiled. “We were both shopping for Christmas presents for our mothers, but he didn’t have a clue. Finally he asked me for help. It was really cute.”

“Hmm. Almost as cute as when we met.”

“Oh, you mean in that sleazy bar where you had to fight off those bikers who were hitting on me?”

“A bar you weren’t old enough to be at in the first place,” Connor pointed out.

“Luckily you were there to rescue me,” she said, lifting her glass in a teasing toast.

“Yeah, lucky,” Connor agreed as he tapped his own glass against hers.

Emily might not know it, but he was here to save her again.

The tiny butterflies taking flight in Kelsey’s stomach as she drove toward the hotel turned into radioactive monsters by the time she stepped into the lobby. She’d been crazy to make a deal with Connor McClane. Somewhere along the way she was going to lose her soul.

Although they hadn’t made plans to meet this morning, the best way to keep an eye on Connor was to embrace their partnership. As she walked by the three-tiered fountain toward the elevators, the doors slid open. Kelsey gasped and ducked into an alcove—the same alcove to which Connor had pulled her aside the day before—and watched in disbelief as her cousin walked by.

What was Emily doing at Connor’s hotel?

Her cousin rarely left the house before noon, and it was barely nine o’clock. What was Emily doing up so early? Or had she stayed out too late? Kelsey’s stomach churned at the thought. She hated to think her cousin would be so susceptible to Connor’s charms. *And what about you?* her conscience mocked. *How easily did you agree to work with Connor in this very spot?*

But that was different! That was about business and keeping an eye on Connor and keeping him away from Emily...not that Kelsey had done a bang-up job at either so far.

Emily slipped on a pair of sunglasses and smiled at a bellboy, who nearly tripped over his feet as she walked by. She didn’t look as if she’d rolled out of bed with her ex-lover, but then again, Kelsey had never seen Emily look less than perfect. Ever.

Kelsey stayed hidden as her cousin sashayed across the lobby and out the automatic doors, then made a beeline for the elevator. “So much for his promises,” she muttered as she jabbed the Up button.

“But why am I even surprised?”

She stomped out of the elevator on the fourth floor. Had she really believed Connor would keep his word?

Maybe she had. Which only went to prove how some people never learned. Rapping on Connor’s door hard enough to bruise her knuckles, she thought she’d be better off banging her head against the wood.

“Kelsey.” Opening the door, Connor greeted her with an assessing look and not an ounce of shame. Bracing one arm on the doorjamb, he said, “I’m surprised to see you here.”

“Are you?” Determined to ignore the masculine pose that could have come straight from some sexy man-of-the-month calendar, she ducked beneath his arm and made her way inside. She refused to have an argument in the hall where any guest, bellhop or room-service waiter might walk by. “If I’d shown up a few minutes earlier, it would have been a regular family reunion.”

“You saw Emily?”

“So much for your promise to keep your distance!”

Connor frowned. “I said I’d stay away. I can’t help it if she comes to see me.”

“Right. And I’m sure she forced her way inside your hotel room. Probably tied you up and had her way with you, too.”

Connor pushed away from the door and stalked toward her with that challenging expression still in his eyes. “That would really mess up your plans, wouldn’t it?”

“She’s engaged, Connor. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

“Yeah. It means she’s about to make a mistake.”

Connor stepped closer, and the only mistake Kelsey could concentrate on was her own in thinking she could confront Connor face-to-face and not be overwhelmed by his masculine sensuality. He hadn't shaved and the morning stubble only made him that much more appealing. Worse, she could practically feel the erotic scrape of whisker-rough skin against her cheeks, her neck, her breasts—

Afraid he could read her every thought by the glow in her cheeks, Kelsey ducked her head. Her gaze landed on the nearby breakfast tray, on a white coffee cup and a pink bow-shaped smudge left by Emily's lipstick. The mark may have been left on Connor's cup, not on the man himself, but the reminder that Emily had been there first doused Kelsey like a bucket of ice water. "Emily's only mistake was inviting *you*."

"Yeah, I bet that's tough on you, isn't it? When you told me yesterday working together would be strictly business, I didn't realize that meant you were getting paid."

"So I'm coordinating Emily's wedding. Don't act all offended like it was some big secret. I thought you already knew."

"Yeah, well, I didn't. If I had—"

"You would have what?"

Scowling at her, he said, "Look, if you want to work together, I need to know you care more about your cousin than you do about your business."

If she wanted to work together! Just yesterday, she thought agreeing to work with Connor was possibly the most foolish thing she'd ever done. And now she had to fight to keep the opportunity?

Yes! a voice inside her head argued. *Because it's the only one you'll get. How else will you keep an eye on him? How else will you keep him from stopping the wedding?*

"Of course I care about Emily."

A sardonic twist of a smile lifted one corner of Connor's mouth. Darn him for making even sarcasm look sexy! "I know you care about her. The question is, do you care enough to put her first over everything else you want?"

The intensity in his eyes transformed the question from a challenge about her loyalty to Emily into something more personal. Something dark and revealing about his past. *Prove that you care...*

It was a test Emily had failed. She hadn't cared enough, or she'd cared about her family's approval more. Was Emily the only woman who hadn't passed, Kelsey wondered, or were there other women who hadn't given Connor the proof he needed?

"You can't prove you care about someone," she stated flatly. "Not in words. Actions show how you truly feel."

Like Connor showing up for Emily's wedding...and Emily showing up at Connor's hotel room. Trying not to think what those actions meant, Kelsey continued, "I'm here. That alone should prove ___"

"That you're a clever businesswoman? I already knew that."

Tightening her grip on her purse strap, Kelsey fought for control. She couldn't pretend she didn't have a lot riding on Emily's wedding.

As she racked her brain for a way to prove her loyalty, Kelsey realized nothing she said would be enough. Meeting his gaze, she stated, "I can't prove it to you, Connor. Because love and caring aren't about proof. They're about faith. So, if I'm supposed to trust your gut when you tell me Todd isn't right for Emily, you're going to have to trust me when I tell you Emily's happiness matters most."

With his gaze locked on hers, Connor stayed silent long enough for Kelsey to anticipate half a dozen responses. Would he laugh in her face? Turn away in cynical disgust?

Seconds ticked by, and she held her ground by pulling off a decent imitation of her aunt. She kept her back straight, her head held high, and still managed to look down her nose at a much taller Connor.

He ruined the hard-won effect with a single touch, tracing a finger over her cheek. The steel in her spine melted into a puddle of desire.

“Good to have you back on the team,” he said softly. “We have work to do.”

Connor knew he’d crossed the line when Kelsey’s eyes widened to a deer-caught-in-the-headlights look. He needed to back off. If he pushed, she’d bolt. But it was the urge to ignore his own boundaries that had him pulling back even further.

If anyone could make him *want* to trust again, Kelsey might. And that sure as hell wasn’t the kind of thought a man wanted to have while sober. Especially not a man like him about a woman like her.

Kelsey was a Wilson, and he’d already learned his lesson when it came to how Wilson-McClane relationships ended. He knew better than to make the same mistake twice...Didn’t he? Just because he’d indulged in a minor fantasy—discovering the five freckles on Kelsey’s cheek *did* combine to make a perfect star—didn’t mean he was losing his grip on the situation. He had everything under control, even if that starshaped outline made him wonder what other patterns he might find on Kelsey’s body...

Far too aware of the bed only a few feet away and Kelsey’s teasing scent, that alluring combination of cinnamon and spice, Connor redirected his focus. “Are you hungry? I could order more room service.”

“No, thank you.” Her words were too polite, bordering on stiff, and they matched her posture.

“All right,” he said, thinking it just as well they get out of the hotel room before he ended up doing something as stupid as touching Kelsey...and not stopping. “But you really don’t want to go on a stakeout on an empty stomach.” Connor didn’t know if his sudden announcement loosened anything, but Kelsey definitely looked shaken.

“Stakeout?” Echoing the word, her brown eyes widened.

“Don’t worry. We’ll stop for staples along the way.” He grabbed her hand, pulled her from the room and out into the hall.

She protested every step of the way and all throughout the elevator ride down to the lobby. “Are you insane? I am *not* going on a stakeout.”

Her voice dropped to a hiss as the elevator door opened, and she even managed a smile at the elderly couple waiting in the lobby.

“You agreed to this, remember? Equal partners?”

As he strode across the lobby, Connor realized Kelsey was practically running to keep up with his long strides, and he slowed his steps.

Jeez, it’d be faster if he picked her up and carried her. A corner of his mouth lifted at the thought of Kelsey’s reaction if he tried. “You really are tiny, aren’t you?”

“I—What?”

She bumped into him when Connor paused for the automatic doors to open. He had the quick impression of soft breasts against his back before Kelsey jumped away.

Tiny, he decided as he looked over his shoulder with an appreciative glance, but curved in all the right places.

Something in his expression must have given his thoughts away. Kelsey glared at him. “I am not going on a stakeout.”

“How are we going to find anything out about Todd if we don’t watch him?”

“I thought you’d hire someone!”

“Right. Because the Wilsons would believe whatever some guy I *paid* has to say about their golden boy.”

Score one for the away team, Connor thought, when Kelsey stopped arguing. Pressing his advantage, he guided her outside. “Besides,” he added, “staking people out is what I do.”

“You—you’re a cop?”

He couldn't blame her for the shock in her voice and gave a scoffing laugh. "No. I'm a private investigator. Turns out we're both professionals," he said. "And if it makes you feel any better, I do have a friend working another lead. But he's in St. Louis."

"What's in St. Louis?"

"A maid who used to work for the Dunworthy family. She either quit or was let go a few months ago."

"So?"

"She pretty much disappeared after that, and I want to hear what she has to say about her former employers."

Midmorning sunlight glinted off the line of luxury cars brought around by the valets: Lexus, BMW, Mercedes. He'd come a long way from his bike days. Too bad. He would have enjoyed getting Kelsey on a Harley. Once she loosened up a bit, she'd love the freedom of hugging the curves, wind whipping through her hair, speed pouring through her veins. He could almost feel her arms around his waist...

Kelsey waved toward the visitor's lot. "We can take my car."

It didn't look like loosening up would happen anytime soon. "Sorry, sweetheart, but I'll bet Dunworthy has already seen your car."

Connor signaled a valet, and within minutes a vintage black Mustang pulled up to the curb. Seeing the question in Kelsey's eyes, he explained, "It's Javy's. Something less flashy would be better for surveillance, but borrowers can't be choosers."

He tipped the valet and opened the passenger door for Kelsey. When she looked ready to argue, he said, "Todd has a big meeting at his office." He'd looked up the address after Emily left. "I'm curious to find out who it's with. How 'bout you?"

As she slid into the passenger seat, Kelsey muttered something he couldn't quite make out.

Connor figured it was just as well.

"I cannot believe I'm doing this," Kelsey muttered from her slumped-down position in the passenger seat.

"You've mentioned that," Connor replied.

They were parked in a lot across the street from Todd's office. The row of two-story suites lined a busy side street off Scottsdale Road, the black glass and concrete a sharp contrast to the gold and russet rock landscape, with its clusters of purple sage, flowering bougainvillea and cacti. Connor had circled the building when they first arrived, noting all the building's entrances and confirming Todd's car wasn't in the lot.

"What if someone sees us?"

"What are they going to see?" he retorted.

She supposed from a distance the car did blend in. Thanks to heavily tinted windows, it was unlikely anyone could see inside. Tilting the vents to try to get a bit more air to blow in her direction, Kelsey admitted, "This is a bit more boring than I expected."

"Boring is good," Connor insisted. Despite his words, he drummed his fingers against the steering wheel in an impatient rhythm, clearly ready for action.

"I'm surprised Emily didn't tell me more about your job."

"Why would she?"

"Because to anyone not sitting in this car, being a P.I. sounds exciting." When Connor stayed silent, she asked, "Do you like it?"

"Yeah. Most of the time."

The tapping on the steering wheel increased like the sudden peaks on a lie detector, and Kelsey sensed he was telling her not what he thought she wanted to hear, but what he *wanted* to believe.

Something had happened to change his mind about the job she suspected he'd once loved. "It must be difficult. Seeing so much of the darker side of life."

"It can be. Sometimes human nature is dark, but at least my job is about discovering the truth."

Was it only her imagination, or had he emphasized that pronoun? Subtly saying that while he pursued truth and justice, she—"You think *my* job is about telling lies?"

"Selling lies," he clarified.

"I promise a beautiful wedding and give the bride and groom what they're looking for. That's not a lie."

"Okay," he conceded, "maybe not the beautiful wedding part, but the sentiment behind it? Happily-ever-after? Love of a lifetime? Till death do us part? Come on!"

"Not every marriage ends with the bride and groom riding off into the sunset. Real life comes with real problems, but if two people love each other, they work it out."

He snorted. "Not from my side of the video camera, they don't."

Irritation crackled inside her like radio static—annoying, incessant and almost loud enough to drown out a vague and misplaced feeling of disillusionment. All these years, she'd heard about Connor and Emily as a modern-day Romeo and Juliet, but the story of star-crossed lovers lost all meaning if one of the players didn't believe in love.

And while Kelsey's faith might have been shaken by what happened with Matt, she still longed for those happily-ever-after and love-of-a-lifetime dreams Connor cynically mocked.

"My aunt and uncle never believed you loved Emily," she said, disappointed. "Everything you've said proves them right."

"Your aunt and uncle weren't right about me—no matter what they think."

Dead certainty ricocheted in his voice, and Kelsey regretted the tack she'd taken. Too late to back down and far too curious about what made Connor tick, she pressed, "Either you believe in love or you don't. You can't have it both ways."

"I just don't want to see Emily get hurt. That's why I'm here."

She opened her mouth, ready to push further, when Connor pulled the handle on the driver's-side door. "I'll be right back."

Kelsey grabbed his arm. "Wait! Where are you going?"

"To check the rear lot. Todd might have pulled in back there while we've been watching the front." With one foot already on the asphalt and refusing to meet her gaze, Connor seemed more interested in escaping her questions.

"I'm coming with you." She scrambled to unlock the passenger door. When she sensed an oncoming protest, she said, "Partners, remember? You're the one who dragged me along. You aren't leaving me now."

"Forget it! He'll recognize you."

"Todd knows what you look like, too," she argued as she turned back toward him.

"Fine," he bit out as he dropped back into the seat, "but there's something you have to do first."

Thanks to her questions, a noticeable tension vibrated through Connor, evident in his clenched jaw and the taut muscles in the arm he'd braced against the wheel. But the tension gradually changed, not easing, but instead focusing to a fine, definitive point—one that seemed wholly centered on her.

His intense gaze traveled over her hair, her face, her mouth. . . The gold flecks in his green eyes glowed, and Kelsey's skin tingled as if warmed by his touch. Surely he wouldn't try to kiss her. Not here, not now! Time raced by with each rapid beat of her heart, a single question echoing in her veins.

Why *didn't* he kiss her? Right here, right now—

Her pulse pounded in her ears, drowning out the sound of passing traffic. The heat shimmering on her skin could put the mirage hovering above the asphalt to shame. Shifting his body in the driver's seat, Connor eased closer. The scent of his aftershave, a clean fragrance that called to mind ocean

breezes and sun-kissed sand, drew her in. Like waves rushing to the shore, helpless to resist the undeniable pull, she reached for him...

But instead of a roll on the beach, Kelsey crashed against the shoals, her pride battered against the rocks when Connor suddenly turned away. He twisted his upper body between the seats and reached into the back. "Here, take this."

Kelsey stared dumbly at the baseball hat he held.

"See if you can cover your hair."

Her hand was still raised in an attempt to reach out and capture a passion obviously only she felt. An admission of her willingness to make a fool of herself.

Kelsey jerked the hat from Connor, eager to grab hold of anything to save face. "Do you really think this will make a difference?"

"A huge one." Almost reluctantly he added, "Your hair is unforgettable."

But he'd forget all about her and her hair once Emily was a free woman again. Unforgettable. Yeah, right.

Kelsey didn't realize she'd spoken the words until Connor murmured, "It's the kind of hair a man fantasizes about. Trust me."

But she couldn't. She'd nearly made a fool of herself seconds ago, and in case she ever forgot, she had the living, breathing epitome of Connor's perfect woman as her cousin. Kelsey couldn't compare; she never had.

Jerking back toward the door to put as much room as possible between them, she shook back her hair and pulled it away from her face with sharp, almost painful movements. Unable to hide behind her long locks, she felt exposed, vulnerable. Even more so when Connor's gaze remained locked on her features.

"How's that?" she asked, as she twisted her hair into a bun and shoved the bright red Diamondbacks cap into place. When Connor continued to stare, Kelsey fisted her hands in her lap to keep from yanking off the ridiculous hat. Finally, she demanded, "What?"

Shaking his head, Connor seemed to snap out of his stupor. "I hadn't realized how much you look like Emily."

His words hit like a punch in the stomach. Look like Emily? Not a chance. She'd seen the disappointment in the Wilsons' faces when they first saw her. If Emily and Aileen were beautiful Barbie dolls, then Kelsey was clearly supposed to be Skipper, a younger, blonder version. But she looked *nothing* like her cousins, a point driven home at every Wilson function, with every meeting of their friends and associates. The surprise—if not flat-out disbelief—when Kelsey was introduced as one of the Wilsons.

I hope they had her DNA tested, Kelsey had heard one uninformed, high-society snob whisper. It wouldn't surprise me if that girl ended up being a con artist out for the family fortune.

Kelsey had struggled to hold her head high and hold back the tears when she'd wanted to lash out at the woman. She was every bit her mother's daughter, *not* her father's, and inside she was as much a Wilson as Gordon, Aileen and Emily. But outside—where it counted—she couldn't be more different.

"Give me a break!" She tried to laugh off the remark, but the fake sound stuck in her throat. "Emily and I look nothing alike! She's tall and thin and blond and—beautiful!"

Her voice broke on the last word, and Kelsey had never been so close to hitting anyone. Giving in to the impulse, she socked Connor in the shoulder. She had a quick impression of dense muscle and bone, but he caught her hand before she could fool herself into thinking she could do more damage.

"Hey!" A quick tug of her arm had her falling against him. "So are you!"

"Tall? Blond?" Kelsey shot back sarcastically.

"Beautiful!" he retorted.

"But I'm not—"

“Not Emily?” he interjected softly. He brushed an escaping strand of hair—her unforgettable hair—back from her face, and the touch she’d only imagined became reality as he traced his index finger over her eyebrow, across her cheekbone, and skimmed the corner of her mouth. Heat and hunger combined with a tenderness that snuck beneath her defenses. “There’s more than one ideal for beauty, Kelsey.”

Still pressed against his muscular chest, she knew Connor was the epitome of masculine beauty for her, and she had the devastating feeling that would never change, even years from now. He was the best of the best, and she was a long shot, the dark horse.

“Stop it,” she whispered furiously.

“You don’t have to be Emily. You can just be yourself.”

The deep murmur of his voice reached inside and touched that vulnerable place, but this time instead of opening old wounds, his words offered a healing balm. And meeting his gaze, Kelsey realized he understood her vulnerability in a way no one else could because he’d felt the same way. He’d never been good enough to date the daughter of the wealthy Wilsons, and she had never felt good enough to *be* one of the wealthy Wilsons.

“Connor...” Just one word, his name spoken in a hushed whisper, broke the connection. He blinked, or maybe Kelsey did, because when she looked again, his sexy smile was back in place, all sense of vulnerability gone. “Except for right now. Right now you have to be someone Todd won’t recognize.”

“Right.” Kelsey pulled back, and Connor let her go. She might not have a sexy smile to hide behind, but she could be businesslike and professional...or as businesslike and professional as a wedding coordinator spying on a future groom could be.

“Come on,” she muttered as she tugged the brim lower. She didn’t know if she’d need the hat to hide her identity from Todd, but maybe she could use it to hide her emotions from Connor. “Let’s do this.”

She climbed from the car and was headed straight for the building by the time Connor caught up with her. Grabbing her hand, he said, “This way.”

With Connor leading the way, they walked half a block before crossing the street and doubling back behind Todd’s building. But the lot was empty except for some abandoned crates and an overflowing Dumpster.

“Let’s go. Todd’s meeting must have been canceled,” Kelsey said. She walked around to the front of the building without bothering to take the circular route that got them there, her low heels striking the steaming pavement.

Connor caught up to her as she reached the front of the building. “Look, I admit this was a dud, but—” He cut off with a curse.

Kelsey didn’t have time to take a breath before he shoved her into a recessed doorway and nearly smothered her with his body. Her vehement protest came out a puny squeak.

“Don’t move.” The husky whisper and warm breath against her ear guaranteed she couldn’t take a single step without falling flat on her face. “Todd’s pulling into the parking lot.”

No, no, no! This could not be happening! Swallowing against a lump of horror, Kelsey fisted her hands in his T-shirt and tugged. “Let’s go,” she hissed.

“Can’t. He’ll see us if we move. Just...relax.”

Despite the advice, every muscle in his body was tense, primed and ready for action. But it was Kelsey who jumped when the car door slammed. “He’ll see us.”

“No, he won’t. He’s heading for his office.”

She had to take Connor’s word for it. With his body blocking every bit of daylight, she couldn’t see beyond his broad shoulders. Too bad the rest of her senses weren’t so completely cut off. Instead, the scent of his sea-breeze aftershave combined with potent warm male, and the masculine heat of

Connor's chest burned into her skin where he made contact with her. Kelsey locked her knees to keep from sinking right into him.

Heart pounding in her ears, she whispered, "Where is he now?"

"Unlocking the door."

She felt as much as heard his low murmur and hissed, "We should go." Right now, before the heat went straight to her head and she did something unforgivably stupid, like melt into a puddle of desire at Connor's feet.

Chapter Five

“I am not meant for a life of crime.”

Seated in a restaurant not far from Dunworthy’s business, Connor pressed a beer into Kelsey’s hand. That she took it without complaint told him how much the incident at Todd’s office had shaken her.

Their near miss had lasted only seconds. Connor had pulled Kelsey toward the car immediately after Todd entered the suite; she’d barely ducked inside the Mustang’s ovenlike interior when he came back outside. Connor might have suspected the other man sensed something wrong if not for the way he sauntered out to his top-of-the-line SUV without checking his surroundings. If he had, it was a good bet he would have caught sight of Connor sliding into the driver’s seat only a few yards away.

Connor had wanted to follow him, but with Kelsey along, the risk wasn’t worth it. Not that it was her fault they’d nearly been spotted. No, Connor took full blame. He’d let Kelsey distract him. He could have driven her back to the hotel and her waiting car but had instead veered off to the restaurant, which had a bar. He figured she could use a drink. After standing in the doorway with the Arizona sun roasting his back, Connor could use a cold shower, but a cold beer was the next best thing.

Liar, a mocking voice jeered. The hundred-plus temperature was a killer, but it was the feeling of Kelsey’s body pressed to his that heated his blood.

“Hate to tell you, but we didn’t break any laws.”

She took a long pull on the bottle, then set it back on the bar with an audible clunk. “We were trespassing.”

Hiding his smile behind the beer bottle, he bit back a burst of laughter. “The parking lot is public property. We had every right to be there.”

“Oh.” Kelsey stared thoughtfully at the bottle. He couldn’t tell if she was relieved or disappointed. Finally, she looked up, her expression resolute. “Okay, so maybe what we did wasn’t illegal, but—but it was unethical. It isn’t right to go around spying on people. Especially when they aren’t doing anything wrong. And I don’t have time to waste chasing Todd or any of your ghosts around town.” She slid out of the booth.

Connor frowned. “Hey, this doesn’t have anything to do with me.”

“Bull. You’re out to prove to Aunt Charlene and Uncle Gordon you’re much better for Emily than their handpicked golden boy.”

Connor recoiled against the padded booth. Was Kelsey right? Did coming back to Arizona have more to do with salvaging his ego than protecting Emily?

No. No way. He wasn’t nearly that pathetic. Unfortunately, Kelsey had almost reached the door by the time he came to that conclusion. “Kelsey, wait!”

“Hey!” The bartender called after him. “Those beers weren’t free, you know.”

Swearing, Connor dug out his wallet, threw a handful of bills on the bar, and raced after Kelsey. The sunlight threatened to sear his corneas after the dimly lit bar, and he shaded his eyes against the glare. “Kelsey!”

The rush of nearby traffic nearly drowned out his voice, but Connor doubted that was why she didn’t stop. Jogging after her, he caught her as she reached the car. It took a second longer to realize he had the keys, and she couldn’t go anywhere without him.

Dammit, what was it about Kelsey that made him so crazy? He hadn’t felt like this since—since Emily.

You’re a fool, boy. Just like your old man. His father’s voice rang in his head. *The both of us always want to hold on to what we can’t have.*

Thrusting the comparisons aside, he said, “Look, I know this afternoon was a bust, but this isn’t about me.”

“Really?” Disbelief colored her words, and Connor fought a flare of irritation mixed with admiration. Had to respect a woman who wasn’t easily snowed.

Taking a deep breath, he forced the irritation aside. He couldn’t risk losing Kelsey as a partner. That was the reason he didn’t want her to leave. It had nothing to do with wanting to spend more time with the woman who had him so fascinated.

Yeah, right, his conscience mocked. Back at Todd’s office, he’d been tempted to forget all about the other man and prove to Kelsey just how beautiful she was. But he refused to make out with a woman in a parked car. Especially *not* Javy’s car, the same vintage automobile he’d borrowed to take Emily out on dates all those years ago.

He wasn’t that same punk kid anymore, even if he was once again lusting after one of the wealthy Wilsons.

“Let me buy you lunch, and I’ll tell you what I *do* know about Todd.”

Back in the restaurant, under the bartender’s watchful eye, Connor and Kelsey placed their orders. As soon as the waitress walked away, Kelsey leaned forward and prompted, “Okay, let’s hear it.”

“First, did Emily ever tell you how we met?”

Kelsey’s gaze dropped as she fiddled with her napkin. “She might have.”

“Well, just so you have the whole story, Emily went to a bar. She was underage and in over her head. Some guys started hitting on her. She tried to shrug it off, but she was afraid to tell them to go take a hike. Because that wouldn’t have been *nice*. But I could see the panic in her eyes. She was waiting for someone to step in and save her.”

“And so you did.”

“And so I did.” Leaning across the table, he covered Kelsey’s hand, intent on claiming her complete attention. Only when her eyes widened perceptibly did Connor realize he’d nearly erased the two-foot distance separating them. He was close enough to count the freckles dotting her upturned nose, to catch hold of her cinnamon scent. Her startled gaze flew to meet his, and as the spark of attraction he saw in her brown eyes flared to life inside him, Connor was the one having a hard time staying focused.

“The, uh, thing is—when I look at Emily now, I see that same panic. She’s in over her head, letting herself get pushed along because she’s too *nice* to stand up for herself.”

“So you rode back into town, ready to play the hero.”

“I’m no hero,” Connor stated flatly, leaning back in the booth and pulling his hands from Kelsey’s. The softness of her skin threatened to slip beneath his defenses, making him weak. The passion in her eyes when she spoke about everlasting love and dreams coming true made him want to believe though he knew better.

Even if he didn’t have countless professional examples of love gone wrong to draw from, he also had his parents’ as proof of love’s fallibility. During their short-lived marriage, his parents drifted so far apart that in the end, neither his father nor Connor had been able to pull his mother back to safety.

If only she’d listened—Helplessness roiled in his gut, but he’d learned his lesson.

It would take more than words to keep Emily safe; he had to have proof. But right now, words were all he had to convince Kelsey. The only way to do that would be to open up and be completely honest. “I didn’t expect to like Todd when I met him. I walked into that restaurant in San Diego knowing he’s the Wilsons’ golden boy and everything I’m not.”

“Now who needs the lesson about being himself?” Kelsey murmured.

“Nothing like having my own words shoved back in my face,” he said with a smile, which fell away as he realized how much they did have in common, how easily Kelsey understood him. Their gazes caught and held, the spark of desire running on a supercharged emotional current.

A touch of pink—sunset pink—highlighted Kelsey’s cheeks, and she dropped her gaze. “Not shoving, exactly. More like gently tossing.”

The waitress arrived with their food, breaking the moment and giving Connor a chance to refocus on what he wanted to say. “This is about more than disliking Dunworthy on sight. It’s about the way he treats people he thinks are beneath him.”

“Like who?”

“Like the valet he was pushing around after we left the restaurant.”

“What?”

“I was pulling out of the lot when I saw Todd grab the kid and shove his face an inch from the bumper to show where he’d *dented* the car.” Leaning forward, Connor added, “It was a rental, Kelsey. You can’t tell me he had any clue whether that scratch was there before or not. But he’s the type of guy who likes to intimidate people, especially people who can’t or won’t fight back.”

“What did you do?”

“Jumped out of my car and pulled him off.”

“And Todd actually grabbed this kid in front of Emily?”

Connor snorted. “No. She’d left her sweater in the restaurant and had gone back for it. By the time she came out, Todd was wearing a crocodile grin and the valet had pocketed a tip the size of his monthly paycheck.”

Something else Dunworthy had in common with the Wilsons—thinking money could make anything or anyone disappear. Not that he blamed the kid for taking the cash. How could he when he’d done the same thing ten years ago?

“You don’t think Todd would hurt Emily, do you?” Kelsey asked, disbelief and worry mingling in her expression.

“I don’t know,” he said. “All I know is that he thinks he can do whatever he damn well wants as long as he pays for the privilege.”

“Kelsey! Where have you been all day?” Emily rose from the table in the middle of the Italian restaurant. “I’ve been calling you since first thing this morning.”

Kelsey braced herself against Emily’s exuberant greeting, hesitantly patting her cousin’s slender shoulder blades. First thing this morning, Emily had been with Connor. Kelsey seriously doubted she’d been on her cousin’s mind. “I’ve, um, been busy.”

“What have you been doing?” Emily demanded as Kelsey slipped into a seat next to her and across from Aileen and her husband.

“I was—” Kelsey’s mind blanked as she met her cousin’s curious gaze, and she couldn’t think of a single excuse.

I was with Connor. We spent the day spying on your fiancé, which was possibly the craziest thing I’ve ever done, right up to the time I thought Connor might kiss me.

“Kelsey!”

She jumped at the sound of her aunt’s voice, terrified for a split second that she’d said the unbelievable words out loud. “What?”

Charlene frowned with a question in her eyes. “You paid the florist, didn’t you?”

“Yes! Yes, I did.” As if the forty-minute errand explained her absence during most of the day.

“Good. I hope it wasn’t a mistake going with such a small shop. As worried as that woman sounded, you’d think she was down to her last dollar.”

Irritation buzzed like a rash under Kelsey’s skin. “Her name is Lisa Remming, and she’s an amazing florist. A deposit is standard policy. We signed a contract stating she could cancel the order if it wasn’t paid on time,” she added, knowing her friend would never have considered canceling such an important order.

“All right, Kelsey. You’ve made your point,” Charlene said. Kelsey thought she might have caught a hint of respect in her aunt’s expression.

But Emily’s eyes widened, and she grabbed Kelsey’s hand. “Lisa wouldn’t do that, would she?”

“No, of course not,” she reassured her cousin, feeling like a jerk for worrying her cousin just to make a point with Charlene. “The flowers are going to be beautiful.”

Emily smiled, relieved someone else had solved the problem. “Thank goodness. I can’t imagine getting married without the right bouquet.”

Kelsey, personally, couldn’t imagine getting married without the right groom. She *wanted* to believe Todd was that man for her cousin, but ever since Connor had rolled into town, doubts had swirled through her mind like a desert dust devil.

“Emily, darling!” a masculine voice called out. Dressed in designer slacks and a slate-blue silk shirt, Todd Dunworthy approached, his perfectly groomed blond hair glinting, and his teeth flashing in a blinding smile.

Sheep’s clothing, Kelsey thought suddenly. Expensive, designer-crafted sheep’s clothing...if she believed Connor. But that was the question. *Did* she believe him?

“Sorry I’m late,” Todd apologized without looking away from his fiancée. “My meeting ran late.”

“Your meeting?” Kelsey didn’t realize she’d spoken the words out loud until all eyes turned her way. Tempted to blurt out that he’d spent less than five minutes at the office, she choked back the words. She couldn’t say that without revealing her own presence. And, as she’d told Connor, Todd’s meeting could have changed locations. Hoping Todd would reveal that was the case, she pressed, “I mean, what meeting, Todd?”

He waved his hand carelessly, and his sleeve pulled back to show a hint of the gold watch he wore. “Just business. You wouldn’t be interested,” he said, flashing a wink that was more condescending than charming.

“Oh, but I am,” Kelsey interjected, when Todd would have changed the subject. He shot her a look clearly meant to back her down—to *put her in her place*—but Kelsey stood her ground. She could almost feel Connor at her back, giving her the strength to do the right thing. “You’ll be family soon, and I hardly know anything about what you do.”

“Honestly, Kelsey, enough about work,” Emily interrupted, despite the fact that Todd had remained completely—suspiciously?—silent. “We have more important things to discuss.”

Ever the peacemaker, Emily turned the conversation to the wedding and her honeymoon. She smoothed over the tension like a pro until, on the outside at least, everything *looked* perfect.

But as the conversation moved on to drinks and appetizers and who wanted to try the chef’s special, Kelsey couldn’t help noticing how her cousin’s gaze would occasionally drift off in the distance. And she wondered if maybe, just maybe, Emily was waiting for Connor—or *anyone*—to rescue her again.

Connor drummed his fingers against the steering wheel, his gaze locked on the Italian restaurant. Candlelight flickered in the antique sconces, illuminating the rustic red brick, aged pergola, and carved wooden doors.

After taking Kelsey back to the hotel and her car, Connor called Jake Cameron, eager to hear what the man had found. But the conversation hadn’t gone as he’d hoped.

“I told you this would take some time,” Jake had said, sounding more frustrated and less confident than during the last call.

“Yeah, I know. You also told me you had a date with Sophia Pirelli. You had to have found *something*.”

Silence filled the line, and Connor might have thought the call was disconnected, except he could still sense his friend’s tension coming across loud and clear. “Jake—”

“Look, I’m seeing her again. I’ll call you later.”

He’d hung up after that, leaving Connor to battle his own tension and frustration. Unwilling to sit in his hotel room and go over the same information on Dunworthy again, he’d headed for Todd’s

condo, planning to talk with some of the man's neighbors, when he spotted the familiar SUV leaving the parking garage.

As Connor followed Dunworthy from his Scottsdale loft, careful to stay two car lengths behind, he had plenty of time to make some calls, and discovered the studio-sized units cost well over two million dollars. Knowing the man would pay such an outrageous price for an exclusive address to call home, Connor should have expected what was to come.

He'd already trailed Emily's fiancé from one expensive store to another, growing more and more disgusted as Dunworthy racked up a small fortune in purchases. Wine shops, jewelers, tailors. Connor had held back far enough to keep Dunworthy from spotting him, but not so far that he couldn't see the dollar signs in the salespeople's eyes.

The afternoon had proved a dud just like the meeting that morning, and Connor wished Kelsey had come along. He missed her company—an odd admission for a man who worked alone. He missed her wry comments and witty comebacks, not to mention the tempting thought of kissing her. It was no longer a question of if, but when...

He did have one lead, thanks to a call he'd overheard Todd make on his cell phone, but he would have to wait to follow up.

He sat up straight in the driver's seat as the restaurant's carved doors opened. "Bout time," he muttered as the elder Wilsons stepped outside along with Aileen and her husband. Todd and Emily followed, and even though Connor had his gaze locked on the other man, it didn't take much to distract him. Just Kelsey.

She stood apart from the rest of the group—not so far she couldn't hear the conversation, just far enough she couldn't be easily drawn in. He'd noticed her do that at the hotel when he'd crashed their little reception planning session. She'd trailed a step or two behind her aunt and cousin, hiding behind the copious notes she took in her day planner. Observing, but not really joining.

Just the way he did. He never would have thought his job as a private eye and Kelsey's job as a wedding coordinator would give them something else in common, but there it was. Still, the Wilsons were more than Kelsey's clients; they were her family. So what was the reason for that distance?

Now wasn't the time to worry about it. Connor jerked his gaze away from Kelsey. He didn't let his attention stray back to her, not even once, surprised by how hard that was.

Todd slapped his future father-in-law on the back, then kissed Charlene's cheek and said something to make the older woman laugh.

I'll be damned, Connor thought, his respect for Dunworthy as an adversary rising a few notches. He'd never seen the woman crack a smile, yet Todd had Emily's mother eating out of his hand.

The group, a silent film of family togetherness, said their goodbyes amid hugs and kisses, with Kelsey drifting just outside the happy circle. They broke into pairs, the elder Wilsons off to the left with Aileen and her husband, Emily and Dunworthy to his car—illegally parked, Connor noted—alongside the restaurant. Kelsey, the odd woman out, headed toward the back of the restaurant, crossing the parking lot...alone.

Todd's SUV engine roared. He should follow, Connor knew. His hand went to the ignition, but he didn't turn the key. A gut feeling, the kind Kelsey had sardonically discounted, held him in place even as Todd backed his vehicle away from the restaurant.

He had to go now if he had any hope of following. Instead, he leaned forward. Kelsey had nearly disappeared around the building. That side of the restaurant wasn't as well lit. Her hair looked brown in the meager light, the shadows dousing its fiery color. Dressed in a denim skirt and lace-trimmed green T-shirt, she looked smaller than usual...younger and more vulnerable.

Connor had already pushed the car door open before he caught sight of the dark shape of a man cutting across the parking lot and heading her way. Surprise drew Kelsey up short. Connor was still too far away to hear what she said, but he was close enough to see the guy reach out to grab her.

It was his nightmare brought to life. Close enough to see, too far away to help... For a split second, Connor froze until he realized this was no dream and the woman in danger wasn't Cara Mitchell. It was *Kelsey*.

Adrenaline pounded through his veins. A short burst of speed, the rhythmic thumping of feet against pavement, and he was there. Muscles flexing, he had the guy's arm twisted behind his back, his face shoved against the side of the restaurant.

"You okay?" he demanded of Kelsey, surprised by the breathless gasp fueling the words. His heart pounded like he'd run half a mile instead of thirty yards. Trying to outrun the past...

"Kelsey?" He could feel her behind him but didn't risk looking over his shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"Connor, what—" Too stunned by his sudden appearance to get the words out, Kelsey pressed a hand to her pounding heart, surprised the organ was still where it was supposed to be. For a second, she thought it had jumped right out of her chest.

"Did he hurt you?"

She blinked, the question not quite registering, and stared at her ex-boyfriend, who was pressed like a pancake against the restaurant's brick wall. Matt Moran had hurt her. He'd wounded her pride, trashed her self-confidence, hitting her where she was most vulnerable with the reminder she could never compare to her oh-so-beautiful cousin.

Matt made a strangled, high-pitched sound that might have been her name. "Kelsey! Tell him I wouldn't hurt you."

Connor shot her a quick glance. "You know this guy?"

The tension eased from his shoulders, but Kelsey knew he could be back in battle mode in a split second. The masculine display shouldn't have impressed her. She'd never advocated violence as a way to problem-solve. But seeing her former boyfriend pinned to a wall, well, it did her heart some good.

"Yes. You can let him go. He just wanted to talk to me."

Only, Kelsey hadn't wanted to hear anything Matt had to say. She'd already heard it all, ironically enough, from Connor.

He let go of the other man's arm and spun him around. "I take it you don't want to talk to him," Connor said. "Can't blame you there." He gave the other man a hard, intense look, then seemed to sum up Matt's entire character with a single shake of his head. Too bad Connor hadn't been around when Kelsey first met Matt.

Oh, who are you kidding? a mocking inner voice asked. She would never have noticed Matt if Connor had been around. But for all their differences, Connor and Matt had one glaring similarity.

"Kelsey, please," her ex-boyfriend practically whimpered. "You've gotta talk to Emily and tell her she can't marry that guy!"

Even without glancing in Connor's direction, she could feel his gaze. Heat rose to her face. She wanted to ignore both men at the moment, but she focused on Matt who was suddenly, oddly enough, the lesser of two humiliations.

"Emily's in love with Todd, and their wedding is going to be perfect." Determination rang in her voice, but Kelsey wondered who she was hoping to convince.

"You don't understand!" Matt took a single step in her direction, but froze when Connor uncrossed his arms. Keeping a nervous eye on the other man, Matt weakly finished, "I love her."

"Believe me. That is one thing I *do* understand."

He'd offered the same pitiful excuse as an explanation for using her, for taking advantage of her feelings, for making love to her and imagining Emily in her place.

Her ex-boyfriend had the grace to hang his head in shame but not enough sense to know when to give up. "Maybe if I could talk to her—" Matt pressed.

"Oh, for Pete's sake, get over it!"

His eyes widened in surprise, but Kelsey felt a shock when the words sank into her soul, and she realized the real object of her anger. She was tired of feeling like a fool for believing his lies. Of accepting his unacceptable behavior. Of shouldering the blame for the failure of their relationship when Matt was at fault.

“Let it go, Matt, and move on. I have.”

Maybe that wasn’t entirely true. As far as love was concerned, she certainly wasn’t ready to take the plunge again, but might it be worthwhile to test the water?

“The lady asked you to leave.” Connor crossed his arms over his broad chest, suddenly seeming to take up twice as much space and ready to literally enforce her advice for Matt to move on.

With a single, pitiful glance at Kelsey, Matt shrank back into the shadows. She didn’t know if he’d heard a single word she said, but it didn’t matter. *She’d* listened.

“Man, you’ve had your work cut out for you, haven’t you?” Connor asked, once Matt had left. “How many of Emily’s exes have you had to deal with?”

Emily’s exes. Kelsey crossed her arms over her stomach, some of her earlier pleasure fading. The toe she’d stuck in the deep end felt chilled by frigid water. “So far, you’re the only one. Matt isn’t one of Emily’s ex-boyfriends. He’s mine.”

Kelsey didn’t know why she spilled that bit of information. It wasn’t as if she wanted Connor to feel sorry for her. She didn’t know *what* she wanted from him.

He kicked at the asphalt and glanced in the direction the other man had disappeared. “Hell, Kelsey, you shoulda told me that before. I wouldn’t have been so gentle.”

The unexpected comment startled a laugh from her. It bubbled inside, shaky at first but growing stronger until she felt lighter, buoyed by the emotion and perhaps the chance to let go of the past. “How exactly do you throw a man *gently* against a wall?”

“*Gently* means he gets to slink off under his own power. *Not so gently* requires an ambulance.”

“I guess Matt doesn’t know how lucky he was.”

“You’re right, Kelsey. Something tells me he has no idea.”

Certainty filled Connor’s deep voice. Just listening to him made her feel free from the shame and embarrassment that had held her down for so long. Stepping closer, he crooked a finger beneath her chin. “You okay?”

She nodded, feeling his finger slide along the sensitive skin beneath her jaw. “Yes.”

Concern gave way to relief and then anger. “You should have had someone walk you to your car. You have no idea what could happen—”

“Connor, I’m okay,” Kelsey interrupted, worried by the tension that was evident in the set of his shoulders. A tension that seemed rooted in a different incident from a different time. “I wasn’t in any danger.”

Exhaling a breath, Connor seemed to release the pressure building inside and shake off whatever memories had caught him in their grasp. “You still need to be more careful.”

True, Matt had startled her, coming out of the shadows the way he had, but he’d lost the power to hurt her long ago. And despite Connor’s warning that she should be more careful, *he* was the most dangerous threat around. His lethal charm tore through her defenses, and a question that should have come to her much, much sooner sprang to mind. “What are *you* doing here, anyway? How did you even know we’d be having dinner tonight?”

Connor glanced at the front of the restaurant. A frown darkened his expression before he shook his head and blew out a breath. “Well, I *was* following Todd.”

“What!”

“That’s how I knew he was at the restaurant,” he explained slowly, as if she had trouble keeping up. “So, tell me about dinner.”

“Not so fast. You first.”

“Okay,” he said agreeably. “I haven’t had dinner yet, and I’m starving!”

“I meant, tell me what you found following Todd.”

“I will, but I really am starving. Come on.” With a last look at the now-empty spot in front of the restaurant, he caught Kelsey’s hand and said, “Let’s go.”

“Go where?” she demanded even as she followed alongside, far too aware of the tingle that raced up her spine as his fingers entwined with hers. The innocent touch certainly shouldn’t have weakened her knees, but Kelsey could barely concentrate beyond the heat of his skin pressed to hers.

“To find someplace to eat.”

Despite the extreme heat during the day, the temperature had lowered with the sunset. A gentle breeze carried the scents and sounds of nearby shops: gourmet coffee, decadent chocolate, the rise and fall of laughter and the faint strains of jazz music.

A group of girls walked toward Kelsey and Connor, heading in the other direction. Tall and beautiful, long limbs left bare by short skirts and tank tops, their not-so-subtle glances at Connor quickly turned to confusion as they shifted to Kelsey.

She didn’t need a thought bubble over their heads to know what they were thinking: *What is he doing with her?* And after the run-in with Matt, Kelsey couldn’t stop that question from digging deeper and deeper.

“Hey.” Connor tugged at her hand. “You still with me?” he asked, as if he had somehow lost *her* interest.

“I’m here,” she said. Now if she could only focus on *why* she was there. “Did you find anything on Todd?”

Connor took his time answering, waiting until he’d found a casual dining restaurant with outdoor seating. Cooling misters hissed overhead, the sound blending with the distant strains of an acoustic guitar being played on an outdoor stage. After giving the waiter his order, Connor leaned back in his chair and said, “If I’d found anything, you’d be the first to know. Unfortunately, all he did was shop.”

“All afternoon?”

He laughed at her startled response. “I thought you’d be impressed.”

“Surprised is more like it,” she muttered, thinking of Todd’s excuse. Still, she hesitated before confessing, “Todd was late for dinner. He said it was because of a business meeting.”

“What? That five-second trip to his office this morning?” Connor scoffed.

“Maybe he didn’t want to tell Emily he’d gone shopping for her.”

“Except he was shopping for himself—unless Emily’s taken up imported cigars.” “Um, no.”

After a waiter dropped off glasses of ice water and Connor’s steak sandwich, he said, “What else?”

“It was dinner, Connor, not an inquisition,” she said as Connor dug in with both hands.

Truthfully, Kelsey hadn’t *wanted* to find anything. She wanted to believe Todd and Emily would have a beautiful wedding followed by a happy marriage. “It’s probably nothing but—” she paused, not believing her own words “—none of Todd’s family are coming to the wedding.”

“Did he say why?” he asked, sliding his plate of fries her way.

Kelsey shook her head at the offer and said, “His parents already had a trip to Europe planned, and his sister is pregnant and didn’t want to travel.”

Connor shrugged. “So it could be nothing.”

She blinked. Connor had jumped on even the slightest inconsistency in Todd’s behavior. She couldn’t believe he was letting this one go. “Are you serious? Can you imagine my aunt and uncle *not* showing up to Emily’s wedding?”

“Not every family is like yours.”

“Okay, fine. Forget the Wilsons. You might be the P.I. expert, but I’m the wedding expert, remember? And families *always* come to weddings!”

Connor's gaze cut away from her as he balled a paper napkin between his fists, and Kelsey knew. This wasn't about Todd's family or her family or families in general. It was about Connor's. A family she knew nothing about, one she couldn't recall Emily ever mentioning.

"You know, I don't think Emily's ever talked about your family."

"Why would she?"

Because, at one time or another, Emily had told Kelsey nearly everything about Connor. So much that Kelsey felt she'd known him long before she first caught sight of him at the airport. But she certainly couldn't tell Connor how she'd listened to those stories the same way a teenager might pore over celebrity magazines for the latest gossip on the current Hollywood heartthrob.

"I don't know. Maybe because if things had worked out like you'd planned, they would have been *her* family, too."

Connor gave a rough bark of laughter. "Emily had enough family to deal with without adding mine to the mix. Besides, my parents died before I met Emily."

The abrupt comment hit Kelsey in the chest, and she felt ashamed for pushing. She ached for his loss, an echo to the pain she still felt over the death of her own mother.

"Oh, Connor." Her defenses crumbled to dust, and with her heart already reaching out, her hands immediately followed. The heat of his hands—strong, rawboned, and masculine—sent an instant jolt up her arms. Her heart skipped a beat at the simple contact, but it was the emotional connection that had her pulse picking up an even greater speed. For a second, as their eyes met, Connor looked as startled as she felt.

Taking a breath deep enough to force her heart back into place, she focused on the reason she'd dared touch him in the first place. "I'm so sorry. I lost my mom when I was sixteen. Do you want—"

"It was a long time ago," he interrupted, jerking his hands out from hers in a pretense of reaching for his wallet to pull out a few bills. "I should get going. I'll walk you back to your car."

Stung by his abrupt withdrawal, Kelsey ducked her head before he could see the embarrassed color burning in her cheeks. Focusing on her purse, she searched for the keys she knew perfectly well were in the outside pocket.

"No need. I'll be fine," she insisted, and started walking. But if she thought she could out-stubborn Connor, he quickly proved her wrong.

"You will be fine," he agreed, his light touch against her lower back a complete contrast to the steely determination in his voice. "Because I'm walking you to your car."

Kelsey didn't argue, even though Matt was probably long gone. Thanks to Connor, he'd learned his lesson. Too bad she had yet to learn hers. Because no matter what Connor said about how beautiful she was, actions spoke louder than words, and all the compliments in the world couldn't erase the hurt of reaching out to Connor only to have him pull away.

Chapter Six

Early the next morning Kelsey stood outside her shop, gripping the key tightly enough to dig grooves into her palm. The unexpected phone call from her landlord couldn't have come at a better time. She still had plenty left to do for Emily's wedding, but she couldn't think of Emily without thinking of Connor. And Kelsey definitely did *not* want to think of him. Last night, she'd felt a connection—that loss and difficult childhoods gave them something in common. But Connor didn't want common.

He didn't want *her*.

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