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Temptation

TEXAS MEN

MAIL ORDER MEN



Vicki Lewis Thompson
EVERY WOMAN'S FANTASY

Vicki Thompson
Every Woman's Fantasy

«HarperCollins»

Thompson V. L.

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Bachelor of the Month—Mark O'Grady This charming rogue has been looking for love...and finding it far too easily! But now he's ready to settle down. And he's looking for a woman who will make him happy—day and night...Sexy stockbroker Mark O'Grady loves being in love. Unfortunately in the past he's been so quick to propose that he's ended up leaving five brides at the altar! But now, through Texas Men magazine, he's met gorgeous Charlie McPherson, a woman he wants to keep in his life—and his bed—permanently. He knows she's "the one." Too bad Charlie has no intention of becoming Matrimonial Victim #6....

Содержание

“You’ve never had bad sex?” Charlie asked incredulously.	6
Every Woman’s Fantasy	7
Contents	8
Prologue	9
1	12
2	17
3	24
4	29
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	30

“You’ve never had bad sex?” Charlie asked incredulously.

“No. No, I haven’t,” Mark said as they walked into the elevator. He sounded surprised that she’d even ask. “Why, have you?”

“Of course. I thought everyone had.”

“Not me. How could you? I mean, everything about it is so wonderful. It doesn’t matter if you’re cramped, or the temperature’s not right, or you don’t have a lot of time. It’s still...” Mark’s eyes glowed as he gazed into hers. “Making love is great,” he finished softly. “And this will be the best.”

Charlie looked away from him. “Now I’m really intimidated. I could be your first disaster.”

“No way. After all, women are designed for pleasure. How could you end up with anything else?” He took her hand and pulled her closer. “Hold on, let me show you what I mean.”

As he brought his lips down to hers in a kiss that set her pulses racing, Charlie moaned her appreciation. Apparently she’d stumbled onto a man who was an artist when it came to making love, and tonight he planned to create a masterpiece.

Who was she to argue with that?

Dear Reader,

I’m a catalog shopper, so the MAIL ORDER MEN series makes perfect sense to me. It must make sense to you, too, because it’s been so popular the first and second time out that we’re offering a third batch of cuties, just in time for spring! So set aside your Neiman-Marcus catalog for a minute and imagine that a copy of Texas Men has just landed in your mailbox. Hey, who wants to look at clothes and shoes when you can admire the likes of Mark O’Grady, Texas Men’s Bachelor of the Month?

Watching bachelors become husbands is a favorite part of my job as romance writer, but this time the familiar story held special significance for me. As I recorded Mark’s progress toward the altar, my son Nathan was making a similar journey. He married his dream girl, Lauri, shortly after I provided Mark with his happy ending. But for Nathan and Lauri, this is only the beginning of the story they will write together. And I wish them a lifetime of happiness...without end.

Best wishes from the mother of the groom,

Vicki Lewis Thompson

P.S. In June look for my novella “Mystery Lover” in Midnight Fantasies, the 2001 Blaze collection. And in August don’t miss Notorious, one of the launch books in Harlequin’s sizzling new series BLAZE.

Every Woman's Fantasy

Vicki Lewis Thompson



www.millsandboon.co.uk

For Nathan and Lauri—

Your courage and belief in each other inspires me.

Contents

Prologue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Epilogue

Prologue

“I CAN’T BELIEVE you did it again.”

Mark O’Grady glanced across the table littered with peanut shells and a couple of half-empty beer bottles. His very pissed-off best man Sam Cavanaugh, who’d uttered those words of disgust, sat across from him, still dressed in his tux. So was Mark. Going back to his apartment to change had seemed too risky.

Fortunately he and Sam were the only ones of their crowd who patronized this little bar in downtown Houston. Their friends considered it too shabby, which was fine with Sam and Mark, who had designated it their special hidey-hole ever since they’d been old enough to drink legally. And Mark needed a place to hide...again.

He tried to come up with something to say to Sam, but he couldn’t think of a damned thing. He was slime. Somebody should just shoot him.

“Ten minutes before the processional! Ten friggin’ minutes. How could you do that?”

“It was her cell phone,” Mark said.

“What do you mean, her cell phone? I fail to see how anything about a cell phone could cause you to back out of your wedding ten minutes before the ceremony. If Deborah hadn’t smashed her wedding bouquet in your face, I would have done it for her!”

Mark gazed at his long-suffering friend. “You’re right. It was horrible, and I should have figured it out sooner. We’d had some big arguments about how much she used that phone. She took it everywhere, and I mean everywhere, and it’s not like the calls were critical or anything. Most of them sounded like a lot of gossip to me. But I kept thinking it was a small issue. I could deal.”

“It is a small issue. The woman has friends. She likes to talk to them on the phone. If you love somebody, you put up with a few things that aren’t perfect about them.” Sam gave him another disgusted look before taking a swallow of his beer and setting it on the table with a clunk. “God knows you’re a long way from being perfect.”

“You’ve got that right.” Mark turned his beer bottle around and around in his hands. “And I told myself all that. I thought I was fine with her cell phone habit. Then, remember how we were going up to the altar to take our places, and we passed by that room where Deb and her bridesmaids were waiting, and the door was open?”

“Yeah, I most certainly do. Because that’s when you lost it and called the whole thing off.”

“There she was, in her wedding dress, looking gorgeous, and she had that damned cell phone to her ear, jabbering away to somebody. I couldn’t even imagine who she’d find to talk to! Every person she knew was sitting in the church!”

“That is kind of amazing, when you think about it,” Sam conceded. “Maybe she was talking to somebody who was in the church, someone who also had their cell phone turned on.”

“No doubt! And I don’t want any part of that! I saw our whole married life dominated by that thing. The wedding night, the honeymoon, the delivery room when we had a kid, the family vacations, the visits to the folks. I mean, if she had to talk on the phone ten minutes before we were about to say our vows, then nothing was sacred.”

Sam blew out a breath. “Okay, I can see your point. I wouldn’t like that prospect myself, but I sure as hell wish you’d figured all this out sooner.”

“So do I.”

Leaning both arms on the table, Sam trained his no-nonsense look, the one he used to intimidate juries, on Mark. “In case you’ve lost count, this is the fifth time this has happened. None of your friends except yours truly will show up anymore. Even your mother refuses the invitations. Is it possible you don’t want to get married?”

Mark had given that considerable thought himself. He'd been raised by a single mother who'd divorced his father when Mark was two. She'd never remarried, and when he was old enough to ask about that, she'd told him she found marriage too confining and time-consuming.

Because she was all he had, he'd tried to see things her way. But he couldn't help envying kids like Sam, who had a cozy family with two parents and a bunch of noisy siblings. Finally he'd decided he couldn't agree with his mother. Although the single life might suit her, he wanted to find a woman to share his life and be the mother of their kids.

He met Sam's gaze. "I do want to get married. It's divorce I want to avoid."

"At this rate you'll never have to worry about divorce, old buddy. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to the can. You can sort through your options while I'm gone."

Mark watched his friend leave. Sam appeared to be in no rush to get married, and yet the guy was extremely eligible. With his dark blond mustache and lean good looks, he was often mistaken for Alan Jackson. Plus he was a successful lawyer and drove a beautifully restored red '57 Chevy that always drew attention. Yet he'd only been engaged once, and that hadn't lasted more than two months before they'd both decided they weren't right for each other.

Obviously Sam wasn't desperate to create a family for himself because he'd had that growing up. Mark had hungered for that kind of stability ever since he could remember. But he wasn't any closer to getting it than he had been seven years ago, when he'd proposed to Hannah, his first fiancée. Something had to change, but he didn't know what.

The waitress came by and he ordered another round. Then he called her back. "Add a shooter to the beer," he said. "No, wait. Five shooters." It seemed like a fitting number.

The waitress blinked. "Five? All at once?"

"Yep." Mark held up his hand, fingers spread. "And you might as well bring five for my buddy, too." When the waitress continued to stare at him, he added, "We'll both be taking cabs home, so don't worry."

With a nod, the waitress left.

Mark decided if he couldn't figure out how to fix his sorry situation, he might as well get drunk with Sam. He could bail his Lexus out of the parking garage in the morning.

An extra few hours of parking expense was nothing compared to the bills he had run up with these five canceled weddings. In each case, he'd let his fiancées keep the rings and even go on the honeymoon if they could find somebody else to go along. Three had taken that option, and two had said they'd rather rot in hell. Deb had been one of those.

On top of that, Mark had covered the cost of the reception and other incidentals. He hadn't wanted his fiancées or their families to suffer financially, considering they'd be suffering emotionally. If he hadn't brokered his talent for playing the stock market into a lucrative career, he'd really be in the poorhouse. As it was, the weddings had eaten up any financial gains he'd made.

With that depressing thought, he started on the shooters the waitress had brought.

Sam took quite a while returning, and when he finally did, he eyed the shot glasses lined up on the table. "I take it the number is significant?"

Mark had already polished off three of his. "You betcha. Pull up a seat and get started. You're behind. What took you so long?"

"The waitress stopped me to ask if we were in here for the same reason as the last couple of times. I had to offer her ten bucks to keep her from coming over here and pouring a pitcher of beer on your head."

"Thanks." The shooters were starting to kick in, slowly taking the tension out of his body. Ah, this was much better.

Sam sat down and threw a magazine on the table. "I found some interesting reading material in the john," he said. "I think this might be the answer."

Mark tossed down the fourth shooter and picked up the magazine. “Texas Men?” He leafed through the ads for eligible bachelors, then glanced over at Sam and grinned. He was getting very relaxed, relaxed enough to find Sam’s gesture hilarious. “Sorry to dis’ppoint you, but I’m stickin’ with girls.”

“You are so dense. No wonder you’re such a mess. I’m suggesting we put you in that magazine.”

“Why?” Mark was beginning to feel really goofy. “So I can rack up more broken engagements? Get in the Guinness Book of World Records?”

“No, the exact opposite. I’m trying to prevent another broken engagement. Here’s what we’ll—”

“Hey. I’ll be a monk. Should’ve thought of that before. Where’s the nearest monastery? I’ll turn myself in.” He picked up the last shooter. “Come on, Sammeeee. Get blitzed with me.”

“Shut up and listen. I’ve thought about this, and the reason you get engaged to the wrong women is that they’re beautiful, and so naturally you have sex with them.”

“Nat-u-ral-ly.” Mark spoke carefully so he wouldn’t slur. “Sex’s good.”

“Except underneath that swinging bachelor exterior of yours, you have old-fashioned ideas. You think because you had sex, you should get married.”

“True-de-doo-doo. And I’m grateful.” He smiled at Sam. “Sooo grateful. Women are wunnerful, Sam. They smell so good, and they feel terrific, and...I love ’em, Sam. I want to marry one of them. I really, really do.”

“You are stewed to the gills, aren’t you?”

“Yep.”

“Maybe that’s just as well. You’re more likely to agree to my plan if you’re pickled. Here it is—we put an ad for you in this magazine, and then we sort through the prospects and find somebody perfectly suited to you. After that you write letters for a long time. A very, very long time. And during that correspondence, you find out if they’re addicted to cell phones, or hate camping, or any of the other stupid reasons you’ve backed out.”

“Not shtupid.”

“Okay, they’re not stupid. But with this woman, you’re getting that all settled way in advance. Every possible glitch that would be a sticking point will be discussed, and analyzed, and dissected, ad nauseum.”

Mark frowned. “Don’t like writin’ letters.”

“I don’t care. I don’t frigging care!” Sam jabbed a finger at him. “This is tough-love time. You are going to write those letters, and you’ll get to know this person before you meet her, before you even think of going to bed with her. Because I know you, and once you do the nasty, you’ll propose. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“Yeah.” Mark nodded slowly, so the room wouldn’t start spinning. “I’m gonna have a pen pal.” He paused to think. “And I’m not gettin’ any for a long, lo-o-o-ng time.”

1

Six months later

“ASHLEY, I’M SCARED.” Charlie McPherson watched her older sister close out the cash register for the day. Ashley had worked her butt off in retail for five years and now owned Glam Girl, home to some of Austin’s trendiest fashions.

Ashley glanced up. “About what?”

“Mark wants to meet me.” Charlie wasn’t into fashion, which was why she desperately needed advice and moral support from her big sis.

“Hey, you’ll be fine.” Ashley smiled. “Perfectly fine. He’s a lucky guy.”

“You’re my sister. You’re supposed to say that.”

Ashley gazed at her. “I don’t blame you for being nervous,” she said gently. “Let me finish up here and we’ll go get a couple of big old margaritas and talk about it.”

“That would be good.” Margaritas would definitely help give her the courage to explain her problem.

If she looked more like Ashley, she might not be so scared. Her sister could just as well be modeling fashions as selling them. Charlie envied three things about Ashley. She was nearly five-eight, which allowed her to wear every outfit in the store without hemming it. Secondly, her rich brown hair was wavy, not curly like Charlie’s, so she could wear it long. Last of all, their parents had given Ashley a terrific name which required no fiddling to make it sound right.

Charlie had to hem up almost everything she bought, and if she didn’t keep her blond hair short, she looked like Medusa. As for her name, she was still ticked off at her folks for saddling her with Charlene. Nobody these days was named Charlene.

She’d shortened it to Charlie, which sounded more twenty-first century and suited her outdoor lifestyle, but it wasn’t half as distinctive as Ashley. Of course, Charlie had to admit she didn’t look like an Ashley. Ashley belonged to someone elegant, like her sister. Nobody had ever accused Charlie of being elegant. Cute, bouncy, full of energy, yes. Never elegant. Making Charlie elegant would take a miracle.

Twenty minutes later, as Charlie sat across from Ashley at their favorite Tex-Mex restaurant, she was hoping her big sister would help her pull off that miracle.

“Here’s to a great first date with Mark O’Grady.” Ashley lifted her frosty glass and touched it to Charlie’s.

“Amen.” Charlie took a sip of her drink and set it on the square cocktail napkin. Then she looked over at her sister. “The thing is, when Mark suggested we write to each other for several weeks so we could really learn about each other before we met, I got this idea.”

Ashley put down her drink, too. “Which was?”

“I decided to change my image.”

She had Ashley’s total concentration now. “To what?” she asked carefully.

“Well, you know how most guys treat me like the girl next door. They see me as wholesome, low-maintenance, stuff like that.”

“Charlie, that’s because you are those things. They’re all pluses, in my book.”

“Whatever. The point is that in my whole life, I have never made a guy drool.”

“Oh.” Ashley gazed at her and the wheels were obviously going around. “So what kind of image does Mark have of you?”

“I didn’t lie or anything,” Charlie said quickly. “I mean, he knows I work for an outdoor adventure company, and he’s seen my picture so he knows what I look like. But I made him think that underneath that girl-next-door persona I’m also this...well, this really hot babe. I, um, wrote some pretty racy stuff, things I probably would never have the nerve to say in person.”

Ashley looked taken aback, but gradually her green eyes warmed. “Ah, I get it. You’re afraid that when you two meet, he’ll expect to jump into bed right away, and you’re not ready for that.”

“But I am ready for that.”

Ashley blinked. “You are? Oh, Charlie, I don’t think that’s a very good idea. You need to—”

“I need to experience unbridled passion for once in my life! With every other guy I’ve dated, there’s no mystery, no tension, no lust. But now I have that. We’ve had three months of postal foreplay. We are so loaded with tension. I just don’t want to mess up and diffuse it.”

Ashley stared at her. Then she took a quick drink of her margarita and cleared her throat. “Okay, let me get my bearings here. I can understand wanting to make a guy lust after you. But I can’t go along with the hopping-into-bed part. I realize you’ve exchanged a lot of letters with Mark, but that’s not the same as face-to-face contact. You need to give it more time before you get into a physical—”

Charlie let out a gusty sigh. “You sound so ‘older sister.’ Haven’t you ever gone to bed with a guy on the first date?”

Ashley blushed. “We’re not talking about me.”

“What? We should live by different rules?”

Her sister looked disconcerted. “Well, I—”

“Exactly. We shouldn’t. Now I’m not saying I will go to bed with him right away, but I might, if I don’t mess it up and come on like a camp counselor on the first date. I want you to help me look like a sex goddess.”

Ashley’s eyes widened. “If Mom and Dad could hear this conversation, they’d have a hissy-fit. I’m supposed to look out for you, not help you get into trouble.”

“Oh, so that’s it. Look, when I moved to Austin I was twenty-two. Maybe I needed some looking after. But hel-lo, I’m five years older now! I’m even older than you were when I got here. And, damn it, I want to feel sexy and glamorous for once in my life. Will you help me or not?”

Ashley studied her for a long moment. “I don’t know. This feels sort of weird. Do you have any idea where he’ll take you on this first date?”

“Not yet.”

“Well, once you know that, I’ll... I’ll at least help you find something great to wear.”

“Great as in nice, or great as in hot?”

“Oh, God.” Ashley looked at her and shook her head. “Unbridled lust? Are you sure that’s what you want?”

“Yep.”

Ashley rolled her eyes. “Mom and Dad would have a cow.”

“CHARLIE’S PERFECT. My dream girl. My soul mate. My happily-ever-after.” Mark brushed peanut shells from the table and wiped away a ring of moisture left by his empty beer bottle before laying a dog-eared picture on the table in front of Sam. “Look at that face and tell me she’s not perfect.”

“I’ve seen her face. In case you’ve forgotten, I’m the one who picked her out of the stack and told you she had promise.”

“And you were right!”

“It remains to be seen whether I was right,” Sam said. “All the information isn’t in yet.”

“Most of it. And her letters are so... friendly. I think she looks exactly the way her letters sound, don’t you?”

Sam picked up the picture and studied it. Then he handed it back to Mark. “Okay, so she’s a good prospect on paper, but with your record, I don’t think you should rush into—”

“Sam, I’m ready to meet her. I’m so ready to meet her.” He tucked Charlie’s picture in his shirt pocket, right next to his heart.

Sam gave him the evil eye. “You said that with a little too much relish, good buddy. Just exactly what do you mean by meet?”

Mark threw up both hands. “I mean just meet! Like drive to Austin for the weekend, and—”
“Slow down, lover-boy! Are we talking an overnight here?”

“Well, yeah. If I take her out for a nice dinner somewhere, with wine, and candlelight, and... and stuff, then I don’t want to drive all the way back to Houston that same night.”

Sam leaned forward. “Dinner’s fine, candlelight and wine is terrific. But it’s the and stuff part that’s got me worried. I’m coming with you.”

“No way! Nobody’s chaperoned my dates since I was fourteen, and I’m not about to reactivate the custom now.”

Sam gazed at him for a long time, as if he was turning something over in his mind. Finally he settled back against the worn cushion of the booth with a sigh. “I hate to do this, because you’re like a brother to me and I’ve tried to stick by you through everything, but here’s the way it has to be. If you mosey on up to Austin and everything goes the way it always does with you, and you come back engaged after one romp in the sack, you’ll have to find yourself another best man this time.”

A cold chill washed over Mark. He’d known Sam all his life, and when he set his jaw like that, he was deadly serious. Apparently he’d had enough. To be honest, Mark couldn’t blame him.

“I ran into Deborah at the grocery store last night,” Sam said casually. “You know, it’s a wonder she didn’t sue you for breach of promise.”

“You’re right. She had grounds.” He glanced nervously at Sam. “Is she still upset?” He was hoping that six months had soothed her feelings.

“I would say she’s still upset. She asked if you’d contracted any deadly diseases yet. I think she’s sticking pins in a voodoo doll or something.”

“So she’s not over it.”

“Doesn’t look like it.” Sam signaled to the waitress and glanced at Mark. “Want another beer?”

“I think I’m gonna need one if we’re discussing Deb.” He waited until Sam had put in their order for two more long-necks. “So what else did she say about me?”

“Oh, the usual. That you’re a pimple on the backside of humanity, a virus on the Internet of life. That kind of thing. From the look in her eyes, she was thinking even worse insults than that, but I think she held back because she knows I’m your best friend and we were in a public place.”

“I really was hoping she’d be over it by now.” He was a rat, no doubt about it. Whenever he thought of how he’d left her high and dry, he used similar expressions to describe himself.

“Well, she’s not over it, but she’s trying to be. In fact, she’s linked up with your four other victims.”

“I wish you wouldn’t use that word.”

“I didn’t. She did. She said they’ve formed a support group. Either they’ll help each other to heal or they’ll figure out a really hideous form of revenge, whichever comes first.”

Mark gazed at Sam uneasily. “A support group? You mean with meetings and everything?”

“Why not? There’s five of them, so that makes a group.”

“I don’t know what to think about this.” Mark grabbed the bottle the waitress had just set in front of him and took a generous swig. “I mean, that’s kind of scary, Sam. Five women plotting against me.”

“You should be scared. Scared straight. They’ve even given themselves a name.”

Mark gazed across the table at his buddy. “Do I want to know what it is?”

“Probably not. But I’m going to tell you anyway. They call their group DOA.”

Mark choked on his beer. “Dead On Arrival?” He coughed and sputtered as he tried to assimilate the information. “Good God, Sam, what are they planning?”

“They just have a sick sense of humor. The letters actually stand for Damn O’Grady’s Ass.”

“Oh.” Mark was relieved, but not a lot.

“I wouldn’t ignore the implication of those three letters if I were you. I’m sure they didn’t choose them at random. I think Deborah mentioned something about having T-shirts printed up.” Sam took a long swallow of his beer.

Mark followed suit. This subject was giving him the willies. He’d felt like a heel each time he’d called off an impending wedding, and he’d certainly wanted his prospective brides to seek comfort in whatever way they could. But he’d never imagined that they’d band together against him.

“I don’t think you can afford to screw up again, buddy,” Sam said. “It wouldn’t be good for your health.”

“Well, I’m not going to screw up. Your idea about using Texas Men to find a woman who’s really suited to me, and me to her, was a damned good one. Charlie and I have been writing back and forth for—what, three months now?”

“About that.”

Mark patted his shirt pocket. “I know her better than I ever knew any of the others—until it was too late, that is. I know she’s a morning person like me, but she needs her coffee. She’s not anal but she likes to keep her place picked up. She loved Survivor, hated Big Brother. Even her job is perfect for me—an outdoor adventure guide.”

“That is one of her good points, I agree. I’ve said that from the beginning. You kept dating these financial types you met at the office.”

“Right. I wasn’t working a big enough area. The magazine changed that, and now I have Charlie, who’s the exact right mix, sensible on the outside, but black lace and naughty thoughts underneath.”

“Hold it. How do you know about the black lace and naughty thoughts?”

Mark had a feeling he’d just revealed too much. In the past few weeks, the correspondence had heated up considerably. “Just a guess. Come to think of it, I probably read too much into her comments.”

“Like hell. Come on, Mark. What did she say?”

Time to backpedal, and fast. “Not much, really. I think she’s shy, actually. Probably would be slow to warm up.” He didn’t think that for a minute. From the tone of her most recent letters, she had an instant on switch. He could hardly wait to trip it.

“Uh-huh.” Sam’s expression was grim. “I get the picture. No wonder you’re so ready to meet her. Mr. Happy wants to meet her, too. That’s your other problem. You’re a washout at celibacy.”

He was, but he didn’t want to admit that he’d been dreaming about making love to Charlie McPherson for weeks. That would only confirm Sam’s opinion that he couldn’t go to Austin alone. “This isn’t only about sex. We like the same things. Not a single one of my fiancées wanted to go camping with me. Charlie would love to go camping.” And he could hardly wait to get her alone in a cozy tent.

“What’s this about camping? I thought you were going to ask her to dinner first.”

“Well, dinner, or...I don’t know. Camping would be nice.”

“It would be a disaster! I know you, and you would not stay in your own little pup tent. No. Camping is out. O-U-T, out.” Sam took a quick drink of his beer and glared at him.

Mark shrugged. “It was just an idea.”

“A bad idea. Some guys can handle getting physical early in the relationship without losing their perspective on the situation. Take me, for instance. I’ve never proposed to a woman after making love to her the first time. With you, it’s like an orgasm kills off half your brain cells. One night of nooky and you’re headed for the altar. It’s the damndest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“I admit I’ve made that mistake a few times.”

“No kidding.”

Mark sighed. “I’ve always moved too quick on this proposing business. I can see that now.”

“Good. Glad to hear it. Then you’ll let me go with you to Austin and make sure you don’t screw this one up.”

The very thought of dragging Sam along made Mark cringe. “Now, Sam, how’s that gonna look? No telling what she’ll think if I have to bring my best friend along when I go to meet her for the first time. She’ll think I don’t trust my own judgment, or I’m lacking in confidence. It’s the wrong way to start out.”

Sam shrugged. “Then do it your way. I’m sure Jack will agree to be your best man. Maybe I’ll tell him to bite the bullet and buy a tux. I’d be money ahead if I’d done that instead of renting one each time. And he can forget about writing a wedding toast. Talk about a waste. On the other hand, he should remember to bring a big box of tissues to the ceremony. No, make that two big boxes. One wasn’t enough for this last disaster, by the time I’d passed them out to Deborah, her four bridesmaids, her mother, her—”

“Okay, okay! So you’re going with me to Austin.” But how he’d manage to make a good impression on Charlie under such circumstances was beyond him. It would be a damned awkward visit.

Perhaps he could come up with a good cover story...

Sam smiled. “That’s more like it. You know, I could go for a hamburger. Want a hamburger?”

“Sure, why not?”

“I’ll go find our waitress.”

“Okay.” While he was gone Mark started brainstorming. He’d pulled a few excellent stunts in his college days. Like the time he and Sam had both wanted to date the same girl their senior year. Mark had gone in drag to the cafeteria and confided in this girl that Mark O’Grady had spent two years in China learning lovemaking secrets from the geishas. Sam never had a chance after that.

Hey, wait a minute. What if Sam needed a blind date when he went down to Austin? What if he was afraid to ask anybody out, because...because the woman he’d been dating had turned out to be a man. Perfect. So then Mark could ask Charlie to come up with a date for Sam, to get him back on track. While Sam was kept busy with her, Mark could get busy with Charlie. Brilliant.

Sam returned and slid into the booth. “I’m glad you came to your senses about taking me along to Austin.”

Mark smiled, feeling much better about the situation now. “I can’t have a wedding without you being my best man.” That was certainly true. If Sam wasn’t standing up at the altar with him, it wouldn’t seem like he was really getting married. Of course, he never really had gotten married. But this time would be different. He could feel it.

“You sure look perky all of a sudden,” Sam said.

“Why wouldn’t I? I’m going to meet the woman of my dreams.”

Gazing at him over the top of his beer bottle, Sam cleared his throat. “Mark, old buddy, one of your more endearing traits is your eternal optimism. But I want you to entertain the possibility that Charlie is not the one.”

“But she is.”

“I hope so, but the truth is we might have to put another ad in Texas Men and troll for more prospects. Because I’m not—I repeat, not—going through this again until I’m convinced that you won’t back out at the last minute.”

“I’m telling you, I won’t back out. Charlie’s the real deal.”

“That remains to be seen. Go ahead and set up the weekend, but remember that there will be no getting horizontal with your darling Charlie if I have anything to say about it. You need to get to know her really well before that happens.”

“But I do know her!”

“Only what she tells you in the letters, pal.” Sam sipped his beer. “Only what she tells you in the letters.”

2

A WEEK LATER, Charlie tried not to hyperventilate as she stood in front of the three-way mirror in Ashley's shop. The plunging neckline of the red dress nearly reached her belly button. If she had the nerve to buy this dress, it would go perfectly with some red high-heeled sandals she'd seen in a store window down the street.

She'd never owned anything like this dress in her life, but it fit the image she was trying to project for Saturday night's date with Mark. The longer she wore the dress, the more she believed in her seductive powers.

"Way too daring," Ashley said.

"No, I think this might be the one." Charlie turned this way and that to see if she looked sufficiently sexy. "But I wish it had a slit up the side."

"It used to." Ashley pulled a blue dress off the rack. "When I saw you eyeing that one the other day, I stitched it up. There's such a thing as over-exposed. Even so, that dress is cut way lower than I thought. Try this one instead." She held out the blue dress.

Charlie glanced at it. "Nope. It has sleeves."

"Try it." Ashley shoved the dress closer. "It matches your eyes."

"Who cares? All my life I've been wearing blue because it matches my eyes. And you know what that dress is? Boring. I will never get Mark to drool if I wear that. I'll look like Alice in Wonderland. I might as well tie a blue bow in my hair."

"You wear that red number and he'll drool, all right. I'm worried about what will happen after the drooling part."

Charlie turned to face her sister. "Okay, let's get to the bottom of this. Why are you so paranoid about the possibility that Mark and I will have sex on the first date?"

Ashley avoided her gaze and hung the blue dress on the circular rack. "Because I'm your older sister, and older sisters are supposed to keep their little sisters away from the Big Bad Wolf. At least on the first date."

"That's weak and you know it. What's the deal here?"

Ashley rummaged through the rack some more, but finally she turned, her cheeks rosy. "Remember Jason Danville?"

Charlie searched her memory. "Was he the guy who drove the Jaguar?"

Ashley nodded. "When he asked me out, I was the envy of every girl in my sorority. He was older, sophisticated, rich."

"And you went to bed with him on the first date," Charlie guessed.

"On the first and only date." She sighed. "It was so humiliating that I never told anybody. Of course he probably told the world. It was so classic. We drank martinis and he convinced me that I was the girl he'd been waiting for all his life. Of course afterward he laughed and called me naive for believing that old line."

"Oh, Ashley." Charlie walked over and gave her sister a hug. "But Mark's not like that," she said. "He would never—"

"Maybe not." Ashley held her by the shoulders. "But don't forget I was there when Kevin Jasper turned you down for the Sadie Hawkins dance back in high school. The way you talk about Mark reminds me of the way you used to talk about Kevin. Come to think of it, you haven't been this excited about a guy since Kevin."

Charlie had to admit that was true. Maybe she hadn't liked being treated like a buddy by the men she'd gone out with, but she hadn't cared enough to try and change the dynamics, either.

"I know you, Charlie," Ashley said. "When your dreams are smashed, you don't recover so well. If Mark turned out to be a rat like Jason, I'd never forgive myself if I let you get hurt."

Charlie appreciated her sister's concern, but she knew it wasn't needed in this instance. Mark wasn't going to hurt her. Still, she wasn't above using an opening when it presented itself. "Okay, then like I asked you before, come with me Saturday night. You'll be able to make a judgment about Mark, help protect me and meet a new guy, all at the same time."

Ashley smiled. "You can stop pushing for the double date. You don't need protection if you drive yourself to the restaurant and drive yourself home, like we talked about, and don't take any side trips in between."

"Maybe he'll slip something in my drink."

"You don't believe that any more than I do. He's a stockbroker at the firm he claimed to be associated with—his letters of reference checked out. He won't do anything weird. But that red dress sends a definite signal, and we don't really know what this guy's agenda is. This three months of letter writing could be a technique to get you in bed."

If Ashley wanted to believe that, Charlie didn't care. It suited her purposes. "And you can keep me from getting carried away by the moment."

Ashley groaned. "Come on, Charlie. Wear a different dress and we don't have to worry. Sure, I feel sorry for this Sam person, but I don't think it's my job to toddle along on your date with you and try to rehabilitate Mark's friend."

"But, Ashley, can you imagine how traumatized he must be? Here he thought he was going out with a perfectly nice woman, and she turned out to be a man."

"I grant you that it might be difficult getting back into dating after something like that, but I—"

"And he didn't discover it until he started making love to her—I mean, him," Charlie said. "What a shock! And now the poor guy won't so much as go to dinner with a woman, let alone get sexually involved with someone. Doesn't that pull at your heartstrings?"

Ashley turned back to the rack and began sorting through it. "Well, sure. But he probably needs counseling, not a date with me."

"Mark said he won't go to counseling, but he said if I could just find Sam a nice girl so that we could have a double date, then maybe he will start to trust again. You're the perfect person to go with us Saturday night. Sherry and Dawn are both involved with someone, and I think Ellie's too aggressive for something this delicate. Besides, I want you to go. I'd like you to meet Mark."

"And I will." Ashley paused to look at a black dress, then rejected it and kept scooting dresses around the circular chrome bar. "But this double-date thing seems so contrived."

"Maybe, but Mark says it's the only thing he can figure out. I think it's sweet that he cares so much for his friend, don't you?"

"I suppose. Here, how about this one?" She took a white dress off the rack and held it up.

"White? You want him to think I'm virginal?"

"White can be very effective on blondes. I wish I could wear it."

Charlie rolled her eyes. "I don't even want to hear about it, Miss Everybody-Thinks-I'm-a-Model. Every single outfit in this store looks good on you. So white isn't your best color. Big deal. You'd still look glamorous, even in unflattering white. As for me, this red dress is the first thing I've ever tried on that didn't make me look cute. I'm tired of guys wanting to pat me on the head."

"So you're an ingenue type. There's nothing wrong with that."

"But I want them to pat me somewhere else for a change!"

"You can think about that on your second date." Ashley returned the white dress to the rack and found a pink one. "In the meantime, this will—"

"Ick! Pink. Barf-o-rama. Pink is exactly what I'm trying to get away from. Just once in my life, I want to knock a guy for a loop the first time he sees me. I don't want him to think, Hey, I'll bet she plays a good game of tennis. I want him to go, Hey, I want a little one-on-one with that hot babe."

Ashley folded the pink dress over her arm and gazed at Charlie. "Then that's the dress."

"I thought so."

“But as your big sister, I can’t in good conscience let you go to a restaurant alone to meet some guy you’ve only written letters to. If something awful happened I’d feel responsible because I was the one who dolled you up like that.”

“So you’ll go along and be Sam’s date?”

“I will, but I’m only going to keep an eye on you in that dress. If my being there tricks Sam into finally having a ‘date,’ then I suppose I can live with that. Just so you and Mark don’t expect this foursome to be a regular thing.”

“Oh, Ashley, you’re terrific! I knew I could count on you.” Charlie threw both arms around her sister in an enthusiastic hug.

“I’m a sucker, that’s what.” Ashley’s resigned expression changed to a frown as she stepped back and looked at Charlie. “Rule Number One. No hugging in that dress.”

“Why not?”

“Take a look.”

Charlie glanced down, and sure enough, one of her breasts had nearly sprung free of the plunging neckline. She grinned as she glanced at Ashley. “This is such a sexy dress.”

Ashley gave her a stern look. “See that you keep it on.”

AS MARK HANDED HIS CAR KEYS to the valet at the restaurant Saturday night, he was still trying to figure out how to tell Sam that Charlie’s sister, Ashley, would be coming as Sam’s date. He didn’t think it was necessary to go into the transvestite story he’d cooked up, first of all because Sam might fail to see the humor in it, and secondly because he couldn’t imagine either Charlie or Ashley would bring up the subject. They’d just be extra nice to Sam, which wouldn’t hurt a thing.

He didn’t like telling untrue stories about Sam, but this meeting with Charlie was so important. If she started thinking he needed a handler to keep him on a tight leash, as if he were some sort of lust-crazed maniac, that could give a bad impression. Likewise, he’d need to think of something to tell Sam that would explain why Charlie’s sister was coming to dinner with them.

They’d left Houston in plenty of time to check into a hotel not far from the restaurant and then made it to the restaurant several minutes early. He’d clue Sam in before the women showed up. He just needed to figure out what to say. A beer would help both of them, but that wouldn’t look so good, to be starting on the drinks before the women even arrived.

“Seems like a nice place,” Sam commented as they walked toward a carpeted entryway covered with a green canopy. Flowers spilled out of stone planters and classical-looking nude statues stood sentry on either side of the glass doors. “But trust you to find the restaurant with naked women standing outside it.”

“I had no idea,” Mark said.

“Right.”

“No, really. I got a recommendation from somebody at work.” Mark thanked the doorman as they walked into the restaurant.

“In any case, Italian’s usually a safe choice for a first date,” Sam said. “Most people can find something to eat, even if they’re picky.”

“Charlie’s not picky,” Mark headed for the tuxedo-clad maître d’. “But I wanted something romantic. They’re supposed to have a couple of strolling violinists and a flower girl who hands out long-stemmed roses to the women.”

“That’s a nice touch.” Sam brushed a piece of lint from the lapel of his sport coat. “But I should warn you that just because a woman says she’s not picky doesn’t mean she’s not. I’ve heard that line a million times, and then you take them out for sushi and they refuse to eat it.”

“Well, when Charlie says she’s not picky, I believe her.” Mark glanced through the arched doorway into the dining room and was satisfied with what he saw. High, narrow windows looked out on a garden setting with twinkling white lights strung on the greenery. Inside, candles flickered on linen-draped tables and the chairs were upholstered in a soft green material that looked like velvet.

“And you told her I was coming, right?” Sam asked.

“Sure did.” Mark listened for the violinists and, sure enough, he could hear them, but they were very soft. Good. Soft was better.

“Did you tell her why I was coming?”

Mark paused just short of the maître d’s station. Time for his fast shuffle routine. “What do you mean?”

“I’m assuming that in all this letter writing you two have been doing, that you’ve mentioned your little problem with the five previous engagements.”

“We haven’t gotten into that, specifically, but—”

“You haven’t?” Sam’s jaw dropped. “Why wouldn’t you? Any woman who gets involved with you should know about that small matter, don’t you think?”

Mark glanced around nervously. “Keep your voice down, okay? Let’s just get seated, and then we’ll talk about it.”

“Oh, we’ll talk about it, all right. I have plenty to say on the subject.”

Moments later they were ushered to a table for four in a secluded corner of the room.

Mark chose a chair facing the doorway so he’d know the minute Charlie arrived. “I think you should sit across from me.”

“I don’t. I think I should sit next to you so I can give you a swift kick under the table whenever necessary.” He started to take the chair on Mark’s right.

Mark grabbed his arm. “No, you need to sit across from me. Charlie’s bringing her sister.”

Sam looked at him in astonishment. “She’s doing what?”

“Bringing her sister. The poor woman. She has this terrible problem. Whenever she’s attracted to a guy, she breaks out in a rash. But she seems to be getting better, and Charlie thought it was time to test her recovery. She thought it would be better if Ashley, that’s her name, started with a blind date.”

Sam’s jaw tensed, but he moved to the seat opposite Mark. “I’m not here to be Charlie’s sister’s blind date.”

“I realize that, but when Charlie heard you were coming, she naturally thought about Ashley and her problem.”

Sam pulled his chair in and leaned his elbows on the table. “Okay, let’s get back to the original question. If Charlie doesn’t know I’m here to ride herd on you, why does she think I’m coming?”

Mark shrugged. “As a friend, to meet the woman I’ve been raving about.”

“Hmm.” Sam smoothed his mustache. He didn’t look particularly convinced. “There’s something fishy about all of this, O’Grady. And you can be sure I’ll find out what it is eventually.”

Mark knew he wouldn’t be able to fool Sam for long, but he only needed to have his cooperation for the next few hours. “All right, maybe I thought it would be kind of cool if you and Charlie’s sister hit it off. One big happy family, right?”

Sam continued to look skeptical. “But according to you, if Ashley and I hit it off, then she’ll break out in a rash.”

“Maybe not. Maybe the hypnosis sessions are working. But don’t bring up the subject, okay? She’s very sensitive about it.”

“Hmm,” Sam said again, his gaze speculative.

“What?”

“I’m thinking about some of the stunts you pulled in college. This dinner setup has the same feel to it. And I—” He paused as a waiter arrived to fill their water goblets. “And I still want to know why you haven’t told Charlie about all your prior engagements,” he said after the waiter left.

“I’ll tell her. I promise I’ll tell her soon.” Mark kept glancing toward the door. Charlie had mentioned she’d be wearing red, and that the dress was cut low in the front, just for him. He loved knowing that. “I wanted to get this first meeting out of the way, so that she’d understand how sincere I am. If she found out about my five engagements before meeting me, it might color everything.”

“It damn well should color everything. Then she’d know to take things slow and not go jumping into bed with you. You can’t handle it.”

“But, Sam, we’ve been taking it slow. We’ve been writing letters for three months. That’s why this was such a great idea, the magazine thing and then the long correspondence. Now we know each other well enough to take our relationship to the next level.”

Sam scowled across the table at him. “You’re not changing levels on my watch. This will be a zipless weekend, buddy.”

Mark sighed.

“It’s for your own good. And hers.”

“You’re right. I know you’re right.” No matter how confident he felt this time, his record in such matters was lousy. And he didn’t want to hurt Charlie. She already meant so much to him. Of course, if she meant so much to him, then there was no way he’d hurt her, because he’d go through with the ceremony.

“Come on, pal. What’s one night compared to a whole lifetime?”

“Good point. Okay, I will not make love to Charlie this weekend. Maybe just a kiss or two. That wouldn’t cause a problem. Just—” His breath caught. There she was. Oh, damn, she was gorgeous. And so hot. The red dress hugged her curves and swooped down in front to show off the sweetest cleavage he’d ever been privileged to ogle. Damn. He couldn’t imagine how he’d keep his hands to himself, his zipper zipped. But he had to. He would. He would.

Their waiter was ready to escort her and a stunning brunette to the table, but Charlie spoke to him and the waiter paused.

Smart girl, Mark thought. She wanted to check out her date before the maître d’ brought her over. If Mark turned out to be the Hunchback of Notre Dame or The Wolfman, then she could still leave. His Charlie was no dummy.

He stood and started toward her.

She scanned the room and when her gaze settled on him, her smile nearly caused his heart to stop beating. Adrenaline made him shaky as he approached. Seeing her picture hadn’t prepared him for her megawatt smile or eyes that sparkled like the waters of the Gulf on a sunny day.

He glanced quickly at the waiter. “I’ll escort them over,” he said.

“As you wish, sir.” The waiter nodded and walked away.

Mark’s gaze settled on Charlie again and he couldn’t stop grinning. Even her ears were sexy. Before Charlie, he hadn’t been a fan of short hair, but with ears that cute, he could see the advantage. He wanted to nibble each diamond-studded lobe while he whispered sweet nothings to his Charlie.

“Hello, Mark.” Her voice trembled just enough to tell him how excited she was.

“Hello, Charlie.” He wasn’t sure what to do next. He wanted to bury his fingers in her blond, wavy hair, tilt her head back and kiss that plump mouth covered in tomato-red lipstick to match her dress. But that probably wasn’t a good idea right here in the middle of the restaurant. Besides, if a kiss or two was all he was allowed tonight, he needed to pace himself. “You’re... beautiful,” he said. “So beautiful.”

“Thank you.” Her cheeks grew pink. “You’re quite the treat, yourself.” Then she extended her hand. “Nice to meet you at last, Mark.”

He took her warm, soft hand in both of his and held it as if he’d never let go. She was unbelievable. And that dress... His mouth grew moist and his groin tightened. “I’m sorry we waited three months,” he said.

“We were trying to be sensible, I guess.”

“That was stupid.”

“Maybe.” She gazed into his eyes for a moment longer before slowly easing her hand from his and shifting her attention to the brunette standing next to her. “Mark, I’d like you to meet my sister, Ashley McPherson.”

He'd been so absorbed in Charlie that he'd practically forgotten about Ashley. Now that he took a good look at Charlie's sister, he wanted to laugh with pleasure. Sam was going to thank him for this day.

Ashley was tall, at least five-eight, but Sam was six-two, so no problem there. Her hair reminded him of a Cherry Coke—rich brown with red highlights—and she had green eyes. Green eyes were a particular weakness of Sam's. He wasn't averse to a dynamite figure, either. Yep, he would bless the day his good buddy Mark had set him up with Charlie's sister.

Well, he might not be thrilled about the stories Mark had concocted. But once he realized how necessary it had been in order to start Mark off on the right foot with Charlie, then old Sam would come around.

Ashley held out her hand. "Glad to meet you, Mark."

Mark shook her hand enthusiastically. "Ashley, it means so much to me that you agreed to come tonight. And I'm sure it will mean the world to Sam, too. Let's head over to the table and I'll introduce you."

"All right, but first I want to set my ground rules. I'm doing this as a special favor to Charlie, but please don't expect that we'll become a regular foursome."

"Absolutely. I completely understand." He gestured toward the table in the corner. "We're right over here."

As the women threaded their way through the tables with Mark following behind, Sam rose from his chair. Mark wondered if Ashley might be rethinking her comment about ending the foursome tonight. Sam usually attracted women like a magnet.

Of course Ashley also thought Sam had a serious phobia about women who turned out to be men, but that would be cleared up before too long. The more Mark thought about the idea of Sam and Ashley getting together, the more he liked it. He and Sam were like brothers, so how perfect if they ended up with sisters.

They reached the table, and Mark cleared his throat. "Sam Cavanaugh, I'd like you to meet Charlie and Ashley McPherson. Ladies, this is my best man—uh, I mean my best friend, Sam."

Sam shook hands with Charlie first. "It's a pleasure, Charlie." Then his gaze flicked over her shoulder to lock with Mark's. The message was clear. Danger. Don't touch.

Mark gave his buddy a short nod of understanding, which doubled as a pledge to be careful. Charlie's perfume, something spicy and exotic, wafted up to him. Oh, God, it was as if she'd set out to sabotage all his good intentions. Well, he'd have to be strong.

Then Sam shook hands with Ashley. This time he didn't bother to glance at Mark. Nope. All his concentration was fixed on the lovely Ashley in her elegant little black dress. "It's good to meet you," he said.

Mark recognized that tone of voice. Sam never used it unless he was interested in a woman. Hot damn. This was going great. Sam would become mesmerized by Ashley, which would leave Mark free to...well, to do something special with Charlie. Not go to bed with her, of course. He cherished her too much to risk jeopardizing their future. But he would love to kiss her...a lot.

"Shall we sit down?" Ashley asked.

Mark snapped to attention. He'd been so busy dreaming and scheming that he'd left them all standing there by the table. His only consolation was that Sam must have been a little dazed by his first glimpse of Ashley, too, since he hadn't started pulling out chairs for the women, either.

"Yes," Mark said. "By all means." He hurried around to a chair and pulled it away from the table. "Charlie?"

"Thank you." She gave him another one of those dynamite smiles as she walked toward the chair. First she hooked the little red purse she was carrying over the chair by its long rhinestone-studded strap. Then she did that thing that always got Mark hot when he watched women seat

themselves. She smoothed the skirt of her dress down over her bottom before she sat down, so she wouldn't wrinkle the material.

Mark loved it when women did that. And to watch Charlie slide both hands over that shiny red material was almost more than he could stand. After her wonderful behind was tucked in securely against the velvet seat, he gripped the back of her chair and scooted her in. That's when he chanced to look down over her shoulder. Oh, Lord. The neckline of her dress was like a curtain drawn back just enough to tease him with the possibilities lurking behind it.

Her breasts, rounded and perky, nestled just barely inside the sweep of red material. He could almost visualize how they'd look, but not quite. Very little material barred him from the view he was after, though. A man wouldn't have to work very hard to coax those treasures out of hiding.

But he'd vowed to limit himself to a couple of kisses. Still, he hadn't decided exactly where those kisses might be placed.... No. He couldn't chance kissing her anywhere but on the mouth. And he'd have to make sure his hands didn't wander, either, no matter how tempting the neckline of that dress was. And it was certainly very tempting....

“Mark?” Sam asked. “Will you be joining us this evening?”

3

ALL HER ADULT LIFE Charlie had dreamed of having a man transfixed by the sight of her cleavage. Yet until tonight, she hadn't had the nerve to dress to attract that kind of attention.

She hadn't even had the nerve to ask a guy to take her to fancy restaurants where plunging necklines would be appropriate. She'd been afraid they'd laugh. Her reputation as a tomboy had preceded her, partly because she met men on the hiking trail, for the most part. Because she was so obviously in her element there, they'd all assumed she preferred pizza parlors to five-star dining.

In general, she did, but she'd always longed for this—to appear in the doorway of an elegant room, to make heads turn as she walked to her table, and to be helped into her place by a fabulous-looking man who couldn't stop looking at her.

Ashley had been very perceptive to bring up Kevin Jasper. Kevin had chosen to go to that dance with someone more glamorous than Charlie, and from that moment on she'd decided her fate was cast. She wasn't the type of girl who could compete in a sophisticated arena.

Yet this time, she'd worked up the courage to try. Because she'd been able to control Mark's perception of her through the letters, she'd been able to indulge her secret longing to become a man's sexual fantasy.

And she'd been able to stage his first impression of her. Instead of meeting him in khaki shorts, T-shirt, hiking boots and backpack, with sweat beading her forehead and no makeup, she could show him this other side of her personality, one that no one understood.

She'd bet her comments about romantic candlelight dinners had prompted him to choose this restaurant. Everything about it thrilled her, from the soft lighting to the strolling violinists. Mark didn't seem to be paying much attention to the restaurant, though. She'd never made a man forget his surroundings before.

And what a man. His shoulders were broader, his rich brown hair thicker and his smile more devastating than she'd ever imagined by looking at his picture. She could write an entire essay on the cute dimple that appeared whenever he smiled, and the way his eyes crinkled at the corners.

And what fascinating eyes. That deep brown turned her knees to jelly, and when she caught the gleam of appreciation and knew it was all for her, she was ready to drag Mark off to the nearest secluded spot and get it on. The dress made her feel almost daring enough to do it, too.

From his reaction to her, he felt the same. His face was even a little red with embarrassment as he took his seat at the table, because he'd been caught ogling.

She flashed him a smile to let him know he hadn't offended her in the least with his preoccupation with her breasts. The attention was new and exciting to her. He could be preoccupied with any part of her he wanted, for as long as he liked.

He grinned back and nudged her knee gently under the table.

She nudged back. Wow, this was cool, playing a little footsie under the table. No guy had ever been moved to play footsie with her. Touch football, but never footsie. And every time he looked at her, she could tell he was thinking the same thing she was—that they needed to ditch their chaperones and get naked.

She'd achieved her goal. He was definitely, positively drooling. At last she had a man buggy-eyed over her, and it felt great. She was enjoying every second of this triumph.

Ashley, on the other hand, apparently wasn't so enthusiastic about it. Charlie could tell that immediately from the worried sound of her voice.

“Charlie, I seem to have something in my eye,” she said. “If you two will excuse us for a minute, I'd like Charlie to come with me to the ladies' room and see if she can find anything.”

“Of course.” Mark leaped to his feet and grasped Charlie's chair once again.

“No problem.” Sam followed suit and helped Ashley out of her chair.

Charlie figured Mark would be more careful not to stare at her chest this time, but at least she could use the opportunity to slide out of her chair in such a way that she brushed up against him. “Thank you,” she murmured, turning to give him a subtle wink. “We’ll be right back.”

“Hope so.” He gazed at her with pure relish.

She unhooked her purse from the back of the chair and positioned it over her bare shoulder before following Ashley toward the ladies’ room. She had no doubt that Mark would watch her leave. That was a new and exhilarating feeling, too. She believed he had lust in his heart. Mission accomplished.

What a beautiful evening, she thought as she followed Ashley toward the tasteful sign marking the ladies’ room. Even the bathroom was gorgeous. The door opened onto a sitting room, and the bathroom lay beyond that. A mural of the Italian countryside ran along the walls, and two green velvet love seats were grouped beneath the mural.

Ashley didn’t seem inclined to sit on either one. The minute they were inside the door, she turned to Charlie. “You are scaring me to death!”

“Don’t be scared. I’m a big girl.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” Ashley reached over and tried to pull the neckline of Charlie’s dress together more. “I should never have agreed to let you wear this dress.”

“Ashley, if you hadn’t been willing to sell me this dress, I would have gone to another dress shop and bought the closest thing to it. I wanted to knock his socks off, and by God, I’m doing it.”

“I’m afraid more than his socks are due to come off if you parade around much longer in that dress.” She snapped open her small evening purse and began to rummage through it. “I wonder if I brought any safety pins. Maybe we could—”

“I’m not going back out there with my dress pinned together, if that’s what you’re planning. Please relax. Mark is not like that Jason guy who was so cruel to you. He’s the sort of person who cares about people. He cares about Sam, for instance.”

Ashley stopped rummaging through her purse looking for safety pins. “Did you hear how he introduced Sam, by the way? At first he called him his best man. Then he corrected himself and said he was his best friend. What’s up with that?”

Charlie smiled. “I’d say he’s a guy with marriage on his mind, that’s what I’d say. That can’t be bad, can it?”

Ashley seemed to be turning that over in her mind. “I guess not.” She gazed at Charlie. “I would love it if he turned out to be the guy for you. I really would. But I still don’t like the idea of you two rushing into a physical relationship.”

“That’s not very likely, is it, with our two chaperones in attendance?”

“Good point. Now that you mention that, I’m glad Sam and I are here.”

Charlie had been mesmerized by Mark, but she hadn’t been totally oblivious to the instant attraction between her sister and Sam. Still she wanted to play it close to the vest. “What do you think of Sam, by the way?”

“Well, he’s very good-looking, if that’s what you mean. But I can tell he’s nervous in this situation.”

“I’m not surprised. He doesn’t know whether you used to be my brother Adam who turned into my sister Ashley. But eventually he’ll probably relax.”

“Doesn’t really matter.” Ashley glanced in an oval mirror hanging over an antique cherry vanity and fluffed her hair. “I doubt I’ll see him again.”

“Really? Why not?”

“He’s got this whole psychological hang-up going on.” Ashley pursed her lips, then opened her purse again and took out a tube of lipstick. “I’m really not interested in dealing with that.”

Charlie couldn’t resist. “Then why are you bothering to redo your lipstick?”

Ashley finished gliding the mocha lipstick over her mouth and twisted it back into its tube. “Habit,” she said, dropping the tube back into her purse.

“If you say so.”

“And even if I did find him attractive, I wouldn’t get so involved that I’d forget why I’m here.” Ashley fixed Charlie with a determined gaze. “Now promise me that you won’t let that man get you alone tonight. I’ve been watching him, and his tongue is dragging on the floor. If you give him an opening, he’s going to take it.”

Charlie thought that sounded pretty darned thrilling.

“It’s that gleam in your eye that has me so worried!” Ashley said. “Now please tell me you’ll exercise some caution.”

“Okay, I’ll exercise some caution.” She wondered if the condoms in her purse counted. “But you’re the one who mentioned his slip of the tongue. If you ask me, Mark and I are practically engaged.”

“Oh, then I guess that was a big diamond ring I saw in his pocket.”

Charlie laughed. “Ashley, you don’t know how long I’ve waited to get this reaction from a man. No man has ever had an erection just looking at me fully dressed, unless you count Donny Smoggles back in tenth grade, which I don’t, considering every girl in school made Donny’s little circus tent go up.”

Ashley’s stern expression dissolved into laughter. “I do remember Donny.”

“Is it so wrong to want to make a man totally lose his mind?” She sent her sister a pleading glance.

Ashley studied her for a long moment. “No, I guess not.” She sighed. “It’s not his mind that concerns me.”

“I know,” Charlie said with a grin.

“And besides the obvious, I don’t want him to break your heart, either.”

“He won’t. I know he won’t.”

“I hope you’re right. Here. Let me adjust that neckline again.”

ONCE THE WOMEN were out of earshot, Sam leaned across the table. “It’s a damned good thing I came along, buddy boy, or you would be toast. Now, here’s the plan. Under no circumstances are you to continue looking at her cleavage. Otherwise you are so dead.”

Mark laughed in disbelief. “Not look? Are you insane? Why not tell me to do a few gymnastics while hanging from the chandelier? That would be a hell of a lot easier.”

Sam blew out a breath and leaned back in his chair. “I get your point, but we’ve got to neutralize the effect of that dress.”

“Unless you plan to make her wear your sport coat and put it on backward, I don’t know how you’re gonna neutralize anything. I think we’ll just have to live with the situation.” Mark wasn’t particularly upset with that prospect. He thought it would be a crime to cover Charlie, sort of like throwing a blanket over one of those nude statues outside the door.

“Man, I never expected an outdoor adventure guide to show up in an outfit like that.”

Mark decided not to tell Sam that he’d known about the dress all along. He also knew the color of her panties. Charlie’s last letter to him had been filled with spicy little details like that. They’d been taunting each other with increasingly erotic messages. No, he’d better not tell Sam about that.

He decided to ease around to a different topic. “Don’t forget that she is an outdoor adventure guide. Don’t forget all the reasons why you advised me to write to her. She’s everything I hoped for, and then some. To find out how beautiful and sexy she is in person is icing on the cake, because I was already convinced she was perfect for me.”

“I do have a good feeling about this one,” Sam admitted. “Still, I’d feel a hell of a lot better if you put off the proposal for as long as possible.”

The waiter arrived with leather-bound menus, but Mark left his closed. He didn't really care about the food, anyway. "Tell you what. I'll do my best to ignore her cleavage," he said by way of trying to pacify Sam.

"Like you said, easier said than done." Sam opened his menu.

"I'll do my best. So, what did you think of Ashley?"

Immediately Sam glanced up from his perusal of the menu. Then he tried to look casual and nonchalant, the way he always did when he was intensely interested in a woman. "She's okay." He looked down at the menu again.

"Okay? Just okay? I don't think there's a woman you've dated in the past five years that compares to her. And how about those eyes? Are those the greenest eyes you've ever seen, or what?"

Sam shrugged and continued to examine the menu. "I guess. But what difference does it make? She's not breaking out in a rash, so she must not find me attractive."

Mark thought fast. Sam had a very tender ego, and whenever he thought a woman wasn't returning his interest, he bailed. If a woman played hard to get, then Sam didn't pursue her. He hoped Ashley wasn't into those kinds of games. "Um, I think Charlie said the rash appears on her... cheeks," he said.

"There was no rash on her cheeks."

"Her other cheeks."

Sam looked up. "Oh." He gazed at Mark for a couple of seconds. "That's kind of weird, don't you think?"

"Stress affects everybody differently. She might have dragged Charlie into the ladies' room because her rash was starting to bother her."

Sam closed the menu and laid it beside his plate. "No, she dragged Charlie into the ladies' room because you were starting to bother her. She's protective of her little sister, and I don't blame her."

"There, see? That's a point scored by Ashley right off the bat. She's protective of her family members. You're protective of your family members. I remember when that kid tried to beat up your little brother and you got all over—"

"Let's get back to the subject at hand—which is her rash problem. You told me this rash of hers is a social embarrassment. If it only shows up on her backside, I don't understand how that would be an embarrassment, because nobody except her would even know about it."

"Of course it would be a problem." It was a good thing he was used to dealing with Sam's lawyerly logic. "If she's attracted to someone, that means that eventually she'd want to get physical with them, and yet she couldn't allow that to happen, because then the guy would see her rash."

"Oh." Sam frowned. "I still think there's something fishy about all of this. But in some stupid way, it makes sense. I can't imagine any other reason why a woman who looks like Ashley would agree to a blind date. She should have guys coming out of the woodwork."

"Aha! So you do think she's gorgeous."

"From what I can see. Of course I'm picturing this rash, and that's not exactly a turn-on, if you get my drift."

Mark was working hard not to laugh. He thought this whole thing was hilarious, and he hoped someday Sam would enjoy the joke as much as Mark did right now. "Maybe she's got the rash situation under control," he said. "Maybe she's very attracted to you, and yet she's not breaking out. If that's the case, you would want to continue to help her along with her recovery, wouldn't you?"

Sam rubbed his chin. "You're up to something, O'Grady. I figure it's based on fixing me up with Ashley so you can sneak off with Charlie and do the nasty."

"Not the nasty." Mark held up both hands when Sam lifted his eyebrows as if he didn't believe a word. "Really. I'm not going to do the nasty. But I'd like to kiss her, at least, which could be difficult if you and Ashley are watching us every damned minute. I wouldn't mind having the two of you talk among yourselves sometime during the evening."

“You plan to start making out with Charlie right here at the table?”

“Of course not! I thought later we might go dancing.”

“Dancing? With her in that dress? Or sort of in that dress? I don’t think so, Mark, old boy. You would—”

“Whoops, here they come. Now if you want to know if Ashley’s attracted to you or not, look at her lipstick. If she globbed some more on while she was in the bathroom, then that means she wants you.”

“You’ve said that before when we were out with women, and I think you’re making it up. Women put on lipstick for no reason. They put on lipstick to go to the grocery store, for crying out loud. I never understood that.”

“Because they might meet a hot prospect at the grocery store, that’s why,” Mark said. “Lipstick is part of that whole mating thing. Remember, we saw that on the Discovery Channel. Look at the lipstick.”

“How do I know if she put it on for me? Maybe she wants the waiter really bad. Or the maître d’, although personally I think he’s a little old for—”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Sam. I swear you’d make a sow’s ear out of a silk purse.” Then he got out of his chair so he could help his fabulous Lady in Red into her seat. And his vow not to look at her cleavage didn’t last even for a second. But he rationalized that she’d worn the dress on purpose to make him notice, so if he didn’t, she’d be disappointed.

He didn’t want to disappoint this woman. Not ever. And that was why he would be a good boy tonight and just enjoy the view from a distance.

“Did you get whatever it was out of your eye?” Sam asked Ashley, peering intently at her face.

Mark looked, too, and saw the fresh shine of new lipstick. Way to go, Ashley. Then he glanced over at Charlie and was gratified to see that she’d added more of that tomato-red color to her mouth. He’d ten times rather spend the next hour kissing that plump little mouth than eating pasta.

“My eye’s fine,” Ashley said. “Probably an eyelash or something.”

“I can see how that would happen. Your eyelashes are pretty long,” Sam said.

Good, Mark thought. Sam liked long eyelashes. Charlie’s eyelashes were long, too, and she had mascara on them. Blondes usually used the stuff, he knew, because without mascara their eyelashes didn’t stand out so much.

He’d like to see Charlie without her mascara, though. No doubt she’d look perfectly fine. He’d like to see her without her clothes, too. She’d look more than perfectly fine without her clothes.

But he wouldn’t be doing that this weekend. No sir. So he’d content himself with simply sitting and watching Charlie. Somehow he managed to order his meal and make a wine decision, but he couldn’t remember his choices thirty seconds after he’d made them.

Charlie totally absorbed his attention. He made small talk. So did she. But the conversation was unimportant. All that mattered was being here together, his knee touching hers, his hand resting on the tablecloth where he could accidentally brush her little finger with his.

Now she was picking up her water goblet. Now she was putting it up to those red lips. Now she was taking a sip. Now she was giving him that coy look that made his pulse hammer. He was vaguely aware that Ashley and Sam were talking to each other, but he wasn’t aware of anything they said.

Charlie-watching was becoming his favorite activity. The only problem was that the more he watched, the more aroused he became. Well, too bad. Tonight he would be strong. For her sake.

4

CHARLIE BARELY TASTED HER DINNER. Somehow she had to come up with a way to get her sister and Sam out of the picture so she could be alone with Mark. He was everything she'd hoped and she could hardly wait to get her hands on him.

After all the sexy things they'd said to each other in their letters recently, she was ready for more than heated glances and knees touching under the table. The single rose looked lovely resting beside her plate, and the strolling violinists were romantic, but by the end of the meal she needed more than that.

She wanted to be held, to be kissed, to be caressed. In the process, she'd find out what it was like to touch the dimple on Mark's cheek and feel the texture of his hair beneath her fingers. She might even find out what he looked like without his sport coat, without his tie, or even without... everything. Her body throbbed just thinking about that possibility.

But he'd brought Sam along, and that was the fly in the ointment.

She couldn't really blame him. It had been a decent and kind thing to do, and Sam seemed like a terrific guy, but it sure did make for an awkward situation having him and Ashley hanging around. The meal was drawing to a close and she didn't know what to suggest that would allow her an intimate encounter with Mark.

By the time they were standing outside the restaurant waiting for the valet to bring the cars, she still hadn't thought of a good solution for extending the evening. Inviting them all back to her apartment wasn't a very romantic thought, and they were overdressed for the movies.

Dancing would work, but she wasn't up on the dancing scene in Austin, even though she was a decent dancer. Her other dates hadn't thought she'd be into that, so she hadn't spent much time nightclubbing.

She glanced at Mark in silent appeal. The evening couldn't end now. It just couldn't.

He met her gaze and his eyes were filled with the same longing. Then he looked over at Sam. "I hate to call it a night so soon, don't you? Our hotel has a lounge with a live band and a small dance floor, so we could—"

"Great idea," Charlie said. At last a man had pictured her as an inviting dance partner. And she'd get to put her arms around him, at least while the music played. That was a beginning. "Isn't it a great idea, Ashley?"

"No!" said Ashley and Sam together.

Charlie seized the moment. "Then I have the perfect solution. We have two cars here. Mark and I can take one of them and go dancing, and Sam and Ashley can take the other one and do... whatever they want."

"On the other hand, dancing might be a good idea," Ashley said quickly.

"Sure," Sam added. "I could tag along for some dancing for a little while. Then Mark and I should probably turn in. Big day tomorrow."

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