

K I M A N I R O M A N C E



Kissed by a
CARRINGTON

LINDA HUDSON-SMITH
ESSENCE BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Linda Hudson-Smith
Kissed by a Carrington

«HarperCollins»

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Kissed by a Carrington / L. Hudson-Smith — «HarperCollins»,

Pro-basketball star Houston Carrington likes his life just the way it is: fame, fortune and freedom. But Kelly Charleston tempts the footloose playboy to break his number-one rule—flings without strings. The time he spent in the sexy sports doctor's company is forever seared in his memory. . . and now she's just signed with his team! Wary of love, Kelly has managed to steer clear of romantic entanglements. But how could she forget the passionate encounter she shared with this seductive, irresistible Carrington brother? And now that she's under contract with the Texas Cyclones, she's in danger of losing something she swore she'd never give up—her heart. Especially when Houston awakens her fantasy of a fabulous future together. Because once you've been kissed by a Carrington, no other man will do. . . .

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His passionate kisses and tender caresses put Kelly nearly out of her mind with need.

He let go of her long enough to pull his sweater over his head. It was hot, even though the air conditioner softly hummed on and off at timely intervals. The prickly heat he felt had more to do with his body temperature than anything else.

Kelly had a hard time sitting still on Houston's lap. His sex was hard as stone and every time she moved a muscle a part of her lower anatomy rubbed against it. The strong desire to see and touch what felt larger than life had her thinking all sorts of naughty girl stuff. If it were Christmastime, she'd get only coal in her stocking. And Saint Nick would give her a good scolding!

Houston had no idea how much of a bad, bad girl Kelly could be. Under the right circumstances, she could absolutely give him something he could feel.

His next fiery kisses had Kelly fidgeting. She hadn't thought she'd ever be the aggressor, but she was ready to become just that. She slowly got up from Houston's lap. "Excuse me. I'll be right back."

"Is something wrong?"

"Very wrong! But I'm about to make it right."

LINDA HUDSON-SMITH

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Linda has won several awards, including a Career Achievement Award from *RT Book Reviews*. She was also voted Best New Writer by the Black Writers Alliance, named Best New Christian Fiction Author by *Shades of Romance* magazine and a Rising Star by *Romance in Color* in 2002. She is a recipient of the 2000 Golden Pew Award and the 2004 winner in the romance category for the African American Literary Awards Show.

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Kissed by a Carrington

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Linda Hudson-Smith

ESSENCE BESTSELLING AUTHOR



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This book is dedicated to my loving sister, Donna Jean Brinson. Your staunch support in my personal life and writing career means the world to me. Thank you for the loyalty! Thank you for the love!

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Dear Reader,

I sincerely hope that you enjoy reading *Kissed by a Carrington* from cover to cover. The Carrington triplets are back by popular demand from the countless readers who desired more of the Texas dead ringers!

I am very interested in hearing your comments and thoughts on the romantic liaison between the NBA's Houston Carrington and the Texas Cyclones' sports medicine physician, Kelly Charleston. These beautiful people will once again touch your hearts and quench your thirst for exciting and sizzling romance.

Please enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope with all your correspondence and mail to Linda Hudson-Smith, 16516 El Camino Real, Box 174, Houston, TX 77062. Or you can e-mail your comments to lindahudsonsmith@yahoo.com. Please visit my Web site and sign my guest book at www.lindahudsonsmith.com. You may also read my newsletters and meet other published authors, aspiring authors and other creative spirits at thewritersworld.ning.com.

Linda

Chapter 1

On a lovely day in early June, wild screams, overzealous whistling and hand clapping thundered through the cavernous restaurant. There didn't appear to be a single woman—young, middle-aged or elderly—who didn't find handsome, toffee-complexioned Houston Carrington sinfully sexy. The NBA's Texas Cyclones' power forward, a confirmed bachelor, couldn't help but smile at the wild reactions as he made his way to a reserved table inside the popular restaurant All About Appetites, an upscale eatery in downtown Houston, Texas. He was used to this.

The ladies' instant recognition of the hometown sports hero made Houston feel good. He was a man who enjoyed women of all types, shapes and sizes.

The moment the hostess seated Houston, a male waiter approached him with caution and obvious reverence. "Good afternoon, Mr. Carrington. Welcome back to All About Appetites. It's a pleasure to serve you. Interested in starting with a drink, sir?"

Recognizing the waiter's nervousness, Houston extended his hand to the young guy while reading his name tag. "Thanks, Alex. Please bring me a bottle of mineral water. I'm expecting another party, so we'll order appetizers and meals once my companion arrives."

"Right away, Mr. Carrington," Alex said, quickly backing away from the table.

Houston drummed his fingers on the table, looking back and forth between his watch and the entryway. His date wasn't late; he was early by fifteen minutes.

A bad case of nerves could knock a man off his normal course, he thought.

As Houston thought about his beautiful luncheon companion and how the date had come about, his drop-dead-gorgeous smile came easy. The first time he'd met her was nothing more than a brief introduction by a friend at a Christmas party six months ago. The second time he saw her was at a charity auction to raise money for Haven House, a foster-care home. Both sightings had remained crystal clear in his mind.

Looking like she belonged on the front cover of a fashion magazine, a stunning female, with rich, dark sienna skin, had stood to make a bid. Thick, glossy, reddish-brown hair swept her shoulders. She was clearly intent on winning the auction entry when she'd lifted her hand as high as her bid of twenty-five hundred dollars.

The fabulous-looking male being auctioned off for a celebrity lunch date was Houston's brother Austin, who was the Texas Wranglers' quarterback. The toffee-complexioned dead ringers were only two members of the Carrington triplets, who played different professional sports in front of their hometown Houston fans. The other brother, Dallas, played shortstop for the National Baseball League's Texas Hurricanes.

Houston recalled the audible gasps that had swept through the room over the amount bid. The smug look on Austin's ex-fiancée's face had quickly changed to an expression matching her evil, hateful ways. Clearly, Sabrina Beaudreaux was not a happy participant. Determined to win, Sabrina had tried topping the last bid by another five hundred dollars, but to no avail. Kelly Charleston, the stunning beauty, was not to be denied.

For the next few minutes, Sabrina and the model-type, five-foot-seven Kelly held a private bidding war. The numbers had gotten so high no else dared to bid on Austin, though the ladies thought he was priceless. Since other gorgeous bachelors were to be showcased on the auction block, some women figured they'd save their bids for then.

The next time Houston saw Kelly after the auction was at a Karamu feast held at Haven House on the last day of Kwanzaa. Each encounter was crystal clear in his mind.

Houston glanced at the entry again. With no Kelly in sight, he sat back and recalled how this luncheon had been arranged. The details were ingrained in his mind.

Austin had approached Houston. "I need a big favor."

Houston had been skeptical. “What’s on your mind?”

Austin grinned. “I need you to swap places with me for the celebrity luncheon date. I don’t want to hurt Ashleigh. Sabrina knew I wasn’t among the celebrity auction participants when she pulled this fast one.”

Houston wasn’t too thrilled. “And you went along with it because the cause is too important. Haven House needs all the money we can raise, right?”

“What would you say if I told you the lady requested the swap? She says she met you at a Christmas party.”

Houston nodded. “We were merely introduced. No conversation occurred between us. As for us swapping places, we haven’t done that since high school.”

“The beautiful lady bid on me but I think she’d like lunch with you, Houston. Please accept it. I don’t want to risk losing the funds. It’s all for Haven House.”

Houston had agreed to take the date in his brother’s stead. He could hear Austin’s plea as though it was happening right now. Due to home games and the hectic away schedule, this was the first chance he’d gotten to make good on his promise.

Houston turned his thoughts from the past to the present. It was now *Kelly time*.

Lovely Kelly Charleston slid out of her sand-colored Porsche sports car and handed over her keys to the valet parking attendant. She had the top up even though the June day was warm and pleasant. She didn’t want to mess up her just-been-to-the-salon waves and curls. Dressed in a hip-hugging heather-gray dress, showing off all her eye-catching curves, she was a delightful and marvelous vision. The shiny gray-and-black patent stilettos added a couple inches more to her already graceful height. She was vivacious, beautiful and sexy—a total knockout.

Kelly didn’t want to be late for her date with Houston Carrington, the sexy power forward for the NBA’s Texas Cyclones. A pretty hostess immediately escorted Kelly to the table where Houston awaited her arrival. His breath caught, causing him to swallow hard. She looked sensational. The kind of reaction he had to her wasn’t so unusual, but remaining his normal cool and aloof self in her presence might be difficult. It was the first time any woman impacted him so profoundly, and they’d only known each other a short time. Wrenching his eyes from her sexy figure wasn’t easy. Ladies didn’t come any more beautiful than this one.

As Kelly arrived, Houston practically leaped to his feet. Lifting her hand, he gently kissed the back of it. “We have to stop meeting like this,” he teased. “You look stunning!” Pulling out a chair, he waited for her to sit before reclaiming his chair.

“Thanks for the compliment. You’re quite handsome yourself,” she said flirtily. Kelly wasn’t worried about coming off as too forward. She smiled, revealing sparkling white teeth. “Hope I haven’t kept you waiting long.” Her voice was soft and smooth as silk, yet the rich, slightly husky intonation sounded seductive to him.

Houston glanced at his watch. “You’re actually on time. I was a bit early.”

Kelly nodded. “I like punctuality. It’s a great quality to possess.”

He liked her candor and self-confidence. “I agree. I’m also a stickler for punctuality. Yet I hang around with a group of guys who habitually run late.”

“Good friends of yours?” Kelly asked, raising a perfectly arched eyebrow.

“My teammates. I can’t tell you how often our travel plans are delayed because of tardiness. Good thing we travel on the franchise’s private jet.”

“Most professional sports teams do travel that way,” Kelly asserted. “My friend is an air traffic controller. He only handles corporate jets and privately owned aircraft.”

“Interesting gig,” Houston remarked, wondering if Kelly was romantically involved with the man she’d just spoken of. His quiet thought had him annoyed. This was a first date—and by all accounts of his past history, a final one.

If Austin hadn't said Haven House might not get the bid monies unless he accepted the date in his stead, Houston wasn't so sure he'd be here.

Houston picked up two menus and handed one to Kelly. He opened his despite his knowledge of what food and dessert items were offered. "Hope you brought along a decent appetite. This place is appropriately named. My teammates refer to it as Triple A."

"All About Appetites," Kelly said on a laugh. "Cute! I like it. I was here once, but not for dinner. I came around the same time they started offering live music."

"Surprised I didn't run in to you. I love the music entertainment they bring in. My teammates and I frequent this place."

The couple quietly began discussing the menu. Kelly asked Houston questions about the entrées and he recommended several items he'd ordered before.

"The tender, juicy mesquite grilled steak and jumbo shrimp is one of the best combination entrées," Houston praised.

"I love steak and shrimp."

Once Houston and Kelly selected their meal choices, he summoned the waiter and wasted no time in making their preferences known.

As if Houston had suddenly recalled something, he snapped his fingers. "Please bring the lady a glass of white zinfandel." Austin had overheard Kelly's wine order at the auction and had passed the information on to Houston.

Kelly looked at Houston with skepticism. "How in the world did you know?"

Houston winked. "I make it my business to know." He laid his forefinger against his temple. "By the way, my brother never told me why you wanted *me* to come on this date versus him. Care to enlighten this old curious George?"

Color stole into Kelly's cheeks. Although she already knew the answer she pondered Houston's query, the million-dollar question swirling around in her mind.

Did Houston need to know the truth?

Kelly cleared her throat. "I bid on Austin because I utterly love to annoy Sabrina Beaudreaux, whom I hadn't seen in a while. She and I are old college roommates. The lady treated me horribly the first semester. I eventually ended up changing roommates."

"I heard there was tension between you. Members of our family felt it at the auction. We tried to accept Sabrina in our lives. Austin was going to marry her, but the Carrington family was never comfortable with his decision or with her. She was rude to us and she constantly showed an unattractive spirit of selfishness and heartlessness."

Kelly snorted under her breath. "I'm sure your family didn't see the half of it. People Sabrina dislikes, fears or is just plain jealous of are the ones who feel the full brunt of her meanness. She often made me the butt of her downright crude and unkind jokes." Kelly cringed at the painful memories.

"I'm sorry for whatever you endured." Houston closed one eye and peered at Kelly through the other, letting her know she still hadn't answered his question. "I've heard what you've said, but I'm also aware of what you haven't said. Why me?"

Amused by his persistent line of questioning, Kelly smiled softly. "Why not you?" she asked straightforwardly.

"That's what I want to find out," he said, eyeing her inquisitively. "You're the only one with the answers."

"Although Austin was the most popular male athlete on the auction block Sabrina wasn't the only reason I bid on him. I simply had a desire to check out the chemistry I felt the first time I saw you in person. So I asked Austin if he was willing to make a switch for the luncheon." She'd told Austin not to reveal her agenda, like she thought that would really happen between brothers.

The famous triplets, Austin, Dallas and Houston, born to Angelica and Beaumont Carrington, were tall, toffee-brown-complexioned, sinfully handsome, athletically built and buff beyond

imagination. The brothers' sexy, athletic physiques, Southern accents, sparkling ebony eyes and silken curly hair had women all over the nation swooning. Kelly had found out she was no exception on her first glimpse of Houston.

Leaning forward, Kelly made unflinching eye contact with her date. "I find you attractive and sexy and I wanted to see if the first unbelievable reaction I had to you was real." She trilled off the sweetest, most heart-stopping laughter he'd ever heard. "It was."

Feeling good about Kelly's remarks, Houston laughed jovially. "You've hit a tender spot in my heart. The compliments are so sweet." His gaze strayed momentarily. "You're not alone in your reaction. I confess I was also enamored with you on each of our quick encounters. It's nice to share lunch with you, Kelly Charleston—very nice."

While extending her hand to Houston, Kelly felt the heat rise in her cheeks.

The meals were delivered in a timely manner. Once the waiter found out everything was to his patrons' satisfaction, he promptly disappeared.

Kelly didn't know if Houston was into blessing the food or not so she took the lead and said a short supplication. Following his enthusiastic amen, he looked up at her, approval shining in his dark eyes.

The next look Houston gave Kelly was odd. "I know this is just a celebrity charity date, but I try to let people know who and where I am regardless of the situation. As for the women I date, rarely is there a second one. Because of my profession and lifestyle, I have a lot of platonic female relationships, but I'm not the type to commit. I only date one woman at a time, but even that is never serious."

Kelly was totally surprised at Houston's pointed remarks. He'd been up-front on sharing his views on relationships, but she wasn't sure the timing was appropriate.

The look on Kelly's face let Houston know he'd caught her completely off guard. "You may think I shared too much information for a first-time get-together, but that's the way it is with me, Kelly. I'm direct and up-front, pulling no punches. Big problems arise for me when I don't lay my cards out in plain view."

Taken slightly aback by how painfully direct he was, Kelly took a sip of her drink. "It is a bit much, but only because I'm surprised by the timing. Are you perfectly clear from the jump with every woman you meet? And why *aren't* you the committing type?"

Houston ran steady fingers through his dark curls. "I love meeting all kinds of women, love them in all shapes, sizes and colors. My career keeps me moving at full speed. I think it'd be unfair to tie someone down, especially when I can't be there on a consistent basis. Commitments come with a certain amount of demands. I have a house but I'm also in love with a new condo...commitment is not my middle name."

"Hmm, those are interesting and commendable edicts. I like a man who is straight and to the point, yet it's unusual for stuff like this to come up in a discussion during a casual first lunch, don't you think?"

"You don't strike me as the kind of woman who kids herself. We've both mentioned our wild reactions to each other so I think the things I've said *are* appropriate."

Shrugging, Kelly chuckled nervously. "Put like that, I'd have to agree. How do you define yourself and manage your life as a superstar athlete? And how *are* things for you out of the spotlight of superstardom?"

Giving several moments of intense thought to her queries, Houston pursed his lips. "I define myself as a man, Kelly, a simple man who tries to live an uncomplicated life. I try not to give out false hopes and I don't go through life with unrealistic expectations from others or myself. No expectations equal no disappointments."

Though fascinated by his philosophy, Kelly tried hard to hide her feelings. "Why don't you believe in commitment?"

“It’s not that I don’t believe in it, because I do. I commit myself to important issues every single day of my life and I work hard to fulfill them. My job has me on the road a good bit. Personal relationships often suffer badly under that type of scenario.”

“So, do you just love women and then leave them behind in your traveling dust?”

Houston peered over at Kelly in a slightly scolding way. “Hardly! I’m up-front about my position.” He explained to her the number of women out on the road doing their best to distract a man from his good intentions. “I’ve seen marriage after marriage fail because of cheating, allegedly due to the numerous absences. I’ve also seen a number of successful ones, yet it’s the failed ones I seem to focus on. As for superstardom, that’s a label my brothers and I have inherited. We don’t see ourselves as such, in or out of our professions. Taught by our father to be the very best at everything we do, we are merely extremely hardworking men who relish success.”

As Kelly thought about how to turn away from their current conversation, she toyed with the idea of whether or not to tell Houston she had signed a contract as a sports medicine physician with his NBA team, the Texas Cyclones. Thinking it was better to wait until she was formally introduced to the entire team and the other staff members, she marked it off as a nontopic of conversation. After exposing her attraction to him, she didn’t want him to think she’d taken the job just to be around him. That wasn’t the case.

Feeling it was best to get off the subject he’d foolishly started, Houston summoned the waiter. Kelly requested another zinfandel and he ordered a glass of pinot grigio for himself.

While Houston waited for the orders to be filled, his mind flipped back to the constant taunting from his brothers over the phone last evening. He didn’t understand why Austin and Dallas stayed up in his personal business. Just because they’d both fallen madly in love didn’t mean he had to. He covertly took another look at his date. Curvaceous in all the right spots, Kelly only stood five foot seven compared to his six-foot-three-inch frame, but she was one tall order for any man to try and fill.

The waiter delivered the drink refills and promptly disappeared. Kelly reached out to accept the wine from Houston.

Hoping to lighten the dark mood he’d created, he pulled the drink back. “I forgot to taste your wine earlier, but I can’t let this one get by.” He took a small sip. “In case Sabrina paid the bartender to poison you, I want you to know I’m willing to die for you.”

Kelly felt the pain of her sharp intake of breath. Laughter bubbled within and broke loose. This gorgeous jock had said the sweetest thing, even if it’d been uttered in total jest. She could only imagine how wonderful she’d feel if he’d actually meant it.

Smiling brightly, Kelly accepted the drink. “So you’d die for me, huh? I hope we never have to find out.” She raised her glass. “Cheers.”

Houston gazed intensely at Kelly. “Would you die for me?”

Kelly’s eyes met his unblinkingly. “Of course, but please don’t quote me on it. I’d first want to know how I’m expected to lay down my life. Not so sure I’d step in front of a bullet or a fast-flying dagger intended for you or anyone else.”

They both laughed.

Houston was too much of a challenge for Kelly to walk away from.

“I liked the interesting way you’ve defined yourself. You’ve left me with no doubt about your character. I’m impressed with how you live your life. It’s commendable. I hear you saying you walk through your existence being true to self. I like that.” Nothing of what he’d said about his view on romantic relationships had been disrespectful or despicable. In fact, he had been up-front and rather sensitive about it.

She liked integrity and sensitivity in a man. Kelly didn’t know for sure, but she felt strongly Houston possessed both—and probably a wealth of other fine characteristics.

Houston was pleasantly surprised by Kelly's assessment of his character. "I've never heard anyone interpret me the way you just did. Very few people get me right off the bat. It seems that you have. Thanks for the generous sizing up."

"You're welcome. Does it scare you that I'd love to learn more about you?"

"I don't scare easily, Kelly. But I have to warn you. You might not like everything you learn. Things you hear about me might not exactly be the truth, either. When in doubt about who I am, simply ask me."

"I'll do that. Thanks for being so transparent."

Kelly had seen Houston's remarks about being a confirmed bachelor and his inability to commit as interesting challenges, something she was always up for. He'd be surprised to know how competitive she was. However, this was the first time in her life she'd ever entered into a competition to win a man's heart.

If Houston truly believed he'd never commit to any one person, she'd accepted the challenge to show him otherwise. Proving him dead wrong wouldn't be easy, but she had already decided to pick up the gauntlet he'd thrown down.

If Kelly had her way, Houston would come to want her in every way a man wanted a woman. Yet it didn't look as if there'd be another encounter for them. But all was not lost. Kelly was an eternal optimist.

Time flew by with the speed of lightning while Kelly and Houston enjoyed the delectable food and learned a few more interesting tidbits about each other. Humor and seriousness had been a part of the conversations, leaving each to wonder what exactly made the other tick. If nothing else, they both knew how to ride out the choppy waves. Despite Houston's rules on personal relationships, he found it difficult to deny himself a chance to learn more about Kelly. She had first exposed a nerve then she'd pressed on it relentlessly. He'd been intrigued by a woman before but never to this degree. No one had ever made his heart race with the force of hurricane winds.

Glancing at her watch, Kelly got to her feet. "This has been one interesting meeting." She wrinkled her nose. "I'm sorry it has to end, but I've got a few important matters to tend to before the day is done." Kelly couldn't let Houston know how deeply she feared seeing him only through her television set.

Houston stood, towering over Kelly. "*Interesting* is just one of many words that describes our luncheon. All good things come to an end. I have had a great time with you." *And I'm no longer sure that this is the end of us, as I was in the beginning.*

Kelly and Houston appeared enthralled with each other as he walked her out.

Chapter 2

Not one to easily give in to bouts of nervousness, Kelly was surprised at the annoying tremor in her heart and at how dry her full, generous lips and mouth felt. The Sahara Desert was an adequate description for the dusty-tasting, cracking condition of her tongue. In spite of the juicy berry-wine lip gloss she wore, her lips felt parched.

Meeting the entire Texas Cyclones team and its owner and management staff wasn't a nerve-racking occasion for Kelly. Yet knowing Houston was among the group had her regretting the decision she'd made not to reveal to him the legal contract she'd signed to join the franchise as a team physician. Houston had imparted a fair amount of his personal history to her, but she hadn't given up nearly as much.

For the auspicious occasion Kelly had worn her favorite red power suit, simplified by a soft, silky white blouse. The dressy business attire, a perfect fit on her slender, well-toned body, was visible proof of her belief in the benefits of exercising regularly. Red patent-leather heels, almost the exact color as the suit, weren't as hot as the stilettos she'd worn on the luncheon date with Houston.

As the professional basketball team filed into the room, Kelly ran her fingers lightly through her reddish-brown tresses. Bouncing with full body, her hair shone with the glossy product her stylist had sprayed on generously after a wash and blow-dry.

A few deep breaths helped to calm Kelly. Then her eyes engaged with Houston's ebony ones. The expression on his face was totally unreadable, like a mask put perfectly in place to hide the true image behind it. Her breath suddenly felt tangled.

Houston didn't look a bit surprised or particularly shocked to see Kelly standing there. His gaze was hot and unwavering, swirling all about her, tampering with her calm demeanor.

Smile, she quietly commanded him. *Smile that beautiful smile for me, Houston Carrington, just long enough to ease this web of confusion I feel.*

"Well, men, this is Dr. Kelly Charleston, the newest player added to our team roster. She's the highly qualified sports medicine physician I just briefed you on," Maxmillian Sheffield, the franchise owner, announced. "Is she not as beautiful as I said?"

"Hear, hear," someone shouted from the middle of the room.

As the team did "guy things," wolf-whistling and pumping fists, Kelly blushed, her sienna cheeks glowing. So Houston *had* known about her contract before he'd walked into the room, she thought. Yet his expression hadn't given it away.

Maxmillian Sheffield, simply referred to as Max, filled any room he entered with his greatness. Kelly's few encounters with him had put her in the middle of what his staffers had said about him. He was kindhearted, considerate and wore on his shirtsleeves the incredible humility and humanity he also carried inside his heart.

One of the wealthiest men in the country, Max lived modestly, comfortably, but fully, sharing his overflowing coffers with the less fortunate. Max was a giver. Kelly had heard it said many times by others; only God could beat Max at giving.

"Kelly is on board to take care of our team's medical needs," Max said, "mainly the orthopedic-related ones. I brought her to us on the highest of recommendations, but no need to repeat all that. Even though our season is over and we're not in the playoffs, we hired Kelly to help with our summer league, preseason training and our future seasons. Without further ado, I present to you Dr. Kelly Charleston. Let's give her a hearty round of applause."

Enthusiastic hand clapping and warm smiles of approval appeared genuine.

Kelly stood in the center of the room, as opposed to timidly hiding behind the podium. "Hello, guys! It's a pleasure and a privilege to sign on with the champion NBA Texas Cyclones. I'm grateful

for this opportunity of a lifetime. I won't travel with the team, but I'll be prepared to meet all your needs at home."

Kelly went on to let the team know that besides their own marvelous facilities, they'd have full access to the same state-of-the-art equipment her orthopedic practice had installed in their downtown medical/athletic facility, Houstons Sports Medicine Center.

"One of my partners in private practice, Dr. Jacoby Quinn, is also under contract with the team. I'd also like you to know I've been a staunch Cyclones fan for many years. Now that we're slightly acquainted, I'm open to any questions you might have."

Houston's left eyebrow lifted. "Any questions?" he asked pointedly, giving Kelly a mere sample of just how incorrigible he could be.

Kelly licked her lips in a stirring manner, a provocation intended solely for one Mr. Carrington. "Any questions that have to do with sports medicine or my credentials," she shot right back, her killer smile knocking him totally off-kilter.

Many of Houston's team members had attended the charity event for Haven House. As far as anyone knew, Austin was the only triplet bid on. Houston would like to keep it that way. Never in a trillion years would he intentionally give away his recent association with Kelly, yet he relished a little harmless fun at her expense.

Laughing inwardly, Houston quietly conceded round one to Kelly.

Kelly happily answered all the astute questions the players asked her. Her demeanor was professional, but she was savvy enough to allow her sensational sense of humor and effervescent personality to ooze. Her desire was to win the team's support, but she also wanted the guys to trust and like her. It would definitely make her job easier.

Max slid his cupped hand under Kelly's elbow. "Instead of the partial tour you had the day of your interview, I'd like to give you a full one of the facility and also show you where to hang up your stethoscope during the paperwork portion of your workday. I hear chart entries and signings are the least popular part of your profession."

Kelly laughed at Max's great sense of humor. "That's for sure. Cramped fingers and hands are occupational hazards, but I wouldn't trade it for anything. I'm ready to go if you are." As Kelly left the room with Max, she waved at the players, smiling broadly.

Instead of Max showing Kelly areas of the training center she'd already seen, he took her to the various sections she hadn't toured, in the interest of time. The Texas Cyclones' training facility was an amazing architectural structure. It was also a massive building, with a number of elevators and escalators provided for easy access from one point to the next. Lots of marble, brass, stainless steel, ceramic tile and an abundance of glass and textured walls could be found throughout.

Upon reaching the area Max had saved for last, he opened the door with a key and allowed Kelly to precede him. With his fingers already on the light switch, he quickly flipped it. "This is your personal hangout, Dr. Charleston."

The loud gasp from Kelly pleased Max. His employees were important to him and their happiness was also. He was one of the youngest owners in the NBA, but he was known as having the wisdom and charisma of someone far older than his thirty-eight years.

The red-and-gold welcome banner hanging high above the desk made Kelly smile. "Oh, my goodness! This is so unbelievable. Look at the size of my office. It's like an apartment inside here. Every piece of office equipment imaginable is installed."

Kelly had another fit when she discovered the private bathroom. "For me, this is equal to the fabled executive washroom. Does it get any better than this?"

Max's expression suddenly sobered. "It can always get better, Kelly. That's what our franchise is about. Making things better is our never-ending goal for all concerned in this business and for the city of Houston and the community at large. In keeping with President Obama's message, I'm willing to do anything I can to bring about change, change for the better good of our country and

her citizens. Adding you to our staff is one of those remarkable changes. Again, welcome! We're blessed to have you."

"I can't thank you enough for everything you've done for me." Holding emotions in check was sometimes hard for Kelly.

A warm hug was warranted—and Kelly would have loved to give Max a big one. She thought it was too forward of an action for now, yet she believed it'd happen one day. Max was truly a wonderful individual and he genuinely cared about his players, his staff and all the others he'd mentioned. Kelly was beginning to see his heart of gold.

"I have one more surprise for you. Then I'll set you free," Max told Kelly.

The reception Max had planned in Kelly's honor was another nice surprise for her. As her eyes misted again, she turned to the owner. "This is very special. Thanks, Mr. Sheffield. I appreciate how you've gone out of your way to welcome me."

Max waved a scolding finger. "Mr. Sheffield' only works for me in the boardroom. Even then, most of my associates call me Max. Please, Kelly, if you don't mind, I prefer Max. You'll soon find out I'm a staff-friendly boss."

Kelly reached for Max's hand and held it briefly. "Max, I'm honored!"

Max smiled broadly. "Glad we have that settled. Now let's go get a couple of plates and hit the buffet tables. If we don't hurry, there'll be nothing left. My guys love to eat. We'll also pop the corks on a few bottles of celebratory champagne."

"I'm all for that," Kelly enthused. "Everything looks so appetizing."

Kelly felt both tired and rejuvenated as she ran for her car. She had stayed at the reception until the last person had cleared the room. In her opinion, everything had gone extremely well between her and the attendees. Even though her official duties wouldn't begin until the summer league got under way, she was looking forward to it and the preseason and regular season games. She would be in-house periodically to set up her office and familiarize herself with the team's training facilities and procedures.

A few of the guys had dubbed her Dr. C. The majority of the players simply called her Dr. Kelly by the time the festive reception was over.

As Kelly buckled her seat belt, a light thump on the driver's window caused her to look up with a slight start. It surprised the daylights out of her to see Houston's mesmerizing eyes peering back into hers. Dazed by his sudden appearance, it took her a minute to realize she had to turn on the engine before lowering the window.

"Congratulations and welcome aboard," he stated, sounding quite genuine.

"Thanks. I'm excited about working with and getting to know the team before the official season." She paused a moment. "I apologize for not giving you a heads-up on my professional role with the team. I now know that I should have."

"You aren't obligated to tell me anything about your personal life. I was there to fulfill my obligation to help Haven House collect the bid you made. That's done now."

Kelly looked nonplussed. "What do you mean by that, Houston?"

Houston shrugged. "It was my understanding you might not cough up the funds unless I agreed to the luncheon date in place of my brother."

"Excuse me!" Kelly felt terribly affronted. "There's nothing further from the truth. That's thinking I may be a thief. Who in Hades did you hear that from?"

"Afraid I can't give up my sources." Houston was now wondering if Austin had lied to him just to get him on the date. His two brothers would never stop the irritating attempts at matchmaking. "We've met the perfect woman for you," Austin and Dallas had crooned to Houston.

"Then you shouldn't repeat what you *thought* was said. It is a bold-faced lie. I rendered the entire bid amount in a check made out to Haven House before I left the event. Have a nice life!"

Angrier than she'd been in a long while, she smashed her finger against the button controlling the driver's-side window.

Houston reacted quickly to the unexpected rising glass in an attempt to avoid decapitation. For several seconds, he just stood there, looking after Kelly's car, which sped through the parking lot like it was on the track at a NASCAR racing event.

It looked as if he owed the vivacious Dr. Kelly Charleston an apology. If that *was* the case, Austin was guilty of putting him in an unattractive position. As he thought back on his comments about collecting on the bid, he realized he hadn't exactly been sensitive in how he'd phrased it. It was so unlike him.

Houston knew he had to see Kelly again, at least one more time. An apology was necessary, no matter who'd misrepresented the reason for the date. Her thinking he was an insensitive jerk didn't sit well with him, not when he wasn't like that. As he conjured up the stunned, wounded look on her face, he felt a sharp ache of deep regret.

Why do I act so out of character when I'm around Kelly? Houston wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer, since he probably wouldn't like it.

By the time Houston made it to his Porsche, which was a different color and model from Kelly's, he had his mind made up about seeing her again. As he settled onto the driver's seat, he thought about how to apologize. No one had to tell him he'd hurt her feelings and no one had to advise him to make it right.

Houston turned the key in the ignition and revved the engine for a few seconds. The car shot out across the lot, slowing as it turned out of the parking area and onto the street. He looked ahead to try and spot Kelly's car. By the way she'd sped off, he wasn't surprised she was nowhere in sight. Just as he came up on the next exit, he saw her car moving slowly down the ramp. Following the Porsche off the freeway, he kept her in sight until he could signal her to pull over. Then he recalled they'd exchanged cell-phone numbers in case either had to cancel the luncheon date.

With his Bluetooth earpiece in place, Houston used the phone's voice-command capability to get Kelly on the line. She responded on the first ring, sounding irritated and a bit disgusted. "Hey, Kelly, think you can pull over for a minute? I need to talk to you."

"Who is this?" she asked, knowing full well it was Houston.

Houston didn't believe for a second Kelly didn't recognize his voice. If she'd stored his number in her cell, his name had also shown on the viewing screen. "It's Houston," he said, tolerating her petulance. "Let me have a word with you, please."

She sucked her teeth. "You've said enough. Frankly, I don't want to hear another remark coming out of your mouth."

Houston chuckled under his breath. She was red-hot and he found her little temper tantrum bold and sexy. "Suit yourself, but you don't know what you're missing out on."

"Like hell I don't!" Kelly pressed the end button on her cell phone just to show him she didn't care about anything that had to do with him. It hurt her to know he believed she'd withhold the promised donation. The reason she'd supposedly reneged on the deal hurt her more than anything else.

His mood turning somber, Houston repeated the voice command. It rang several times before he realized she was refusing to take his call. He understood her anger and could appreciate her feelings. However, he aimed to apologize...and his intent was steadfast. One way or the other, he planned to let her know how sorry he was.

Minutes later, Houston caught up to Kelly again, leaning on his horn to get her attention. As she glanced over at him, he gestured for her to pull over. *Please*, he mouthed, hoping she'd comply. If not, he'd follow her to her destination, wherever that was. She'd either park somewhere or eventually run out of gas. His tank was full.

Houston had pretty much shown Kelly how persistent he could be during their lunch date so she wasn't surprised by his actions. If she didn't pull over, she didn't believe for one second he'd give up. Houston was no quitter.

Slowly, Kelly steered her car over into the right-hand lane so she could turn up into the Walgreens discount store parking lot. She had her choice in slots since the area was near empty.

Houston pulled his car in right next to hers and got out.

Kelly's hands began to tremble. As Houston tapped his fingers lightly against the passenger-side window, she suddenly realized he intended to get into her car with her. She certainly hadn't bargained for that. The idea of him seated so close to her, in such tight quarters, made her sweat. Yet she popped the lock open.

While easing his body onto the seat, Houston felt cramped in her car because his Porsche was custom-designed for his tall, athletic physique. He looked over at her and smiled gently. "I was an absolute horse's behind back there. I was insensitive to you. I was at lunch on behalf of Haven House, but I've never enjoyed myself more. I know you are an honest person and would never skip out of a commitment, financial or otherwise. Can we please get past the bad start? I take full responsibility for it. I'd love to be forgiven."

The soft and sincere way in which Houston had spoken had Kelly reeling. Her head was going around and around. The man made her dizzy. She didn't even want to deal with her desire issues. Wanting him in a way she hoped he'd one day want her made her feel mental. "Why should I forgive you?"

"Because I asked you to and 'cause I really want you to. I don't want you upset with me. Just the idea of you mad at me is upsetting. The reason why I feel this way is that I like you, Kelly. You're fun to be with. I'd love for us to become friends."

Friends. She both liked and disliked the sound of the meaningful noun. *Friend* was too tame for what she wanted. Sharing in fire and brimstone and hot, breathless passion was more to her liking. Envisioning his beautiful body naked and steamy, stretched out on her mattress, his manhood hot, hard and ready for her, made her wish she was anywhere other than in the confines of her car. Imagining eating ice chips from his body and lapping the melting water with her tongue only heated her up more.

Kelly turned slightly in her seat and looked directly at Houston. "Why did you insult me like that? What you heard about the bid, do you believe it?"

"I didn't intend to affront you. I believe you and what you told me. I plan to find out the truth. I don't like being lied to, especially if it was intentional."

She sighed with relief. "I believe in forgiveness and I'm a forgiving woman. That doesn't mean I have to be your friend, but I like you and I want to be." Leaning in, she kissed him gently on the cheek. "Thanks for believing in me. The donation to the home was never a condition of the date. I was always going to pay. I simply wanted the date to be with you. Remember?" Kelly had wanted to go out with Houston for the reasons she'd cited. She had wanted to find out if her bombshell reaction to him was real.

"I'm glad that's settled. Think you'd like to hang out with me again?" he queried.

"Based on your commitment rules, I'd think you'd be the one to shy away."

"We've already discussed that. You know where I stand. There's nothing wrong with a man and woman becoming friends. Is there?"

There is when one is hot as Hades for the other. "You're right." She looked at the clock on her dashboard. "This has been interesting, but I've got to go."

"Hot date?" Houston instantly wished he hadn't asked such a personal question.

"Red-hot," she remarked. Her hot date was with a steaming bath.

Houston reached for the handle and opened the door. Just before sliding off the seat, he leaned his head back in, catching her off guard as he kissed her. "Friends."

“Friends,” she repeated, bewildered by the airy, fleeting kiss to her mouth. It was one of the sweetest kisses ever, though his lips had barely grazed hers.

Removing the cell phone from his belt, Houston handed it to Kelly. “Please store your home number for me so I can call. I’ll also give you my contact information.”

Taking hold of his phone, Kelly suddenly felt giddy inside. Wishing he wasn’t watching her so intently, she punched in the ten digits, hating the trembling in her fingers. Feeling shook up inside, Kelly inserted just her initials—*K.C.* Worried he may not find it like that, she erased it and put in her full name, adding *M.D.*

Kelly handed the phone back to Houston. Their hands touched. Then their eyes connected in a fiery way. As the heat of seduction emanated through their bodies, concentrated gazes held steady for several seconds.

Staring into Houston’s eyes was like looking into a midnight sky. It was too easy for Kelly to get totally lost in his dark gaze, too effortless for her to forget the world existed when he could draw her into his with a mere glance or a lingering one.

While making her way into the beautifully decorated master bathroom of her home, with its fancy gold and brass fixtures, Kelly stripped out of her clothes. An entire wall behind the dressing table was mirrored. Black-and-white wallpaper with red-and-gold trim adorned both the spacious bathroom and the large but cozy bedroom.

A plush, downy-soft white comforter, matching sheets and pillow shams were adorned with a pattern of large hand-stitched black roses and an intricate edging done in Christmas red. The oversize master suite, her favorite space of all, was open and airy.

An oval-shaped tub, surrounded by a step-up black-and-gold-veined marble apron, was adorned with red, black and gold candles in every size and shape. The window nearest the tub looked down onto an in-ground pool/spa amidst a stone deck. Two majestic Magnolia trees stood watch over a lovely evergreen garden. The custom-built Clear Lake home, amidst a forestlike setting, was less than a year old.

It was nowhere near dark, but Kelly closed the slats on the plantation shutters. Filling the tub with water before turning on the strong pulsating jets, she lit cranberry- and jasmine-scented candles. Before she could step up and down into the tub, the phone rang. Dashing across the room, she quickly reached for the portable extension on the dressing table.

“Is this too soon for you?” Houston asked.

“Soon enough,” she sang out, laughing softly. “Where are you?”

“I’m on the road leading to my place, which is so unlike the large spreads my brothers own. Austin had his before he got married. Both are staunch cowboy ranchers.”

“Cowboys, huh? What about you?”

“I’m the urban cowboy in the family. We grew up on a ranch with hundreds and hundreds of acres of land, where our parents still live. Daddy taught us all he knew about ranching, but it’s more in Austin’s and Dallas’s blood than mine. My home is surrounded by plenty of forested acreage in South Shore Harbor off 518. What I love most are the innumerable trees and lake access, yet the trees can be hazardous during hurricane season. I’ll have to invite you over. The landscaping alone is worth the trip.”

“I’ll just bet it is,” she said, her tone seductively taunting. Exploring the landscape of his hot body would be more than worth it. “Tell me more about the urban cowboy.”

“I appreciate the land, while Austin and Dallas love to work it. I enjoy planting the occasional shrubs and flowers, but I don’t have stables to muck or fences to mend. My brothers have qualified personnel to tend to the vast acreage and the horses and other animals. I have a gardener and a pool man. My housekeeper, Aleigha Swan, comes once a week. She cooks for me on occasion, but mainly handles the catering for parties and other special events I host quite frequently. I love to entertain at home.”

“So, there are some big differences between you and your brothers. You look so much alike I imagined you also thought and acted the same way. Silly of me, I guess.”

“Not really. Lots of folks think that way. And we are very much alike. Our parents did a great job in raising us to become our own individuals. There are a host of things that set apart Austin, Dallas and me. We grew up with the same values and principles, hung out together constantly, but each triplet has our own patented personality and our own special way of doing things and living our lives. We all have problems, but loving each other isn’t one of them. The Carringtons are a devoted crew. I’d love for you to come to one of our family dinners. They’re off the hook and so is the food.”

Kelly looked surprised. “Is that an invitation?”

Houston thought about what Kelly had asked. “Yeah, it is. We do dinner once a week when everyone is in town. Let me know when it’s a good time for you.”

Kelly nodded. “I’ll do that. Sounds like a nice evening. Thanks.”

Houston smiled as he opened the remote-controlled gates securing the lavish homes. “Thanks for pulling over earlier today. I’m glad we had the conversation. Again, I’m sorry.” Kelly closed her eyes. “Me, too. It’s all good.”

Houston parked in the long circular driveway. Instead of getting out of his car, he just sat there, thinking hard about what he’d said and done. Only a short time ago he’d been spouting off his commitment speech to Kelly. Today, he’d asked her for date, a real one, a first date with one of the most intelligent women he’d run across, not to mention one of the most beautiful. His idea of spending time with the opposite sex was supposed to be fun, honest and uncomplicated, without any game playing on his part. “Keeping it real” was his favorite mantra.

As much as Houston hated to admit it, he was more than merely intrigued by Kelly. There were many things about her that blew him away. He was taken with her in a big way, feeling things he’d never allowed himself to indulge in. The lady doctor was intellectually, socially and physically correct. She appealed to him on every important level he could think of. Her wit was sharp, but oh, so sweet, which required him to be on his toes and his best behavior. Kelly made him laugh, made his heart dance.

Was it possible for one woman to have it all?

As Houston thought about a beautiful lady named Angelica Carrington, he knew it was a definite possibility. His mother, a rare gem, was one woman who had it all.

Then there was Austin’s wife, Ashleigh, and Dallas’s girlfriend, Lanier. Both brothers had chosen women who had many attributes mirroring those of their mother. Houston had always known that when he went for a lifelong partner she’d have to possess the same qualities as the beautiful, spirited woman who’d raised him, the wonderful lady whose heart overflowed with kindness and love. His wife had to be the same kind of person Angelica was, a woman whose husband and children absolutely adored her.

Was Kelly Charleston that woman for him?

“God only knows,” Houston whispered shakily.

Inside his beautifully appointed lakefront home, decorated by one of the finest interior design firms in the greater Houston area, Houston headed straight for the huge, delightful kitchen, which featured dark cherry-wood cabinets and every modern piece of stainless-steel appliance and complementary equipment available for purchase. The high table with high-back bar stools was large enough to seat eight. Above the center island hung a built-in rack holding a variety of copper pots, pans and other cooking utensils.

Opening the door of the two-sided stainless-steel refrigerator, Houston pulled out a bottle of water. Twisting off the cap, he tossed it in the garbage can and then walked through the spacious one-story home, which had a formal living room, a more open casual great room, a family room, a dining room, built-in bookshelves lining the rooms and halls and several fireplaces.

Once Houston reached his massive master suite, decorated in gray, red and navy blue, he plopped down on the humongous mattress, which had been custom-made to accommodate his size. A ceiling fan/lighting fixture hung directly over the center of the bed. Two more fans hung from the ceiling in the attached retreat.

Works of Black and Asian art graced every single wall, along with a variety of shiny wall sconces holding appropriately sized candles. The majority of the bedroom featured recessed lighting, with the exception of several brass lamps positioned around the room. His home was equipped with the finest in office equipment and the latest state-of-the-art audio and visual components. Several glass bookcases were filled with books in a host of genres. CDs and DVDs were stored in a built-in cabinet.

Deciding to take a shower before lying down, Houston rushed into the bathroom and opened the glass door leading to the largest stall architectural plans would allow for. The shower was equipped with four separate showerheads, two fixed and two handheld. Each head adjusted to the user's desired water temperature.

Houston hastily tore himself out of his clothing and stood under the jet stream of steamy water. The moment the hot liquid hit his body, he felt his muscles relax. His mind then went straight to Kelly.

Chapter 3

Freshly showered and naked as a jaybird, Houston slid under the blue, gray and red comforter and lodged two king-size down pillows under his head. As his thoughts of Kelly continued, he recalled the icy tone of voice she'd used earlier. Some guys might've called her frigid because of it. He had to laugh at that.

The layers of heat he imagined on the surface and beneath the tiers of Kelly's soft but firm flesh belied such. His body had sizzled at the slightest touch from her. Her skin had to be silky soft and pliable because it looked that way. The idea of caressing Kelly everywhere on her shapely body caused his manhood to respond.

Since turning off his wondrous thoughts was impossible, Houston phoned Dallas. Once he got his brother on the line, he dialed Austin's number. This situation called for a three-way.

Austin answered the phone, sounding drowsy. "You sound out of it," Houston remarked. "Dallas is on the phone, too. I initiated the call, but we can do this later."

"No, man, it's cool," Austin assured his brother. "I've been awake a few minutes. What's happening in your world, Houston? What're you up to?"

"Up to my neck in thoughts of Kelly Charleston! You won't believe this..." Houston said.

"What?" Dallas asked, yawning.

"The beautiful lady is under contract with the Cyclones," Houston revealed.

Austin whistled. "Signed on in what capacity?"

"A sports medicine physician. When Max announced it just before we met her, I nearly fell out of my seat. Did you know she was a doctor, Austin?"

"Not a clue. Sounds like you're cornered, my brother." Austin chuckled under his breath.

"That's not the half of it. I asked her out on a date, after I hurt her feelings."

Dallas gave a disgruntled snort. "What did you do or say to offend her?"

Houston told his brothers about the offensive remark he'd made about fulfilling his lunch date obligation for Haven House.

"Ouch," Austin exclaimed. "That's my fault. I guess you know by now I lied to you about why you had to accept the date."

"It's a little too late for regret now, don't you think? I told her I'd been lied to, but not by whom. She took serious offense to my comment."

"Houston, you're way too sensitive to do something like that," said Dallas. "This girl is already getting to you."

"I agree," Austin seconded. "Asking her out on an official date, especially after putting up such a fuss about the lunch, is also very telling."

"A classic sign of falling hard," Dallas remarked. "I suggest you go with your feelings."

"Who said anything about feelings or falling hard?" Houston shouted.

"You just did," Dallas responded loud and clear. "There are definitely some feelings happening here, whether you want to admit it or not. I can't recall the last time you had a follow-up date with any sister. Maybe you did in high school or college but certainly not lately."

"I like her, Houston," Austin confessed. "She seems like a nice person. She's real, man."

"Very real," Houston said, blowing out a breath of frustration. "I mentioned taking her to our family dinners."

"Make it happen soon," Austin recommended. "Is she under contract to travel with the team?"

"No." Houston was quick to respond. "I can't say I'm sorry about that. Things could get complicated under that scenario. I don't want my teammates getting wind of this. If they do, they'll ride me like a bucking bronco."

“The guys will definitely find out if this relationship progresses into something serious,” Dallas advised. “You know how our teammates sniff out any hint of rumor or innuendo.”

Houston sighed hard. “There you guys go again, always jumping to conclusions. We haven’t had a next date, but you’re both talking like we’re already deep into something.”

“I hate to let you in on this, bro, but you *are* in deep,” Austin cautioned Houston. “You just won’t let go of the tight control on your silly commitment notions. Let yourself feel this woman. But we won’t harass you. Just don’t take too much time to make up your mind.”

“Yeah, man, we’re with you,” Dallas assured, knowing they’d harass Houston at every turn, more so if he decided to keep Kelly at arm’s length. “Make sure you know what you’re doing. You don’t want to hurt her. Maybe it’s time to let loose the Doberman inside you, the one guarding your heart. No one ever knows the beginning from the end, but finding out what’s in between can be a beautiful experience.”

“Dallas is right, Houston. Now that I have you two guys on the phone,” Austin said, “there’s something important we need to discuss.”

Seated in the cavernous kitchen inside Austin’s ranch-style home, Houston looked tired. He had gotten up earlier this Saturday morning than he’d intended. It had been hard to get out of bed. After talking with his brothers about Kelly last night, he’d lain awake until the wee hours of the morning thinking of the lady doctor.

The conversation had ended with Austin calling a meeting to discuss plans for Angelica’s birthday. The brothers wanted to do something extraordinary for their mother, their biggest supporter. It was a daunting task since they showered her with special gifts all year long.

“Dining in a fancy restaurant is old hat,” Houston drawled lazily. “We do it all the time.”

Dallas’s fingers raked through his dark, satiny curls. “We need to do something original, something we haven’t done for her yet. Mom deserves the best.”

Pushing his coffee cup around in circles on the table, Austin looked thoughtful. “We know that much. We’ve given her everything but the sun. This gift has to be extraordinary.”

Houston’s eyes lit up. “What about a cruise?”

Austin pumped one fist in the air. “Great idea! She’s talked about going on one but hasn’t done it yet. What do you think, Dallas?”

“Works for me. Dad would love it. Old Beaumont will have a fit if we send Mom away without him. They’re extensions of each other—where one goes the other follows.”

Austin and Houston laughed at Dallas’s *old* reference to their dad. They all did it from time to time, but never in his presence. They had the utmost respect for their father. He was the man who’d named the triplets after various cities of his native Texas, the person who’d taught them to become strong, independent, upstanding black men. Beaumont led by example. His boys had followed along in his footsteps without getting lost in his oversize footprints.

Looking a bit concerned, Austin stroked his chin. “We can’t be gone for too long. Since Ashleigh’s in her third trimester, a three- to five-day cruise will work best for us.”

Dallas nodded. “The time frame is cool with me, big brother. We can sail to Cozumel right out of the Port of Galveston or the Port of Houston.”

Austin, the firstborn triplet, was a born leader. Houston and Dallas looked up to Austin and also went to him for sound advice on personal guidance and growth and life in general. Dallas was the money man, sought out for discussion on financial issues and relied on heavily for his recommendations on various investments. Houston was the knowledgeable one, referred to as a walking encyclopedia. Black history was his favorite subject and he researched it relentlessly, sharing with the family the unusual things he’d learn. Each brother supported the other in individual and joint ventures.

Austin nodded. “Great suggestion. Ashleigh’s not keen on flying until after she delivers. I don’t want her isolated from proper medical care, either.”

“Maybe we’d better come up with a good backup plan,” Dallas suggested.

“If all of us can’t go on the cruise, we’ll just send Mom and Dad,” Houston said.

Liking Houston’s suggestion, the guys nodded in agreement.

Ashleigh, Austin’s golden girl, suddenly appeared in the doorway. She was a beautiful woman with a fiery copper-colored mane of thick, unruly curls and a sun-kissed champagne-gold complexion. “Did I just hear my name?”

Dallas and Houston rushed to Ashleigh’s side, giving her warm hugs. The guys genuinely loved their sister-in-law, who was once a foster sister. As a foster child, Ashleigh had resided in the Carrington home for many years. Years later the family had been reunited on a Valentine’s Day cruise.

Houston always noticed how mesmerized Austin was by his wife’s gentle beauty. He kept his eyes on her as the brothers made their normal fuss over his adorable wife.

Smiling brightly, Ashleigh waddled into the room, her stomach clearing the doorway first. The brothers followed along behind her, reclaiming their seats at the table.

Ashleigh plopped down on Austin’s lap, kissing him passionately. “Talking about your favorite subject, huh?”

Austin kissed Ashleigh back. “You know it!” As his hands rubbed her stomach tenderly, he couldn’t take his eyes off her. “How’s our little one today, Mommy?”

Ashleigh smiled sweetly. “Just fine, Daddy. No kicks yet from our future star punter. I’m sure he or she is just gearing up for the day. We haven’t been awake very long.”

Houston loved the way Ashleigh referred to herself and their child as one body. He was also enamored with the fact that his sister-in-law thought a girl was as capable of being a star athlete as a boy. Male or female baby was just fine with the couple. A healthy child was the daily prayer. Wanting to be surprised, Austin and Ashleigh had refused to learn the baby’s gender.

Ashleigh sniffed the air. “Who fixed coffee?”

Houston laughed. “Who else, Ash? We used to get our coffee from McDonald’s restaurant in the mornings. Glad you took time to teach us how to brew, but Austin is still selective about when he makes coffee for us.”

Austin tossed Houston an intolerant glance. “I already do enough for you and Dallas. You guys eat and sleep out here at the ranch almost as much as Ashleigh and me.”

Houston grinned guiltily. “You shouldn’t have built those fabulous guesthouses. Ash, would you like a cup of herbal tea or a glass of orange juice or milk?”

Feeling a tad uncomfortable, Ashleigh moved over into the chair next to her husband’s. “Orange juice would be nice. Thanks, Houston. Has anyone eaten breakfast?”

All heads shook in the negative.

Slowly, with extreme caution, Ashleigh arose. “I’ll rustle up something real quick. We’re ravenous this morning,” she said, rubbing her stomach.

“Not a chance, Ash. I’ll do it.” Austin leaped out of his seat then helped Ashleigh back into hers. “Be still. Just sit there and look beautiful for me.”

Ashleigh playfully swatted Austin’s behind. Pulling his head down, she gave him a flurry of gentle kisses. “Husband, I’m not disabled. I’m merely pregnant.”

Austin kissed her forehead. “That’s why I wait on you hand and foot. Enjoy it, babe. Once the baby comes... Well, we already know what’ll happen around here, Mommy.”

Ashleigh laughed heartily. “Yeah, we do, Daddy. Sheer pandemonium!”

Everyone laughed.

“Has anyone talked to Mom and Dad this morning?” Ashleigh inquired.

Houston raised his hand. “They were fine last night around nine.”

Ashleigh glanced at the clock. “I’ll call them after we eat. Everybody’s coming for family dinner tonight, right?” Ashleigh chuckled. “Like I really had to ask. Of course you strapping Texas boys

will be anywhere food is involved.” She laughed. “Just kidding. You guys are so loyal to the family. I love that about each of you.”

“Family is all we’ve got. No one knows that better than you, Ash, because of how you were raised. Speaking of family, Mom can’t wait for the new addition to arrive and to become a grandmother,” Houston remarked. “That’s all she talks about these days.”

Busy at the stove, Austin grinned. “Tell me about it! Mom and Dad are already goners over their first grandchild. You bringing Lanier, Dallas? What about inviting Kelly, Houston?”

Dallas rolled his eyes back. “I try to get together with my girlfriend every possible chance. With you no longer working full-time at Haven House, Ash, she has her hands full. If only she’d trust the employees more, but she has to do it her way.”

“That’s Lanier Watson for you. Her way or the highway,” Ashleigh commented. “Since she lives in the house, everything falls on her. It’s actually a twenty-four-hour gig.”

“Lanier thrives on doing it all,” Dallas remarked. “The woman’s a workaholic.”

Houston wanted to avoid the question about Kelly so he was glad Austin hadn’t come back to him. He hadn’t called her to confirm a date for a family dinner night, but he still planned to. Only a couple of days had passed since the meeting and reception at the training facility. He was still too busy running away from commitment to act upon his feelings. Kelly wouldn’t travel with the team, but he already knew how hard it’d be to resist her indelible charms right here at home.

Houston didn’t know why he felt this way, but he was afraid he’d met his match in Kelly. He couldn’t say his days as a liberated man were numbered, but she had him wanting her and running scared at the same time. He had no clue how to conquer his fears. Whether to invite her to dinner or not had him frustrated. Houston was glad when Austin set out the food. A meal placed in front of the brothers was a surefire distraction.

Scrambled eggs, hash browns, turkey sausage and bacon were stacked high on colorful platters. The pan-fried steak smelled delicious. A loaf of oven-toasted bread was piled on a small plate. Butter and jelly filled small, round serving bowls. Apple butter, a family favorite, was on every Carrington table.

Austin gave a humble prayer of thanksgiving. “Okay, dig in. Don’t forget the tip jar.” Austin always reminded his brothers and their teammates to leave a gratuity. At restaurants, the small monetary token was in addition to a bill. No check had to be paid at Austin’s home.

The tip jar kept on the granite counter was half-filled with cash. No change was allowed. Austin had started the tipping jar long before he’d married. Since his brothers and teammates ate a lot of meals at his home, he thought his cook/housekeeper, Stella Hanson, should be rewarded. Once Austin married Ashleigh, Ms. Stella only prepared meals on special occasions, yet her paycheck wasn’t affected. The tip jar remained and the guys continued to fill it with cash to invest in a money-market account for the triplets’ future kids.

As the Carrington family ate their breakfast, the room was as quiet as falling snow.

Houston looked from one brother to the other, his eyes flickering with amusement. He could see Ashleigh was still fascinated by how much the guys ate. The vast amount of food gobbled down was outright astonishing. If daily exercise wasn’t a part of their lives, Houston feared they’d all blow up like the Goodyear blimp.

A wry smile playing at the corners of his mouth, Austin captured Houston in his gaze. “Say, bro, aren’t your feet tired yet?”

Houston looked puzzled. “What’re you talking about?”

Austin laughed at Houston’s frowning expression. “You never responded to me about inviting Kelly to dinner. I guess it means you’re still busy running hard and fast. Thought you were ready to be caught. That’s the impression I got during recent conversations.”

Sighing heavily, Houston scowled. He should've known his family hadn't let him off the hook. They never did. "Man, my feet are just plain cold. One minute, I think about getting up close and personal with Kelly. Then I start using the same excuses to avoid getting involved."

"Little brother," Dallas said to Houston, "you keep this up, you could lose out. What if Kelly Charleston *is* the one? She's hardly a member of the little groupies out there in force in every city our teams visit. You'd better go for it before some other man snatches her up."

Houston shot Dallas a dagger-thrust look. "You haven't made the ultimate commitment to Lanier, yet you've been with her awhile. Kelly and I aren't even dating."

"Everybody here knows Lanier's the holdout, including you," Dallas countered. "She's just like you, man, scared to death of commitment, terrified of forever after. I've been ready for the next level. I'm a patient man but it gets hard. You don't want any woman you care about to feel any doubt. If I didn't believe Lanier truly loved me, I would've been long gone."

"She does love you," Ashleigh assured Dallas, "with all her heart. In her defense, we know she grew up amidst a bad marriage and a volatile household. The verbal and physical fighting between her parents was how she landed in foster care. Lanier wants forever with you, too, Dallas, but she just doesn't have a good grip on her fears. Please remain patient with her."

Dallas gave Ashleigh the thumbs-up. "I plan to. Love is patient."

Uncomfortable with the direction the conversation had taken, Houston excused himself from the table, promising to return in a few minutes.

On the back patio, seated at the round glass table, surrounded by the unbelievably serene atmosphere Austin had created for himself and Ashleigh, Houston pulled out his cell phone. After three indecisive starts and stops, he finally punched the code for Kelly's home number, hoping she was in. Houston hadn't talked to her in a couple of days.

The Cyclones team had made it into the playoffs but had been ousted in the second round, right after their unstoppable center was badly injured. The official season had ended at the end of May, but the preseason wouldn't get under way until late summer. Houston wasn't fond of the lengthy downtime, though he welcomed the break.

Houston's heart skipped a beat upon hearing Kelly's sweet, sultry voice. "Hey, lady, how's it going this morning?"

Savoring the delicious sound of the sexy bass voice on the other end, Kelly closed her sable-brown eyes. Had her constant thoughts of Houston somehow gotten through to him? "Morning, Houston. I'm fine. What about you?"

As though Kelly could see him through the phone, Houston moved his hand in a so-so gesture. "I'm good. I miss the game, of course. Once the finals are over, sometime in June, I'll play in a summer league. Have to keep the skills honed. What're you up to?"

Up to my elbows in missing you like crazy. "Staying busy. Office hours at my private practice, Houston Sports Medicine Center, make my days crazy, especially with so many new patients. I'm not complaining, though, 'cause I'm blessed. I could use a nice long break, but my schedule is packed right now. Just calling to say hello or did you have something specific in mind?" She hoped for the latter.

Sucking in a deep breath, Houston slowly released it. "I'd like you to join us at Austin's tonight for our family dinner. Are you free by chance?"

Kelly suddenly felt the insanity of this crazy liaison with Houston. The boy was here today, but would he be gone tomorrow? Did she dare dance with a man who had no proclivity for commitment? She didn't want to start wondering if she'd see him again. Nothing romantic had occurred between them, yet she had no stomach for the bitter taste of disappointment she might be signing on for, wittingly so. She wouldn't be able to yell she'd been blindsided, not when he had exposed so much of who he was and how he felt about commitment.

Although Kelly wanted to accept Houston's invitation to the Carrington family dinner she was hesitant. But what would it prove to deprive herself of time in his company? Not a thing. She had

already decided to accept Houston just for who he was. He'd been honest and right up-front about how he chose to live his life. No sane person argued with candor.

"Are you still there, Kelly?"

She sighed. "I'm still thinking about the invite."

Kelly wanted to make the right decision. There was no doubt in her mind about her desire to be with Houston. Besides, she didn't want to thwart the chance of them becoming at least friends. Despite the minor run-in, they *had* enjoyed each other's company.

Houston chuckled. "Have you come up with anything yet?"

"As a matter of fact, I haven't. Do you have any suggestions, Mr. C.?"

Intrigued by Kelly's taunting remark and follow-up question, Houston propped his feet on a nearby chair. "Well, let me see if I can help you out. What about the fact we could have a great time together? Our conversations will definitely be intellectual bombs and there are endless things to laugh like crazy about. Those are very good reasons for you to accept. Also, my family would love to meet you."

Kelly gasped inwardly. "Oh, you play so dirty. You just couldn't resist tossing in a bit of irresistible bait." She already knew she'd enjoy his family from the things Houston had said about them. She'd even mentioned how nice it'd be to spend time with the Carrington crew.

Being estranged from her own family was hard on Kelly. The unresolved issues standing between her and her parents were difficult to bring to a close.

"What time should I get out to Austin and Ashleigh's ranch?" Kelly asked.

"Seven is the magic dinner hour for us. I'd love to pick you up. It won't be a problem."

"Thanks but no thanks, Houston. If I drive myself, I won't have to wonder if I'll ever see you again." Without further comment, she rang off.

Sorry she'd disconnected rather rudely, Kelly stared at the phone, trying to decide if she should call back and apologize. Instead, she sat back in the recliner in her bedroom and reflected.

Kelly hadn't personally met Houston when the sports medicine position had first become available, but he was one of her favorite basketball players. She had closely followed his career and had developed an infatuation with him via the television and the home games she attended.

Houston Carrington intrigued Kelly both on and off the court. She was now more intrigued than ever before. His superstardom wasn't at the heart of her desire to get to know him. It was the sexy flesh-and-blood man who turned her on and flipped her heart inside out. She wasn't sure she knew how to deal with it.

Feeling the prickly heat from Kelly's last remark, Houston clipped the phone back onto his leather belt. By the tone of her voice, he couldn't help wondering if she already felt a bit of disillusionment with him.

Up to this point, Kelly hadn't said if she was in a romantic relationship, which made him unsure of where she stood. He couldn't blame her if she was a little concerned with how things might go between them. He himself was on edge over it. Thinking of how he and Kelly had come into being was outrageously intriguing. No other woman had paid for a date with him. Of course, he knew the donated money was for Haven House, but indulging in silly flattery every now and then never hurt anything.

Houston got up from the chair and went back inside the house. The moment he entered the kitchen, all eyes instantly turned on him. "Ash, you can count on one more mouth to feed for the family shindig. I invited Kelly...and she accepted."

"Way to go, bro," Austin and Dallas shouted simultaneously.

Dropping back down in his original seat, Houston looked embarrassed. "Give it a rest, guys. You have no clue how hard it was to make that call. I can't seem to figure out what I want with and from Kelly. I'm confused about her. Pray for me," Houston joked. "Unlike you two muscular, hardheaded jocks, I know I need Jesus."

Everyone laughed.

“Boy, you need the holy Trinity,” Dallas shot back like a crack of thunder.

Laughter erupted again.

Even Houston had to laugh at Dallas’s comment. “I can’t top that one so I won’t try.” He looked down at his watch. “I need to get going here shortly. This day has sprouted wings.”

Austin eyed his brother closely. “I guess you have to go get all primped up for your big date with Kelly,” he teased. “Word of advice, you could sure use a haircut.”

Houston tore Austin to shreds with a glaring look. “Save it, man. Not trying to hear it.”

The Carrington triplets were used to good-natured ribbing with each other. No one ever took it seriously. It was simply a part of their extremely close brotherhood.

Dallas leaped to his feet. “I could use a haircut, too, but I need to make sure I have a date for tonight. Ash, I’m run on over to Haven House for a minute to check on my favorite girl. Want to come along? The girls would love to see you. They miss you like crazy.”

“I miss them, too.” Ashleigh looked to Austin. “Mind if I go along with Dallas?”

Austin shrugged. “Not at all. I’ll drive you so he won’t have to come back out here until this evening. I’d like to see the teenagers, too.”

“Let’s all ride together,” Dallas said. “You two can drop me off at my place after the visit and drive the SUV back here. I’ll use my other car this evening.”

Knowing they did this sort of thing all the time, Austin nodded. “Works for me.”

Houston scratched his head. “Maybe I’ll drop by Haven House with you guys. I haven’t been over there in a while. I’ll just meet you there ‘cause I know Dallas drives too slow to keep up with my fast-moving wheels.”

“Don’t go there,” Dallas warned. “There’s nothing you can do I can’t do better.”

Austin saw the two egos about to clash. “Can it, fellas! Let’s just go. Driving fast isn’t something either of you should brag about. Too many people die in major car accidents for you two boneheads to get out there and drag race like a couple of teenagers. Besides, it’s a breach of both your contracts. Your limbs are insured for way more than either of you are worth.”

Austin’s ranch was less than twenty miles outside downtown Houston. The area was beautiful, appearing to spread out far enough to meet up with eternity. Summer hadn’t been ushered in yet, but it was already hot. Houston drove along the road feeling at peace with his surroundings. The top was down on his shiny, metallic black Porsche Boxster, but the heat was unbearably muggy, causing him to turn up the air conditioner’s fan.

The breakfast conversation had Houston wishing his brothers would stop bringing up Kelly’s name. Austin or Dallas always had something flattering to say about her. He knew Kelly was a beautiful, smart woman—and he didn’t like hearing that some other man might snatch her up. It could happen, but he didn’t allow himself to dwell on it. Only he or Kelly would know if anything romantic or long-lasting would happen for them. Everyone else should butt out.

If he had no desire to change the way he lived his life, why did his family?

Houston saw that Dallas couldn’t stop smiling at the stunning five-foot-eight siren Lanier Watson. By the soft, loving expression on her pretty mahogany face, he knew she was no less enamored with him. Dallas never could get enough of being with her. When Lanier had the occasion to act a lot like “the renegade brother,” what Dallas referred to Houston as, Dallas did his best to remain patient with her. Lanier feared long-term entanglements with good reason.

“Welcome to Haven House, best friend,” Lanier greeted cheerfully, hugging and kissing Ashleigh, openly displaying deep affection. “Girl, I can’t tell you how much I miss you not being here full-time. Hey, Mr. A.! How’s it going with the proud poppa-to-be?”

Austin brought Lanier into his warm embrace. “This poppa *is* proud and he’s just great. Every day with Ashleigh is like reliving Christmas morning as a small child. You see how our girl’s stomach has grown. Is she beautiful or what?”

Tears popped into Lanier's eyes. "As beautiful as ever."

Houston looked between Dallas and Lanier, wondering if they'd ever end up like Ashleigh and Austin, who were only one of the happiest couples on the planet. Lanier's eyes easily conveyed her love for Dallas.

Houston suddenly appeared in Lanier's line of vision. "What's up, Hou? I'm really happy to see you. Yours is definitely a rare visit."

Houston walked up to Lanier and hugged her. "Hadn't seen you and the girls in a while so I thought I'd tag along with the family. I promise to do better with visits. How are you?"

Lanier took in her surroundings, her eyes beaming with sweet sentiment. "I couldn't be better. I'm still as happy as a lark. The residents of Haven House and Dallas have truly allowed me to experience a more exciting and joyous existence."

Houston easily interpreted the expression of love and desire he saw in Dallas's eyes. It was obvious his brother thought the world of Lanier.

Before anyone could say another word, four teenage girls came bounding into the living room. The girls went ape as soon as they spotted Ashleigh and the guys. Animated greetings and heartfelt hugs were exchanged. Then the teenagers left the room the same way they'd entered.

Ashleigh was moved to tears by the genuine expression of love she'd just received. "Kathy, Tina, Willow and Gina look good, Lanier. You're doing a great job. They seem so happy. But where are Stephanie and Lauren?"

"The sisters are with their aunt for the weekend. The girls are happy, Ash, but they also have you to thank. The young ladies were an absolute emotional mess when we first got them. Your love and patience brought them through. You know how many times I felt like kicking their young butts to the curb. I don't easily deal with smart mouths and bad attitudes. Man, did those girls have nasty vocabularies and short tempers when they first arrived. Things are much better now. We've become one big happy family," Lanier enthused.

Ashleigh smiled. "I can't take all the credit for how these kids have grown. The numerous times you sat up all night with one or the other, calming their fears, drying the endless tears, made them feel wanted for the first time in their lives. We've accomplished it all together, Lanier. No one person is responsible for the success of Haven House. Ours is a joint triumph."

"Okay, girls, ease up on the sentiments," Houston said. "You've got me and my bros frowning up to keep from weeping. That wouldn't be a pretty sight. You ladies have done a miraculous job with the kids," Houston said sincerely. "We're proud of you both."

Lanier cast Houston a sweet smile. "Thanks. You always know just the right thing to say. So what's up with everyone? Any special reason for the surprise visit?"

Dallas looked hopeful. "Carrington family dinner is tonight. I need a date. Can you hook this brother up?"

Lanier crooked her finger at Dallas, her eyes flirting wildly with him. "Let's discuss this in private. Excuse us for a minute. We'll be right back."

Houston laughed at the look on Dallas's face. His brothers were whipped and neither of them cared who knew it. His father had also lost his mind over a woman. No man loved his wife more than Beaumont loved Angelica.

Houston was starting to get it, but he knew he had a ways to go before personally meeting up with a storybook ending. Some people did live fairy-tale romances. He had seen the magic with his own two eyes, growing up around it for twenty-eight years. After thirty-two years of marriage, his mother and father were still crazy in love. As Kelly's image came into his mind, he closed his eyes and let himself indulge in a bit of romantic thinking.

Chapter 4

Houston stood in the driveway of Austin's home to wait for Kelly. She had already called from the front gates, which Austin had opened via the telephone. The cameras installed above the massive black wrought-iron gates, designed with a huge *C* in the center, allowed the residents to view approaching visitors. The electronic security equipment at the ranch was extensive. Unlike Houston's posh housing community, Austin didn't have private gate guards.

As Kelly got out of the car, Houston walked over to greet her. She looked beautiful dressed in a casual, lightweight khaki-colored pantsuit and an indigo silk shell. Brown low-heel sandals and shoulder-strap purse completed the look.

Houston gently kissed Kelly on the cheek. "Glad you made it. Any problems with the directions I gave you?"

"None, but my GPS tracking system comes in handy. How are you?" She liked how relaxed he looked clad in perfectly pressed blue denim jeans and a crisp white shirt, open at the collar. He wore no socks and his casual navy leather shoes were fashionable.

Houston slid his hand under Kelly's elbow. "All the family has arrived. Ready to officially meet the rest of the Carrington crew?"

Kelly nodded. "I'd like that. If they're anything like the great things you and Austin have said about them, I'm sure I'll be comfortable."

Houston put his arm around her shoulder. "You will be. No doubt in my mind."

He knew his family would treat Kelly respectfully and make her feel welcome simply because they were kind, loving and generous people, yet he really had nothing to compare this experience to. His brothers had made a big deal out of the invitation he'd extended to Kelly because he hadn't ever brought any woman to family functions.

When it came to physical needs, his got met, but long-term relations never developed. It was a mutual agreement.

Walking alongside Houston, Kelly suddenly felt nervous about meeting the family, yet she expected to be shown kindness. According to Houston, he belonged to the most wonderful family in the world. She found herself groping for his hand just before they entered the house. She let go seconds after receiving comfort.

Houston had a huge grin on his face. "Carringtons, I'd like you to meet Kelly Charleston." He then introduced her to each of his family members by name.

Kelly smiled beautifully. "It's nice to meet all of you. It may take me a minute to remember each name, but I'll eventually get it right."

"We're sure of that," Ashleigh said. "Come on in and have a seat, Kelly. We recall seeing you at the auction, though Austin was the only one you met."

Austin extended his hand to Kelly. "Good to see you again. Welcome to our home. Ashleigh and I are honored."

Kelly wasn't sure about the nature of Ashleigh's remark, but it hadn't sounded mean-spirited. She *was* Austin's wife—and she'd probably been a bit curious about her famous husband privately meeting the woman with the winning lunch bid. "I remember seeing everyone that evening. I'm glad we're meeting officially. Houston talks a lot about you and has put you on very high pedestals," Kelly joked.

"Probably way too high for us not to break something on the way down," Angelica said softly, smiling warmly. "Houston tends to exaggerate about how wonderful his parents and brothers are, but never over the deep love he feels for his family."

A closer look at Angelica let Kelly see how elegant this woman was. Petite in stature and weight, she looked as if she took really good care of herself. Although she only wore casual designer attire Kelly saw that she had exquisite taste.

“Would you like something to drink, Kelly?” Beaumont’s brown eyes twinkled with merriment. The kindness of his soul had a way of shining through his entire being. An impressive-looking man, Mr. Carrington was as handsome as his three six-foot-plus sons. He stood every bit as tall.

Kelly nodded. “A diet cola would be nice. Thank you.”

“One diet cola coming right up,” Beaumont responded in kind.

“You can sit here if you’d like, Kelly.” Patting the seat cushion, Lanier moved over to make space for Kelly to sit next to her. Dallas was on the other side of Lanier.

Without hesitation, Kelly took the offered seat, thanking Lanier as she sat down. The kind gestures were endearing and felt personal. She felt warmly welcomed by the entire group. Dallas hadn’t said anything to her directly, but his kind, friendly smiles appeared to show approval.

Beaumont stepped back into the large family room, immediately drawing the attention of everyone present. “Okay, Carrington crew and guests, the food is ready. The patio tables are set. You folks can head on outdoors. Kelly, your cola is inside the cooler by the outdoor bar. I didn’t bring it in to you since we’re heading outside.”

“That’s fine. Thank you, sir.” Kelly got up from the sofa.

Houston nudged Kelly with his shoulder. “I’m hungry. What about you?”

She enjoyed his playful gesture. “I could use a bite or two. I hear your dad cooked dinner. That’s so unusual. I can’t imagine my father or mother lifting a single finger to do anything domestic. Maybe that’s ‘cause they didn’t have to. We had servants, of course,” she announced, heavy on the sarcasm.

Houston unwittingly squeezed her hand. Then he wished he hadn’t. “My father does the majority of the cooking. He loves to grill. Most meats and a variety of vegetables are grilled at their house. The man is insane over barbecuing.”

Houston thought it best not to feed whatever disdain Kelly might carry for her parents. He had a hundred questions to ask about her family, but he was content to wait on her to tell him what she wanted him to know.

Kelly stopped in her tracks and turned to face Houston. “You’re so blessed and lucky. If I had a family like yours, I’d live on a cloud. I don’t even know why my parents bothered to have me. I was probably an accident. No siblings ever arrived after me.”

Houston jumped out in front of Kelly. “Stop it. Don’t ever look at yourself as an accident. From what little I know, I think you’re a good person, a beautiful spirit and a brilliant physician. Our whole team is totally taken with you. I saw that for myself. One thing I love about you is that you don’t seem to define yourself by your prestigious M.D. label. You’re the best damn accident I’ve ever run in to.”

Kelly wished she didn’t feel the way she did. “Thanks, Houston. Jared and Carolyn were so busy working and making money, I often accused them of forgetting they had a daughter. Although my parents didn’t send me off to boarding school my upbringing was largely left up to the hired help paid handsomely to live in.”

Feeling her pain, Houston pulled Kelly in closer to him and gave her a tender hug. “You sound so sad. I’m sorry for whatever you’ve been through, but please give yourself a break.”

“Much like you triplets, I grew up in a very wealthy, prominent family, but ours is nothing like the totally amazing group of folks I’ve met this evening.”

Houston nodded, giving her a compassionate smile. “The Carringtons thrive on being together and loving each other unconditionally. An unbreakable bond exists, an endless circle of loyalty and constant togetherness. If one of us has a problem or a need, the entire family rallies around to own it and deal with it collectively.”

“Mama Tilley and Papa Joseph Rose are like parents to me. I stay in constant touch with them. My mother and father are successful heart surgeons and they’re partners in a thriving practice. By

design, I see very little of them, socially or otherwise. They're receiving an award for their lifetime medical service to the Houston communities they serve, but I'm not sure if I'll attend the event."

Smoldering sparks of anger flared in Kelley's sable eyes. Then the flames died down as quickly as they'd appeared. This wasn't Houston's problem. It was hers—and she'd deal with it privately, like she always did. "I'm sorry. Talking about my parents gets me riled up, but I don't want to take it out on you. Forgive me, please."

Houston kissed Kelly's forehead. "Lighten up, lady. No forgiveness necessary. Let's just have a good time. No problems allowed at the Carrington dinners. Okay?"

"Your wish is my command, Urban Cowboy."

Loving how sexy she made the name sound, Houston smiled broadly. "Looks like I've got a new nickname. I'm the only one who's ever called me that. I like it coming from you. It sounds hot and seductive," he teased.

"That's 'cause it totally befits the sexy man behind it. You're one of the hottest cowboys I've ever met." Kelly giggled. "In fact, you're the only cowboy I've met."

"That's not true. You've met three others. Dad, Austin and Dallas are true-blue Texas cowboys. You can see firsthand what I'm talking about later. That is, if you're interested in taking a walking tour around Austin's ranch."

Kelly smiled sweetly. "I look forward to it. I guess I've met more cowboys than I'd confessed to. This is also the first real ranch I've visited." She paused for a moment. "I just made another false statement. I went to a ranch in Wyoming with my college friends on spring break one year."

"How'd you like it?"

Kelly shrugged. "Everyone thought they wanted to experience life on a dude ranch. That is, until after we got there and the staff made us get up at 5:00 a.m. We were under the impression it'd be all fun and games. It was hardly that, yet it was an adventure I'll almost never forget."

Houston laughed. "Five is about the time most ranchers come to life, if not earlier. I've known my father to start working as early as four in the morning."

Kelly frowned. "I must admit my girlfriends and I found a way to dodge some of the required duties occurring right after the early wake-up calls. We got up but later snuck away from the group and climbed up into the hayloft and went back to sleep. We didn't come up with that idea until a couple of days after the torturous schedule began."

Houston threw his head back and laughed. "Charming story. I like it."

The laughter vibrating from somewhere deep in Houston's belly held Kelly spellbound. The sound of his joy was captivating. It was a true but simple story, but he seemed to enjoy it like it was a bestseller. He had mentioned how uncomplicated he liked his life. Was it this easy to please someone, knowingly or unknowingly? Kelly hadn't even been trying to please him. She wasn't sure she knew how to please a man.

The family had waited for Houston and Kelly to make an appearance. Their conversation had kept them rooted to one spot longer than planned. He felt guilty for holding up dinner. When he apologized, he was told by the family not to sweat it.

The host passed the blessing. Making it short and sweet, Austin held on to Ashleigh's hand all the while. It was actually a ritual for the entire family to join hands during prayer. Austin knew everyone was ready to get into what had been dipped up from the pots and pans. The huge redwood table was laden with goodies.

Kelly was amazed by the amount of food prepared. "The dinner menu is something else, Houston. I can't recall ever seeing this much food."

"The Carringtons know how to put out a big Texas spread. Like I said earlier, just about every meat entrée is grilled. Steak, brisket, beef ribs, shrimp and chicken are slow-cooked. 'Meat eaters' would best describe the Carrington men's voracious appetites."

Baked potatoes, fresh asparagus and corn on the cob, both white and yellow, were also roasted on the grill. The baked beans had been prepared in the oven and Ashleigh had baked the yeast rolls and chocolate cake, according to Houston. The creamy red potato salad, a Texas favorite, was one of Angelica's specialties.

Once everyone began eating, the room quieted down considerably. Pass me this, that or the other were the only remarks uttered. The guys began shoveling in food as soon as it landed on their plates. Loss of appetite probably never occurred among the triplets, Kelly considered. These guys knew exactly how to put it away, all in record time.

The Carrington family was magical to Kelly. Looking around the table, from one to the other, she saw how tuned in they were, as if they knew each other's every thought and next move. Their laughter carried contagious joy. She was sure problems existed, just like in any other family, but she had a pretty good idea they weren't exposed or discussed outside their inner circle. It seemed the Carringtons coveted their private lives.

Whatever was in the Carrington mix, Kelly suddenly wanted to be right in the thick of it. Was this fun, animated group of people what real families were made of?

Sensitive to Kelly's mood, Houston brought his mouth close to her ear. "Are you okay, Kelly-Kel? It seems as if you're somewhere in outer space," he whispered huskily.

Kelly loved the nickname Houston had dubbed her with. He had made it sound endearing and sweet. "I was just thinking about you and your family."

Houston frowned slightly. "Good or bad thoughts?"

Kelly cast him a dazzling smile. "I'm not telling. A woman has to keep some secrets locked away in her heart."

Intrigued by Kelly's uniqueness and her charming personality, Houston loved the interesting comments she tossed at him. He smiled back at her, unable to help himself. If only he could let himself go with her, he'd probably be a lot better off than constantly fighting to keep himself at a safe distance.

Fleeting, Houston wished he'd dated one person consistently so he'd know for sure what it was like and what he should expect. He operated from a blind spot, but he now realized he'd put himself at a terrible disadvantage.

Kelly wished she could resist the charming Houston, yet she was happy to be at Austin and Ashleigh's home with him. Being in the company of the entire Carrington family was an awesome experience.

The other two tough sports heroes and their handsome father were so attentive to the women they loved. Kelly closely observed how Dallas kept his eyes fastened on Lanier and Austin couldn't keep his hands off Ashleigh. Beaumont and Angelica conversed with each other through flirtatious language. Theirs was a love etched in stone. These couples only had eyes for each other.

With all the love and romance Houston was constantly around, Kelly couldn't understand how he managed to stay so unaffected. He was attentive enough to her, but it was nothing in comparison to how the other Carrington men reacted to their significant others.

Therein lies the problem, Kelly mused.

I'm not Houston's significant other. I'm not even his girlfriend. Will he ever look at me the way Austin looks at Ashleigh? How many more times would the very same question come to her mind in one evening? Kelly had to wonder.

The cool evening air was a nice change from the muggy heat of the day. Several ceiling fans hung from the rafters of the covered porch cooled things off. Strung with colorful Chinese lanterns and Tiki torches, the vast area reserved for dining was well lit.

The deep shades of ever-changing colors lighting up the pool provided a peaceful, romantic ambience. The majestic trees surrounding the vast property appeared to dance in tune with the stirring winds. It was just before sunset and the stimulating sounds of nightfall could be heard in the distance.

Quiet conversations and frequent trills of laughter permeated the outdoor atmosphere for the next couple of hours. A father and his three sons took turns telling jokes, keeping the dinner party lively. Beaumont was the biggest comedian of all. He had a cache of off-color jokes about any subject a person could possibly think of.

Angelica's eyes lovingly scolded her sons. "Guys, please don't encourage Beau in his charming but incorrigible ways." She knew it was all to no avail. As a mother and wife, she had to make an attempt. This was what her men did when they got together.

Dallas and Lanier were the first couple to excuse themselves from the table after the dessert had been consumed. Houston and Kelly followed suit only moments later. The two guys had given farewell affections to their parents, who were about ready to leave the ranch. Austin and Ashleigh stayed behind to see the elder Carringtons to their car.

It was a fine Texas evening for a romantic moonlit stroll around the ranch.

Houston was eager to show Kelly around the place. It was too big to see all at one time. It might take a couple of days to tour the entire property.

"Let's walk down to the stables first." He pointed out the whitewashed buildings to her. "I'd like to introduce you to Austin's pride and joy, Q.B. and T.D."

Kelly lifted a brow. "Horses! Quarterback and Touchdown, right?"

"Yeah, but how'd you guess?"

Kelly laughed heartily. "*Stables* might've given it away. As for their names, they're a perfect fit for Austin's career."

Houston chuckled. "I didn't stop to think about what I'd said. You're right, of course. Austin loves his Palominos. The other horses on the property are used by the hired hands. There's also been a new addition to the stables. My brother purchased a beautiful Appaloosa for Ashleigh before they found out she was pregnant. She named the frisky horse, with the beautiful, shiny spots, Sundance. Although she's only gotten to ride Sundance a few times she visits her every day. She'll ride again after the baby comes."

Kelly got a far-away look in her eyes. "I used to want a horse when I was little. I received a flat-out 'no' when I asked. I never brought it up again. Do you ride?"

"There isn't a Carrington who doesn't. We were taught to ride at an early age."

Kelly took off running toward the area Houston had pointed out, surprising him. She couldn't wait to see the horses. She hadn't learned to ride, but she was now thinking it wasn't too late for her to take lessons. Maybe one of the guys could recommend a good teacher. She made a mental note to ask Houston about it later on.

After catching up to Kelly, Houston steered her into the stables and over to the stall where T.D. was housed. The horse greeted the visitors with a loud whinny, making them both laugh. "This is a friendly one, but we still have to be careful. Here," he said, taking her hand, "let me show you how to handle her without getting injured."

"Her? T.D. is a girl?"

Houston cracked up. "She's a girl, a very beautiful one. Stroke her mane gently. That's the way. She loves to be cuddled."

"What woman doesn't?"

Their eyes met and held for several engaging seconds. Kelly wasn't sorry about what she'd said. If Houston didn't like it, that was too bad for him. She wasn't going to monitor every word she spoke for his comfort. She was used to speaking freely.

"Men like to be touched, too. I already know you have soft hands. I've felt them."

Kelly was glad he wasn't bothered by her comment. "They're soft but strong. I know how to minister one hell of a deep-tissue massage."

Houston's eyes locked with hers. "Is that something I can look forward to?"

“We’ll have to wait and see. I pray that you don’t get injured during the off-season, but if you have one that calls for a massage, I’ll see to it or have one of the therapists take care of you.”

“I set myself up for that one, didn’t I?”

Kelly shrugged, feigning ignorance. “Set yourself up for what?”

Houston laughed inwardly. “Okay, so it’s going to be like that. I’m cool. Let’s move two stalls down so you can meet Q.B., who is not a girl.”

Q.B. was also a beautiful animal, whose light-colored coat glowed like sunlight. The horses’ coats were so healthy-looking. Kelly was careful to gently touch Q.B., the same way Houston had shown her how to handle T.D. The horse gently nudged her shoulder with his nose, causing her to giggle. She’d seen people kiss the noses and foreheads of horses, but she wasn’t going that far, though Kelly would like to hug Austin’s pride and joy. Texas and Wrangler were also favored by their owners.

“Let’s move on down to the lake before it gets too dark to see anything.” Houston grabbed a checkered blanket from a wall rack. “There are a lot of fish in the lake, but we don’t catch them. Austin’s not willing to reel them in to fry up in a pan. They buy fresh fish at the seafood market nearby.”

“Are all the Carrington men that sensitive?”

“Every one of us. We don’t hunt wild game, but we do purchase deer steaks and pheasant and other wild game from the neighbors who do.”

Kelly scowled. “It sounds utterly barbaric! But I guess it’s no different from eating any other kind of meat. Slaughter is involved no matter how it’s performed.”

Houston looked uncomfortable with what Kelly had said, but it was the truth. He didn’t like the idea of harming animals, but men had been acquiring meat that way for countless years. It was the way of the world, whether it was right or not.

Down at the lake Houston spread out the blanket and prompted Kelly to sit. He followed suit. While taking off his shoes, he urged her to do the same.

Kelly was happy to free her feet and let the air rush through her toes. Setting her shoes aside, she stretched out on the blanket, propping her head on one elbow. “This is nice. It’s much cooler by the water’s edge. This is some Texas ranch. I spotted a white gazebo during our journey. I have a fondness for the structure. Do Austin and Ashleigh use it?”

Houston nodded. “Boy, do they use it. Austin had it wired with speakers and hundreds of tiny white lights when it was built on that slope. It has a wooden dance floor and built-in seating around the inside perimeter. There’s also a bar and bandstand. One can see for miles and miles from up there. It’s a pretty romantic setting.”

“It sounds lovely. Have you ever taken anyone there with romance in mind?”

Houston chuckled. “I’ve been up there hundreds of times but not for romance. Austin throws old-fashioned hoedowns and uses the gazebo for social events. We love country and western music, but we’re kind of selective.”

“Austin Carrington thought of everything, didn’t he? It sounds like Ashleigh gets her fair share of romance from her loving husband. By the way, I like CW music, too.”

“They are a very romantic couple. We always tell them to ‘get a room.’”

Lanier and Dallas, hand in hand, came upon Houston and Kelly, but they just waved, smiled and moved on.

Houston waved back at the couple. “I wonder if they’re leaving already. They usually stay a lot longer. What about you, Kelly, are you ready to go home?”

Kelly sighed with deep contentment. “Not yet. It’s so peaceful out here. But if you’re ready, I’m okay with leaving. Is it getting late?”

Houston slipped his hand into hers. “It’s not that late.” His eyes softened. “I like being here with you this way. I agree that it’s quiet and peaceful. I love the outdoors as much as you seem to. I wish our basketball games could be played outside. Austin and Dallas have the best of both worlds.

Occasionally they play in indoor sports stadiums, but for the most part they're out in the elements. I wish. NBA games are always played inside as you know."

Kelly leaned over and kissed Houston on the nose. "You poor, millionaire baby," she cooed. "I feel so sorry for you."

Houston chuckled. "You love messing with me, don't you? I have no complaints. I know I'm blessed. How many people get paid megabucks to do what they love?"

"You *are* right about that." Kelly lay back on the blanket and looked up at the dazzling stars. Locating the brightest one, she closed her eyes and made a wish upon it. "Starlight, star bright," she chanted softly, "please make my wish come true tonight."

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