

PERJURIES OF THE HEART

THE THIRD NOVEL OF A TRILOGY BY

DOLLY KYLE

"It is of great importance to set a resolution, not to be shaken, never to tell an untruth. There is no vice so mean, so pitiful, so contemptible; and he who permits himself to tell a lie once, finds it much easier to do it a second and a third time, till at length it becomes habitual; he tells lies without attending to it, and truths without the world's believing him. This falsehood of the tongue leads to that of the heart, and in time depraves all its good disposition."

~ Thomas Jefferson, letter to Peter Carr, August 19, 1785

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PROLOGUE ~ July 25, 1994 ~ Monday, early morning

“... Please hold for President Coulter.”

Mandy’s heart skipped a beat. It was bad enough to be jerked awake by a telephone ringing in the dark. It was worse to realize that the president of the United States was calling at such an hour.

The young woman sat upright in bed, shifted the phone to her other hand, and groped toward the nightstand for her glasses. By the time Cameron picked up his phone in the Oval Office, Mandy had managed to poke her little finger in her right eye, wipe away the resulting tears, and finally focus on the alarm clock’s large red numerals in the darkened room.

It was 6:05 a.m. – already 7:05 in Washington.

Moments later, the president’s early-morning, raspy voice greeted her cheerfully, as if there were nothing wrong.

“Hi, Mandy! How are you?”

“Half asleep. You sound sick.”

“Been up most of the night, and my allergies are bothering me, but it’s nothing serious.”

“That’s good.”

Mandy let a silence grow between them. *What did he want at this hour of the morning? He knew she liked to sleep late. This had better be something important.*

“I thought you might be at Vicksburg High School’s thirtieth reunion the other night. I looked for you.”

“Did you really?”

“Of course. Would I lie to you?”

Mandy let that question ring in his ears. Cameron cleared his throat nervously. Mandy closed her eyes and pictured him tightening his jaw. Still, she didn’t speak.

“Thought you might be there as a guest. Great party.”

Mandy smiled to herself, listening to the publicly-smooth-talking Leader of the Free World groping for conversation as he used to do when they were kids. He still had the same problem any time her big sister was around. It made her

suspect that his call had more to do with Kelly than with her. She waited, determined to make him work for it.

"Your beautiful big sister was there. She was by herself."

Mandy relished being correct and grinned at the thought.

"I guess you were there by yourself too, not counting a dozen Secret Service agents. I don't suppose your lovely wife was with you."

If Cameron noticed the sarcasm in Mandy's use of the word "lovely" in reference to his very unlovely Yankee wife, he didn't mention it.

"You know that Mallory hates to go back. She despised everyone in Mississippi. Couldn't wait to get out of there."

"Yeah, I know. It was obvious."

The president changed the subject.

"So, you're happy practicing law in Jackson?"

"Yeah. And, somebody had to take Mallory's place as the token female partner in the law firm. I guess I should have thanked you for that opportunity. After all, Mallory surely wouldn't have opened the door to female partnerships at the firm if you hadn't been governor."

Cameron again tried to divert the talk away from his wife.

"Kelly seems to be well settled in Dallas. She told me all about that *pro bono* organization she founded, and runs. What's it called? Volunteer Housing Lawyers? She's excited about what they're doing for low-income homeowners there."

Here it comes, Mandy thought, but didn't respond aloud.

"And, she told me she had finished her novel."

Again, silence from Mandy.

"She's a great writer. Great book. Have you read it?"

"No. You know I don't read books unless I have to."

Everyone knew that Mandy's eyesight had been bad since her premature birth forty-two years earlier. Coke-bottle-thick eyeglasses were a trademark for her, along with her thick brown hair worn straight and long.

Cameron cleared his throat again.

"Well, I was wondering if maybe Kelly would let you read the manuscript before she sends it to a publisher. After all, you're her sister and you've always been very close."

"You've been more intimate with her than anyone has."

Cameron glossed over her comment.

"I'll bet she'd be happy for you to read it. Aren't you at least a little bit curious? You're a character in it too."

Mandy was becoming exasperated.

"Let's get to the point," she said. "Lindsey Brewster told me last Christmas that y'all had read Kelly's book and didn't want it published. I'd certainly like to know how Brewster got a hold of the draft, and I bet the only way that could have happened was for someone to hack into her computer."

"Mandy..."

"Cam, let me finish. Kelly has been working on that book for ten years and she's not trying to hurt you. She never was. If she had wanted to hurt you, she could have sold out during the election. And, by the way, she's not the only person in this family who had that opportunity. Of course, you wouldn't recognize loyalty if you stumbled over it in the dictionary.

"If you still don't want her book published, you need to work up the gumption to call her and tell her that yourself. Seems to me she always does whatever you want. If you're calling to ask me to read the draft and then advise her not to publish it, you're barking up the wrong tree."

"Whew! Please listen, Mandy. Everything is different between Kelly and me right now. I was just thinking that maybe you could get her to back off it for a little while. Sure, she's been working on that book for nearly ten years, so what difference could a few more years make?"

There was silence for a moment.

"In the meantime, you might enjoy doing something like being our ambassador to the Bahamas. You could invite Kelly to spend time with you down there. She loves the beach, and y'all could have a great time. Then we could help her get the book published later on, after I'm out of office. The book makes me look bad, and I don't need that in the next two years. I simply can't come right out and ask her not to publish it. That book means too much to her."

"But you want me to ask her not to publish it?"

"No.... No, I'm not asking you to do that. Forget we talked about the book. I just called to keep in touch. Yeah. You can tell Kelly that. Tell her I just called to keep in touch."

"I'll tell her you said to say that. Anything else?"

Mandy heard Cameron catch his breath.

"Uh, Mandy, uh, I, uh, I didn't call to cause any trouble. I just wanted to stay in touch."

"Well, then, thanks for calling."

The president shifted smoothly to his campaign voice.

"It's always good to talk to you. Good-bye."

Mandy echoed her own version of a campaign voice.

"Good-bye,"

She looked at the clock. It was already 6:10 a.m. — not too early to call her big sister in Dallas.

Chapter 1

July 30, 1994 ~ Saturday, early evening

Kelly hit the “print” command on her computer. Seconds later, she picked up the fresh pages and began pacing through the house, reading and re-reading the words she had written and edited over the past twelve hours. Satisfied that she had covered everything she intended to tell about the reunion, Kelly put down the draft and picked up her favorite ink pen.

The full-time lawyer/part-time aspiring novelist had been meaning to write a letter to her sister every day since Mandy had called on Monday to tell her about the call from Cameron.

“I finally finished my novel today,” she said aloud, as if to counter her self-condemning thoughts about procrastination.

Kelly’s younger sister had not ever, in the ten painful years of its production, shown any interest in reading a single paragraph of the novel. Kelly decided it was time to change that. The book’s final chapter would surely do it.

Mandy wanted to know all the details about what Kelly and Cameron had done at the reunion, so Kelly could now kill two birds with one stone. She went to her desk and chose a piece of her best stationery, not usually wasted on Mandy.

Kelly sighed and settled into the big old wingback chair in her study. Twilight sounds of children playing kick-the-can blended with the fading *kasik-kasik* calling noises of a thousand locusts. Kelly languidly closed her eyes and allowed her mind to wander back to summer evenings in Vicksburg.

It was after midnight when she awoke, still sitting in the same position in her normally comfortable wingback chair. Her neck was stiff, her back was aching, and she was ravenously hungry. The letter to Mandy would have to wait until the next morning, after church.

July 31, 1994

Dear Mandy,

As I told Cameron at the reunion, and then confirmed to you on the phone the other day, I had finished my novel. At least it was finished as far as I could go at the time. I had ended the story early on Election Day, leaving a question about whether or not Cameron became president. I thought it would make the book seem more like fiction ~ which it is, of course.

Then I found out two days ago that Cameron called Christi the morning after the reunion. He wanted her to discourage me from publishing the book. Of course, she would never do such a thing, and she made that clear to him. I'm concerned that he turned right around and called you too.

It's sad to remember that Cameron encouraged my writing (both the stories and the songs ~ you know how he helped me get a break in Nashville), and he didn't ask me not to publish the novel when I told him it was finished. Unfortunately, if he is saying one thing to my face and then sneaking around behind my back to sabotage me, there is more to all this than I had realized.

I'm still going to call the novel a fictional story, and I'll still change all the names in the final version, but there is simply no way to disguise the autobiographical nature of it. After all, Cameron was my relatively obscure boyfriend from the time we were kids, and he is now the president. My attempt to disguise the truth when I started writing this ten years ago was well intentioned, but now it seems downright silly and pointless. I also see that my earlier decision to end the story before the vote count was a chicken-hearted cop-out.

It's clear to me today that the actual reunion scene will make a much better (and certainly a more dramatic) ending to the story than simply letting it fizzle into an uncertainty on Election Day. Ergo, I decided to add a final chapter based on what actually happened last Saturday night. Ironically, I could never have imagined such an extraordinary performance by a sitting president of the United States ~ at his high school reunion, no less! It's almost unbelievable ~ certainly, a classic case of "truth is stranger than fiction!"

I realize that you haven't read any of the draft of the book, but you already know the whole, true story better than anyone else. After all, you were there when Cameron and I met on the golf course ~ wow! ~ 35 years ago this summer. The only part that you don't know is what happened at the reunion last week, so I'm answering your questions about it by sending this new ending. I wrote it yesterday (leaving out a few details!) and "slept on it"(sorta slept, cramped in a chair) last night. I'll appreciate your comments, editorial questions, and a heads-up on any typos.

Please don't share this with anyone ~ I haven't changed the names to fictional ones yet, and I haven't applied for the copyright!

Thanks!

Love, Kelly

FIRST DRAFT of Chapter 44 ("the reunion scene")
July 23, 1994

For weeks before the thirtieth high school reunion, Kelly debated about making the trip to Vicksburg. She figured that Cameron would be there, of course, barring a war in the Middle East or some other international crisis. She didn't want him to think she would go just to see him, as many others in the class would do, but she also didn't want him to think she would stay home just to avoid him.

Finally, she decided that having this internal debate was still allowing him to control her life and she had vowed to stop that. In her heart, she wanted to go, and so she did. Driving her classic convertible across the Mississippi River Bridge, Kelly was greeted with a huge banner proclaiming "Welcome to Vicksburg, Hometown of President Cameron Coulter."

Kelly had made reservations at a small inn because the splendidly restored Vicksburg Hotel would be too crowded to suit her. Cameron, the Secret Service, and everyone else who could afford it would be staying there. Kelly knew she had made the correct decision when she drove past the hotel and saw hundreds of locals, as well as tourists, swarming around.

A moment later, Kelly heard the distant sound of sirens, followed by the thunderous roar of every police motorcycle in Mississippi. She turned down a side street and parked her car. Chastising herself for her interest in the spectacle, she walked to the corner and watched as the presidential motorcade passed by - long black limousine after long black limousine - followed by the black Suburban "war wagon" that reminded her of the ever-present danger to Cameron, even in Vicksburg.

There would be ample security for the reunion; everyone had to have security clearance before receiving tickets. There were letters, forms, and much ballyhoo about souvenir mugs and tee shirts that would be available. Vicksburg, the tourist city, was well prepared for the arrival of its most famous son.

Kelly spent less time than she had planned in dressing for the evening, barely glancing in the mirror before leaving her room. She knew she looked good in her simple white silk blouse and ankle-length black skirt slit to the thigh.

Walking two blocks to the hotel in the early evening heat made her wish for a moment that she had worn her long blond hair up. Then, she remembered her mother's favorite saying, "Beauty must suffer." She chuckled at the breadth of adages, old wives' tales and Italian superstitions she had unconsciously picked up from her mother.

"At least I inherited her great Italian skin," she mused. At forty-six, Kelly was as untouched by crow's feet as her mother had been well into her sixties. It helped that Kelly always wore sunglasses to protect her pale green eyes from squinting.

Her heart skipped a beat as she approached the Vicksburg Hotel and saw the big black Suburban "war wagon" up close. The side door opened and a clean-shaven, crew-cut-type stepped onto the sidewalk. He looked at Kelly as if he intended to say something. Kelly paused, smiled, nodded, and glanced beyond him at the amazing amount of electronic equipment and gadgetry in the vehicle. Then she continued her walk past the silent man standing beside the open door.

She thought about President Kennedy and, as always, said a quick prayer for Cameron's safety. She tried never to think about all the unknowns that could threaten him. Then she remembered Cameron's threat to her. His callous words about their life together cut into her again.

"If you cooperate with the media, we will destroy you!"

Kelly entered the hotel's foyer carrying some anger.

Apparently, everyone else had arrived early to go through the security clearance. Also apparent from the sign-in sheet was that everyone else had brought the one allowed guest.

"We thought you'd changed your mind about coming, Kelly. Here's your name tag, not that you'll need it. You look exactly the same as ever."

"You, too," Kelly lied. She smiled at the graying brunette hostess for the evening. The unrecognizable woman must have gained a hundred pounds since graduation.

As Kelly passed through the portable metal-detector security clearance, she turned to one of the dozen uniformed guards. "I left my thirty-eight in my hotel room, in deference to Cameron, so, I'll need an escort when I leave. With whom should I arrange that?"

"I'll take care of it, ma'am."

Kelly craned her neck to speak to the unusually tall man.

"Thank you. You'll be easy to find."

Kelly entered the ballroom alone and felt hundreds of eyes staring. Everyone was already seated at big round tables and, because it was an hour after the festivities should have started, they were watching the door for Cameron's entrance.

Only a few couples were dancing at the far end of the room and Kelly was grateful that the music was not too loud. She strode purposefully through the room, hoping to chance upon a good place to sit. Someone grabbed her hand as she walked by and squealed, "Kelly!"

The high-pitched voice belonged to a tiny girl from her World History class. Kelly could not recall speaking with her in school, but this person acted as if they were old friends.

"What's the latest with Cameron?"

As usual, Kelly wondered how much everyone knew.

"The latest with Cameron is that Cameron will be late."

People around the table laughed at her response, probably figuring that Kelly had detained him. She changed the subject by asking about grandchildren, and smiled politely for the interminable stories that followed.

A wave of silence washed over the room and, without a glance toward the entrance, Kelly knew that Cameron had arrived. She imagined him tall and handsome, his light blue eyes taking in the whole ballroom with its beautifully restored white walls, mirrored columns and brilliant chandeliers.

Kelly sensed that he was searching for her in the crowd of four hundred people, that his eyes were drawn to her, that he recognized her from the back, that he was focusing on her long blond hair, that he was walking past the first tables and coming directly to the table where she was, closer and closer until she could almost feel the heat from his body.

The squeally woman rose to her feet with all at the table.

"Mr. President! Mr. President!"

"Excuse me," Kelly said to no one in particular. She stood without looking back and walked away from the group, avoiding the lights of the hired video camera that had come on when Cameron arrived.

It was easy to find empty seats after that because half of her classmates were on their feet, trying to talk to Cameron, to introduce him to spouse or guest, and to have their pictures taken with him. Within a few minutes, some woman asked Cameron to dance, and the parquet dance floor filled.

Everyone was warming up and the music was good. Kelly wanted to dance, too, but thought she should avoid the area. Then she remembered her vow not to let Cameron run her life and she looked around for a partner.

She saw Dan Hodges at a table with a pretty brunette who was younger than the class. The tall, now gray-haired Dan had always been a good dancer and Kelly watched to see if he would head for the floor, but he didn't. After a while, Kelly walked over to greet him and he introduced her to his wife. Rachael was very sweet and Kelly found herself drawn into conversation with her. Dan offered to get them drinks. When he left, Kelly asked Rachael if she and Dan liked to dance.

"Dan loves to, but I don't dance at all."

"Would you mind if I asked him to dance with me?"

"Of course not! Dan will have much more fun dancing."

Kelly couldn't believe her good fortune. Before long, she was having a great time dancing with Dan and several others. She felt safe from Cameron on the dance floor, but, later, after the class picture was taken, Cameron started steering his partner-of-the-moment toward Kelly. He would strike up a conversation with her partner so that she would have to look in another direction to avoid him. She thought at first that she might be imagining it, but it continued for hours.

Near midnight, dancing a slow one with Dan, her left hand on his shoulder, Kelly felt Cameron approaching again. He started talking to Dan, but Kelly didn't look at him. Then Cameron reached over and squeezed her hand.

Kelly withdrew her fingers gently from Cameron's grasp and moved her hand out of his reach. He didn't change the tone of his conversation, and the dance ended a minute later.

As they walked off the dance floor, Dan offered Kelly a drink. She asked for plain water again and said she'd meet him at the table where Rachael was waiting. Dan disappeared in one direction and Kelly tried to make her way in the other.

She was blocked by a close throng of classmates wanting time with Cameron, who had limited himself to a few minutes per person all night. Kelly wondered if he were connected to a silent alarm that told him when to move on, but now she was frustrated that she could not move through the crowd. Again, she sensed that Cameron was behind her. She felt his hand gently grasp her forearm. Still, she didn't turn around.

Then, in a voice so sweet and solicitous that no one else would have recognized it as patronizing or condescending, Cameron whispered, "How are you?"

He might as well have repeated, "We will destroy you!"

The hurt and anger that Kelly had worked so hard to overcome surged upward from a depth she had never reached or recognized. She whirled around to face Cameron directly for the first time in two-and-a-half years.

"You are such an ... [okay, Mandy, I admit I referred to him as a body part I shouldn't have mentioned in public]," she spit the words at him, "I can't believe you'd even bother to ask!"

At the offending word, the nearby crowd gasped and, simultaneously, a Secret Service agent reached toward Kelly.

"It's okay," Cameron said, blocking the man with his arm.

Cameron reached for Kelly's hand and pleaded with her.

"You've got to understand what I was going through. You have to understand what I was feeling at the time."

Neither Kelly nor Cameron appeared to notice the crowd that had become deathly quiet and was inching toward them.

"I'm sick of understanding what Cammie-boy is going through, what Cammie-boy is feeling! I've got a life and I've got feelings too, and mine are just as important as yours!"

Cameron nodded in agreement. As the crowd pressed closer, he took Kelly's arm. "We've got to talk," he said gently.

"I have nothing to say to you. After thirty years together, you wouldn't return my call. You threatened to destroy me!"

"Please, Kelly, talk to me now. You owe me that."

"I owe you nothing, Cameron! You have no idea what I went through for you!"

"Tell me. Please, tell me everything."

A blond female version of a Secret-Service type forced her way through the crowd and touched Cameron's arm.

The timekeeper said, "There are people who want to talk to you. Several of the women would like to dance."

Not taking his eyes from Kelly, he waved her away.

"Tell them I'm tired of dancing."

"But," she tried to persist.

"I'm tired of dancing," Cameron repeated firmly.

No longer oblivious to the fact that he was making a scene, Cameron once more insisted that Kelly talk to him. This time, he turned her as if they were dancing, and Secret Service agents motioned the crowd back.

Cameron escorted Kelly toward a couple of side-by-side chairs in front of a mirrored column. The austere men, with wires in their ears, took their places a few feet away from Cameron, standing straight and tall with their arms crossed over their chests. No one dared approach.

Cameron and Kelly stood in front of the chairs, staring deeply into each other's eyes, saying nothing. Finally, Kelly sat down and so did Cameron, still searching her face.

"Tell me everything," he said, looking softly into her eyes.

Kelly averted her gaze, not sure if she could be this close to Cameron and keep her wits about her. She noticed that hundreds of people in the ballroom had returned to their tables and now sat with their chairs facing Cameron as if they were waiting for an after-dinner speech to begin.

"You wouldn't even call me," Kelly said quietly.

"Everyone was afraid you would tape the conversation."

"Of course, as Sindy Towers did," Kelly responded.

"I told them you were no Sindy Towers."

"I guess you didn't convince them. And then there's the Sindy Towers affair itself, Cameron. That hurt me more than you know, even though I have to admit it sounded like a 12-year-long, one-night stand."

"It's all lies. How could you believe her?"

"Her story sounded real enough to me. She was pretty specific. She even said that you never used protection."

"Everyone knows that about me. She could have heard about that anywhere."

"That's great. 'Everyone knows.' A fine example that is! Details aside, I didn't have any trouble believing her."

Cameron tightened his jaw. "She was nothing."

Kelly stared at him and didn't say anything.

"Really, she was nothing."

"She sounded like something to me, but, I don't want to hear any more of your lies about it and there is no point in listening to your convoluted version of the truth."

"Her story simply isn't true. Kelly, don't you see? If someone prints a story and one word of it isn't true, then the story isn't true. I can just say that it isn't true, and that's that."

Kelly shook her head.

"You've always tried to get away with that kind of lie, Cameron, but it's going to come back to haunt you some day."

"At least they didn't print our story. Those tabloid people are such sleaze."

Kelly recognized his life-long patterns of changing the subject and finding someone else to blame. She decided not to confront those issues again.

"I never thought I'd defend a tabloid, but you're wrong. The man who talked to me was an incredible reporter who had done his homework. He had our story nailed. The whole story. It was remarkable. He knew things I had forgotten."

Cameron looked like he had just been kicked in the gut.

"Still, those tabloid people can't be trusted."

Kelly shook her head again.

"You're the one who threatened to destroy me. After that, was I supposed to trust you? The tabloid reporter had more finesse, and certainly more integrity, than anyone who was working for you. If you had called me back, I would have suggested that you hire the guy."

"Why didn't he print our story? What did you do?"

"I can't tell you why he didn't print it. I can tell you that I turned down a half million dollars for your head on a platter."

Kelly's voice quivered. "Too bad you don't know what the words loyalty and integrity mean. You wouldn't return my phone call because some back-room wimps convinced you I would record it. Cameron, you don't even know who I am."

The look that Kelly gave him pierced Cameron to his soul. Tears welled up in his eyes and spilled down his cheeks. He sat there unashamed and cried openly.

"I'm sorry, Kelly. I am so sorry."

He said nothing else until the tears stopped. Kelly sat still and watched him, wondering about this public performance, wondering about the tears they had cried in private.

Were his tears real? Was anything about him real anymore? Could anything he said or did be trusted?

He still hadn't addressed the issue of his threat to destroy her, or was that included in the apology?

"If you're sorry, Cameron, then, of course, I forgive you, but I'm sure that's of little concern to you now. You're the president of the United States. You're the most powerful man in the world. You have everything you ever wanted."

"Oh, Kelly. If you only knew."

"I do know, Cameron. Surely, you remember the night not-so-many years ago when I told you it wouldn't be enough. If it comes from outside you, it can never be enough."

He smiled in remembrance. "You were always so wise."

"Right. I was so wise that I was at your beck and call for thirty-three years, until you decided I might get in the way of what you really wanted. Well, I went to Washington and I watched you being inaugurated and then I closed the book."

"You came to my inauguration?"

Kelly nodded.

"I didn't see you there."

Kelly thought about his earlier inaugurations as governor and almost mentioned some of those special nights. Instead, she said simply, "I didn't intend for you to see me."

"Then, why did you go?"

"I cared about you so much that I wanted to see you get what you always wanted. I was happy for you, even though I wasn't a part of it. I was really happy for you."

Kelly thought about confessing that she had never voted for him in any election because she valued her role as a citizen more than she seemed to value her own self respect. She could throw away her body, but not her vote. It was too tacky to say, so she simply repeated, "I was happy for you."

Once again, Cameron's eyes filled with tears.

"Kelly, Kelly, my Kelly," he whispered. "I had no idea."

"You never did, Cameron. It's sad, but you never did."

They sat in silence for several minutes. Glancing away, Kelly noticed the crowd. Other than a few couples on the dance floor, no one was moving. The room was eerily quiet and even the music seemed subdued.

Kelly felt compelled to change the subject.

"I finished my novel."

"Is it still autobiographical?"

"All first novels are autobiographical. I'm writing a trilogy, covering the same stories from different characters' perspectives. Some of the plots will overlap and some will be new. It will all be somewhat autobiographical, though. I certainly had more than enough material for this first one."

"Am I still in it?"

She nodded.

"Am I recognizable?"

She nodded again.

"Do I run for president?"

Another nod.

"Do I win?"

"How could I make you lose? Actually, the story ends before the votes are counted."

"So, now I guess you'll publish it..."

Cameron sighed, and tightened his jaw in his old habit.

"... Just put the hook in and rip my guts out."

Kelly looked into his eyes a long time before answering.

"No. I know what that feels like. I wouldn't do it to you."

For the third time that hour, Kelly saw tears forming in his eyes. This time, she felt them in her own as well. They sat and cried quietly, not touching, with hundreds of people watching and his security men standing five feet away.

Kelly wiped her own tears carefully with her fingertips so that her mascara wouldn't run. She was tempted to reach out to Cameron and wipe his tears too.

After several long seconds, she questioned, "I suppose now you'll ask me not to publish it?"

Cameron shook his head.

"No, I could never ask that."

"The book won't hurt you, Cameron. It's fiction. When someone asks you about it, you can say you don't have time to read that kind of fluff and fantasy."

"I could never say that. It's a true story, isn't it?"

"Not by your definition of true! It's as psychologically true as I could make it. A factually true story would sell more books, but, that's not why I wrote it. As I said years ago, the writing was my therapy. The facts are incidental. God knows, it would be too much to reconstruct the past 35 years. Too many dates. Too many people. Too many people to hurt."

"You're an extraordinary woman, Kelly. I've been a fool."

Kelly laughed. "I'm not going to argue with that."

Cameron took her hand.

"Come to Washington. Live on the Hill. Be near me again. It will be different, I promise."

Kelly patted his hand firmly.

"No, Cameron. The answer is, now and forever, no. I'm not going to live like that. Not anymore. Not for you. Not for anyone. It isn't right, and I deserve better. I've changed, Cameron, and you don't even know who I am. I'm not sure you know who you are."

Kelly stood up slowly, and Cameron rose with her.

"Say you'll think about it," he pleaded, reaching for her other hand.

"It's too late, Cameron. It's too late."

She squeezed his hands, then let them go, and whispered, "God be with you."

* * *

There it is, Mandy ~ most of what happened at the reunion. I guess a stranger would see this odd story as hokey and unbelievable (especially the public tears), but that's what happened. Ask anyone. The ballroom drama was played in public and Cameron did nothing to hide it. ~ Let me know when you hear any more from Cam. I'd like to have some advance notice if he's still planning to destroy me! Be sure to hit the "record" button on your answering machine when he calls. I know, I know, you always do. ~ Thanks again! Love, Kelly

Chapter 2
August 1, 1994 ~ Monday, Late Morning

After years of futilely trying to forget what had happened to her on that date, Kelly had finally decided to set aside August 1st as the day to feel sorry for herself. The weather always cooperated by being miserably hot, as it had been on that other August 1st such a long time ago back in Vicksburg.

It was 30 years ago today, and Kelly was prepared. She had looked in the paper, and found something worse than her own misery to justify some tears. In the Sudan, Arab Muslims were viciously attacking black Christians, as they had been doing there for over ten years. The article said that since the early 1980's, untold thousands of people had been slaughtered or displaced from their homes by those vicious fanatics.

No one whom Kelly knew seemed to care at all about what the Muslims were doing to the Christians in Africa. That lack of concern was a requirement for her August 1st misery commemoration, because no one cared what had happened to Kelly either. Of course, she had never told anyone, except Cameron, about what happened to her. He had cried with her when she told him, but he never mentioned it again. He could probably work up more tears for the Sudanese than for her. Cameron had turned out to be an extreme disappointment.

There were worse ways to be raped, of course, Kelly told herself, as she had done so many times before. It could have been a stranger who could have stabbed her with a knife, or even killed her. It could have damaged her body so that she would not have been able to bear her three wonderful daughters. It could have even caused a pregnancy. It had done none of those things, and still it had ruined her life.

"I was a virgin, Cameron! I was a virgin until three months after the prom. That lying dirty so-called friend of yours raped me!"

Her secret hurt had finally burst out to Cameron on another hot August morning in Mississippi, before they heard the news that Elvis had just died in Memphis. Kelly imagined that Cameron had probably shed more tears for Elvis than for her that day. That speculation added fuel to her pity pyre.

"I was waiting for you, Cameron, but Willie Everett raped me and ruined my whole life!"

The thought was enough to start her annual tear flow.

"It doesn't matter now, Kelly. Honest, it doesn't matter."

Cameron's stupid, callous response had made her feel worse, both then and now. She wondered if he had any idea what rape could do to a woman. How could he know? He had no experience with rape. Kelly lay face down across her bed and sobbed uncontrollably.

"It does matter!"

Kelly cried herself to sleep, and was awakened an hour later by the harsh ringing of the bedside phone. She let the answering machine respond.

It was an old classmate, now living in Houston, who had missed the reunion.

"Kelly, you've gotta call me back. Ever since the reunion, everybody's been talking about what happened between you and Cameron. I can't stand it. Please call me back!"

Kelly rolled over, sighed, and stared at the ceiling. There must have been a breath of air stirring because the reflected daylight above her was flickering with shadows from the tree outside her window. It wasn't even noon yet, and Kelly didn't feel like crying any more.

It's been thirty years, she thought. Maybe it's time to reduce this Despondency Day to just a Melancholy Morning. She liked the idea and the alliteration. Suddenly, it seemed silly to be wallowing in misery when it was time for an early lunch.

Her best friends were out of town, and she didn't feel like calling anyone from the office to join her on a "vacation day" to talk about business concerns. Kelly dressed casually and walked down the street alone to her favorite sandwich shop. It was hot walking on the scorched concrete sidewalk, but it was easier than finding a parking place in the crowded neighborhood center at any time of the day.

For no particular reason that she could figure, Kelly decided somewhere along her short walk to lunch that the best way to change her day (and her life!) for the better was to start by changing something. Any little something.

Who knew? It might turn out to be the psychological equivalent of what had happened when she bought a new lamp. An old one had to move out.

The new lamp had looked better on a different table, and that table had to move over. With a different table, the angle of the chair had to change, which necessitated a readjustment of the rug. Such little changes led first to a completely new look in that room, and then with one small change at a time, eventually the whole house was transformed into the perfect place for Kelly to live, write, and entertain friends.

She knew that it was time for any little something to change in her whole life. It was time for another “new lamp” to get things moving. She had to take the first baby step, and so, instead of retreating to her usual booth in the back, Kelly chose a small table in the front window of the sandwich shop. Her regular waiter looked at her strangely.

“Meeting someone?”

“One never knows. I’d like to look at a menu today.”

“Wow! That’s different.”

The waiter handed Kelly the short list of sandwiches, soups, and salads.

“What’s this all about?”

“Again, one never knows.”

* * *

The line inside the front door of the sandwich shop was tightening. No one wanted to wait outside in the heat. A very tall man and a blond woman who could have been Kelly’s older sister squeezed into the last bit of standing room in the small vestibule. Without giving it a conscious thought, Kelly waved to the incoming strangers and motioned for them to join her. With a grateful nod, they headed to her table.

They were an attractive couple, in their late fifties or early sixties, and had the look of Texas horse people – deep tans, a slightly western cut to their clothes, and the trademark National Cutting Horse Association belt buckles. Kelly had seen plenty of the unmistakable NCHA logos in Texas.

"I'm Landon Fisher," the man said as he smiled and extended his hand to Kelly. "This is my wife Joan. Thanks for inviting us over. You must be European."

Kelly stood, shook their hands, and scooted her chair around to make more room at the small table.

"I'm Kelly McCain, and I'm happy to have some company today. Please, have a seat."

Even seated, the man seemed very tall to Kelly. Possibly six-and-a-half feet. His slim wife towered over Kelly as well.

"Why did you think I was European?"

"Europeans are always quick to share their tables at lunch in a crowded cafe," Landon answered. "But your accent is southern, maybe Mississippi, so I guess I was wrong, but not by much. I'll bet you have a Mediterranean parent."

Kelly looked at the stranger with a wry smile. His wife interjected. "Landon is a retired Texas Ranger. He can't help himself. He's always analyzing people and picking up clues about them. Please don't be offended."

"I'm not offended. Just surprised."

Turning to Landon, she asked, "Why Mediterranean?"

"Your olive skin. Definitely Mediterranean. Cheekbones, Italian. Thin wrists, Italian again. And naturally shadowed eyes, Italian or Spanish. Your eye color ... hmmm... I have never seen green eyes that pale. What do you think, Joan? Have you ever seen eyes like that?"

Joan shook her head, and smiled at Kelly. "You're certainly getting the full treatment here from a couple of impertinent strangers, but you do have very unusual eyes. Quite lovely."

"Thanks," Kelly murmured, now wondering about these seemingly nice people she had invited to her table.

"I'm going with Italian," Landon said. "The surname McCain is not Italian, of course, but I'm surmising from your demeanor that you are a professional woman who uses her maiden name, so your father is the WASP, and it must be your mother who is Italian. Northern, of course, to have that blond hair. How am I doing?"

Kelly couldn't help but chuckle. "Glad I'm not a fugitive. You would've nailed me. My mother is the northern Italian."

The waiter arrived as Landon beamed, and Joan rolled her eyes in feigned exasperation at her nosy husband.

“Order something different and special today,” Landon insisted. “We’re buying your lunch.”

Kelly had already planned to order something different and special. Her unexpected treat was that these new friends were paying for it. *Yes, she decided, it was a good idea to do something different today.* By the time they were ordering dessert, Kelly was open to the idea of meeting a guy who was a good friend of theirs on the cutting horse circuit. Kelly had always avoided blind dates, but this was a new day for her.

The guy was Cleave Cummins, and though his name sounded vaguely familiar, Kelly couldn’t place it at first. Then Landon proudly announced that his riding buddy was a very successful architect, and Kelly immediately remembered seeing his photos in the paper along with some of his more famous Dallas projects. Some of the worst modern architecture in Dallas (and there was plenty of it) had emerged from the drawing board of Cleave Cummins.

Kelly was having second thoughts, realizing that she already disliked the man simply for designing those horrid, tall, glass boxes downtown. Cleave Cummins was equally responsible for most of the low-lying, tasteless, glass complexes that sprawled across the north Texas plains throughout the expanding suburbs, threatening to desecrate the rolling countryside all the way to Oklahoma.

Even as Kelly gave her phone number to Joan, her every instinct told her that this was not a good idea, but over the following three days, she forgot all about it.

Cleave called on Thursday afternoon. Lunch Friday? He sounded surprisingly warm over the phone, and Kelly had no plans for the next day, so she accepted his invitation. He arrived at her office five minutes early, and Kelly let him wait in the reception area for four of those five minutes. She didn’t want to appear too eager to meet him, but she need not have worried about that. She was disappointed at first sight.

Cleave Cummins was much older than Kelly had thought. He was bald, and he had a bit of a paunch over his NCHA belt

buckle. He was wearing a western cut suit, and, though it was clearly expensive, it was still a western cut suit.

Kelly hated clichés and caricatures, yet here was the famous architect standing before her, holding his summer Stetson hat in his right hand.

The man stared blankly at her. No smile. Nothing.

Kelly extended her right hand, as her daddy had taught her to do when she was a child.

"I'm Kelly McCain and I'm pleased to meet you, Cleave. I'm familiar with your work."

He shifted his hat to his left hand.

"Pleased to meet you too,..." he said, shaking her hand.

Please, God, don't let him add "Ma'am" to this cliché, Kelly prayed silently, but of course he did.

"... Ma'am."

Chapter 3

August 6, 1994 ~ Saturday, 8:00 a.m.

The gently rolling pasturelands of East Texas usually stay lush and verdant in the summer, while 750 miles across the state, the brown grasses of the West Texas plains are burned and withering. *No wonder the land is twice as expensive here*, Kelly thought, as the big pick-up truck consumed the miles along I-20, heading in the direction of Tyler and Shreveport.

She glanced again at the driver, a middle-aged lawyer named Rick Ruston, whom she had known professionally for the past several years. Rick was a cutting-horse friend of Cleave Cummins and he had agreed to give her a ride to the farm where he kept his own horse in Cleave's barn.

Kelly wondered if Rick had been surprised by Cleave's call after lunch on Friday. She was curious about what Cleave might have told him about her and about her easy acceptance of his invitation. If Rick knew that Kelly had met Cleave just the day before, perhaps he would think she was a bit trashy for planning to spend the weekend at the farm. Cleave had told Kelly that there was plenty of room for guests, but she couldn't help wondering what he had told Rick.

As they drove along listening to a Vince Gill cassette tape, Kelly tried to distract herself. She liked country-western music just fine, and she liked Vince Gill in particular, but his high-pitched voice could get on her nerves after a while, and a while had passed since Rick had picked her up at her home near Preston Center in Dallas.

Kelly silently reviewed yesterday's lunch date with Cleave Cummins. He had surprised her first by heading to an up-scale Italian restaurant, assuming she enjoyed, or not being concerned with whether or not she even liked, Mediterranean cuisine. Of course, their matchmakers Landon and Joan had probably told him that Kelly was Italian, so maybe Cleave was being considerate after all.

His western cut suit had seemed even more conspicuous to Kelly in the midst of the Armani-clad dealmakers who frequented the restaurant than it had on her first impression of him at her office. Obviously, Cleave had not been concerned.

Cleave had asked a few typical first-date questions, but then they had talked very little throughout the meal. Kelly thought that she should have been uncomfortable with all the silence, but she saw in retrospect that she was not. The food had been good and they had ordered tiramisu for dessert.

Kelly had allowed Cleave to prolong the meal with extra cups of decaf coffee, along with conversation about cutting horses, which he seemed to enjoy more than architecture. When she finally returned to the office, Kelly was amazed to realize that she had been gone for over two hours.

More amazing to Kelly was the fact that she had readily accepted Cleave's invitation to spend the weekend at the farm to ride and get to know him better. Walking from his car back to her office, Cleave had given his longest speech of their date.

"I like smart women. Attractive women. Women who do good for other people. You're all that, and more. Come to the farm this weekend so we can get to know each other better."

Right then, Kelly had not been sure if she wanted to get to know the guy better, or not. She still wasn't attracted to him, didn't like his architecture, and she hadn't been on a horse in years. She had just met the man, but he did seem harmless.

When Cleave added a suggestion that a mutual friend could be their chaperone, she had reluctantly accepted, and now Rick was putting on the turn signal to exit toward the farm. Kelly took note of the county road number.

Immediately after crossing over the concrete freeway, the asphalt side road dipped and disappeared into a thick cover of overhanging trees. The temperature dropped noticeably, and Kelly sighed deeply. Pleasant Pass, Texas, might indeed be a nice place to spend a hot August weekend.

The road snaked through pastureland dotted with ponds, and over slightly higher hills, running along and over various creeks and streams. Miles of fencing and cross fencing divided one beautiful farm from the neighboring acreage.

There were several impressive entrances with brick or stone columns supporting arched wrought iron gateways with the farm name or its brand clearly and proudly displayed. Kelly could barely see the large brick homes set far back from the road, usually under a stand of trees.

Rick slowed the truck and clicked on the left turn signal. Kelly couldn't imagine where he was going to turn. There was no grand entrance in sight. Knowing the grotesque showiness of the infamous Cleave Cummins architecture in Dallas, Kelly was at a loss. She waited in silence as Rick swung onto a hard-packed dirt road.

A dilapidated old metal cattle gate that sagged from one side to the other stopped them a truck-and-horse-trailer-length beyond the asphalt county road. No sign. No entry columns. No electric entry keypad. The fences leading up to the gate on both sides of the dirt track were overgrown with native coral honeysuckle and trumpet vine.

Rick wordlessly put the truck in park, got out, and walked up to the rusty gate. Kelly looked closer and saw that it had been painted white once upon a time, and another time black.

Rick lifted the latch bar, and with a gentle screech of iron on iron, the gate swung slowly open into what must be the side road to Pleasant Pass Farm. *Pleasant Past would be a better name*, Kelly mused, looking around but finding no evidence of any name or brand.

The dirt road widened slightly after the first long curve, while the cattle fence meandered along about 20 feet away on the right. The area on the left side of the road was completely given over to trees and thick underbrush, with no fence in sight. After riding about a mile around a few more gentle curves, winding in the dappled shade under overhanging trees, Kelly asked when they would get to the farm.

"Been on the farm since we came through the cattle gate."

"Not a very impressive entry from the road," Kelly said, "but it's a beautiful drive through the trees."

"That's Cleave for you. Not very impressive until you get to know the guy. He grows on you."

Kelly had her doubts that the architect known for his cold glass and steel structures could ever grow on her.

"As far as he's concerned, building a big fancy entry just invites an itinerant thief to come steal something. Cleave doesn't need to show off, and he doesn't want to be a target. From the road, this looks like a poor dirt farm."

"Hmmm. Interesting. Smart."

“Yeah. Like I said, he grows on you.”

Kelly was totally unprepared as Rick’s truck made the last turn on the dirt road and stopped at another cattle gate. This time, there was a natural stone column inset with an electronic keypad. Rick rolled down the truck window and punched in four numbers. The pristine gate swung open in front of them.

Ahead on a gentle rise was a brown, two-story farmhouse with wrap-around porches, nestled under a stand of elms and white oaks that appeared to have been there for a hundred years. Kelly wasn’t sure at first glance if the house was an old remodeled homestead or a new one. It certainly was not what she would have expected from the cold, taciturn architect she had met at lunch the previous day.

A healthy herd of about fifty cattle grazed in a pasture on the right that stretched as far as Kelly could see before the land gently disappeared off the eastern horizon. On her left, the cross-fenced lawn sloped down to a small lake surrounded on three sides by what appeared to be an impenetrable forest. Four bay horses nibbled on the lawn’s lush green grass.

Kelly was mesmerized by the sunlight glistening on the rich coat of a mahogany bay. The horse’s black mane and tail sparkled as if they were woven through with diamonds. Two of the other horses showed the lighter red-brown shades of a standard bay, while the smallest of the group was a coppery chestnut. She wished she had brought her camera, but it was a picture she would long remember without film.

“Nice, huh?” Rick asked.

Kelly nodded.

Rick drove slowly down the dirt road as it widened again, continued toward the farmhouse, and then swung around to the right between the house and the cow pasture. Kelly noticed a large barn that matched the vertical cedar siding on the house. Behind the farmhouse, there was another, smaller version of the barn that must have been a bunkhouse.

Kelly concluded that the house must be relatively new because its scale was perfectly proportioned with all the outbuildings, including a covered shed under the trees that sheltered, side-by-side, a two-horse and a six-horse trailer. Maybe there was more to this architect than she had thought.

As Kelly was stepping down from Rick's truck, she heard the sound of a horse approaching at a canter, and she looked up to see a ruggedly handsome guy coming toward her, riding tall in the saddle. He was wearing jeans and boots, of course, and an old red plaid western shirt with the sleeves cut off. His arms were tanned and muscular above his leather riding gloves, and though his face was partially shaded by a straw Stetson hat, his grin was wide and visible.

Kelly was almost startled by her immediate attraction to the stranger on horseback, and wondered if he might be the ranch foreman, but when he greeted her with "Welcome to Pleasant Pass," she recognized his voice. In a heartbeat, Kelly realized that she had just encountered the Cleave Cummins who grows on you.

Cleave swung down from his horse in one fluid movement, and casually let the reins drop to the ground. His dark bay stallion gave the visitors a brief glance and then lowered his head to nibble on some choice vegetation.

"Glad you made it out here. Did Slick Rick put any moves on you? I'd hate to kill an old friend."

Kelly thought that Rick was anything but "slick" and she wasn't sure if he made a habit of flirting with Cleave's female friends, so she just smiled at her host and said, "I'm glad to be here. Your place is beautiful."

Cleave nodded an acknowledgment.

"Bunkhouse is open, Rick."

Cleave grabbed both of Kelly's bags with his left hand, and started toward the house with them. She followed his long strides across the dirt drive toward the expansive back porch of the farmhouse, feeling humidity in the air, smelling dust and freshly mown hay and decaying manure, watching a pair of Beagle puppies arise languidly from morning naps to greet their master, listening to the gentle farm sounds of wind in the trees and cattle stirring and then the stark, determined jangle of Cleave's spurs as he crossed the porch in three paces to open the screen door for Kelly.

She stepped into a large, tiled vestibule. On the right was a mud room full of boots, jackets, and riding gear. On the left was a big half-bath with its door open. The toilet seat was up.

Cleave followed her into the house and let the screen door double-slam behind him.

“Straight ahead through the kitchen. Left up the stairs.”

Kelly glanced at the kitchen as she passed through it. She admired the wood-clad great room with a huge stone fireplace and pairs of dark-stained French doors opening onto the front porch. More doors opened to a wrap-around side porch overlooking the lake. Kelly didn't pause, but took note.

She started up the wide stairway with its large window at the first landing, and then continued to the second floor where there was a vestibule large enough for a sitting area. It was devoid of furniture. Not even a bench. A smaller set of stairs led from there to another unseen level.

Cleave dropped both of Kelly's bags on the floor beside her and tilted his head toward the door on their left.

“My room's there. Guest room ahead. Your choice.”

Cleave turned and headed down the stairs. He stopped at the landing under the huge window.

“We'll be waiting by the barn.”

Chapter 4

August 6, 1994 ~ Saturday, 9:00 a.m.

Kelly stared at her bags on the carpeted floor of the vestibule. Then she looked left and ahead at the two doors.

“Your choice,” Cleave had said.

She didn’t even know this Cleave Cummins. Did he mean to say that she could sleep in his bedroom while he would take the guest room? He didn’t seem like the kind of guy who would give up his bedroom for guests. He had unceremoniously banished his friend to the bunkhouse.

Kelly quietly tiptoed toward the master bedroom, though there was no one in the house and she had been invited to make a choice. Feeling a bit intrusive, she opened the door.

Cleave’s bedroom was gigantic, with a stone fireplace that must have been directly over the one in the great room downstairs. Books were piled on the floor on either side of the French doors that opened onto a deep porch overlooking the lake and the forest beyond it. The view was spectacular.

The bed was queen-sized, though Kelly would have expected a king. Massive dark-stained headboard. Plain but expensive bedding. At the far end of the room was a sitting area with two large leather chairs and ottomans, and a huge, old-fashioned oak desk piled high with papers. Dozens of architectural renderings were rolled up and sticking out of an iron cauldron on the floor beside the desk.

Kelly finally noticed that on her left was a door opening into a large bathroom. There were matching closets off the vanity area. One closet was full of the western cut suits and fancy boots that she assumed must be Cleave’s trademark. The other closet held old jeans, old boots, old shirts, and dozens of old belts, some of which were tossed on the floor with empty hatboxes and plastic wrappers from new socks. High on a shelf were hatboxes of various brands.

In the middle of the bathroom, under a window on the front entry side of the house, there was a giant claw-footed tub that might have been a refurbished antique. On its right was a walk-in shower, plenty big enough for two people. There was a built-in bench, a rainforest showerhead, and several side jets.

Everything in the tiled bathroom was white and clean against the dark stained walls. The toilet seat was up. Kelly tiptoed from Cleave's bathroom, took another look at his bedroom, and walked the few steps across the vestibule.

The guest bedroom was less than half the size of the master, and was on the back corner of the house. There were double windows on the north and east. Delicate pink and white floral drapes, matching wallpaper, and a curlicue wrought-iron bed painted white were the only signs of femininity that she had seen since coming through the gate to Pleasant Pass Farm.

The guest bathroom was papered with the same flowers. There were thick, luxurious, pink towels, washcloths, soaps, creams, and perfumes reflected in the mirror above an old-fashioned vanity. It was a suite for a girly girl.

No wonder Rick stayed in the bunkhouse. No self-respecting cowboy would take off his boots in such a room, unless paying for the privilege.

Her choice.

Kelly wondered for a moment why she was dawdling over her choice. After seeing both rooms, she was quite sure that Cleave Cummins was not planning to swap spaces with his "guest" for the evening. It would be the master bedroom with Cleave in it or the delightful guest bedroom alone.

Her choice.

She resolutely grabbed her bags and set them on a trunk under the guest room window. It was a fine room. What was her problem? Looking out the window, she saw Rick and Cleave emerging from the barn. She pulled a pair of leather gloves from her suitcase and ran down the stairs.

Kelly arrived on the porch just as Rick and Cleave did.

"What are you doing with those fancy boots?" Cleave asked, looking at the embroidered eel skins that Kelly was proud to possess.

"They're the only boots I own."

"I thought you told me you could ride."

"I said that I could ride, but it's been a very long time."

"You can't wear those boots. You'll ruin 'em." Cleave walked brusquely past her into the house.

"Come here," he called from beyond the screen door.

Feeling like a scolded child, Kelly went inside.

"Sit down and take off your boots."

Kelly carefully removed them.

"Skinniest feet I ever saw."

Cleave turned to the row of boots behind him.

"Here. Try these. Got any extra socks with you?"

"Yes. Why?"

"You're going to need about three pairs to keep these boots on. Everyone else who rides here has normal feet."

"I'll go get some more socks."

Kelly picked up her eel "fancy boots" and grabbed the pair of black goat-ropers from his hand. She ran up the stairs, wondering why she felt like crying.

It did take three pairs of thick socks to hold someone else's boots on her skinny feet, and Kelly didn't like the looks of the boots either. Still, it was better than ruining hers. She headed back down the stairs to find the guys.

"Let's go saddle up," Cleave said to Rick when Kelly joined them on the back porch.

"I thought your horse was already saddled," Kelly said.

"Rode him hard. Need a fresh horse. You can ride Joe."

"Joe? What kind of name is Joe for a horse?"

"Plain. I like plain. Generally. Nothing plain about you."

Cleave turned and gave a distinctive whistle toward the lawn area where four bay horses had been grazing since before Kelly arrived. The mahogany bay came trotting toward him like an obedient dog.

"Kelly, this is Joe. Joe, this is Kelly. She says she hasn't ridden a horse in a long time, so treat her right."

Kelly could not believe that Cleave Cummins was talking to the gelding as if he were a dog, or even a human. She had never been introduced to a horse like that, but she had to acknowledge to herself that the animal had come when summoned by a whistle. She looked into Joe's eyes, and had the surreal feeling that they were somehow communicating.

The three humans headed for the barn. Joe followed.

Kelly stood outside the barn and talked to Joe, gently nuzzling his soft but whiskery nose, while Rick and Cleave

went in to get the saddles and tack. Cleave tossed a well-worn brown leather saddle over the fence rail.

"This'll fit fine, and Joe likes it."

Kelly nodded and stood still while Cleave went back into the barn. He came out carrying two saddle blankets and a bigger saddle. He was leading a dark stallion on a rope.

"This is Jet. He's mean. Stay clear."

Rick led his own horse across the driveway, away from Jet, and was tossing on the saddle blanket while Cleave was tying Jet to the fence post. Cleave handed Kelly a saddle blanket, which she stood holding. He put a blanket on Jet, who tried to toss his head defiantly, though tethered. Then Cleave put the big saddle on Jet, who shuddered and twitched his shoulders in a show of defiance. Cleave grabbed a length of leather rein and popped Jet across the rump with it.

"Easy!"

The horse gave Cleave what Kelly could have sworn was a dirty look, but he settled down.

"Don't just stand there," Cleave said to Kelly, in the same harsh tone he had just used on the unruly horse. "Saddle up."

"I don't know how to saddle a horse, I have no interest in doing it, and I seriously doubt if I could lift that saddle up over my head, even if I wanted to."

"You don't saddle, you don't ride. That's the way it is."

"Fine. I brought a book. I'll be on the porch."

Kelly stomped away from the barn. She stomped across the driveway in someone's goat-roper boots that were as wide as clown shoes. She stomped loudly up the wooden back steps. She stomped more loudly across the wooden porch, and she let the wooden screen door slam loudly behind her.

She took off the offending boots and threw them on the floor of the mudroom. Then, with her triple-socked feet, Kelly ran quietly up the carpeted stairs to the lovely floral-filled guest bedroom.

Her choice.

Indeed.

Chapter 5

August 6, 1994 ~ Saturday, 9:30 a.m.

Kelly propped herself up on top of the floral coverlet and opened her new book. After a half-dozen pages, she realized that she didn't have any idea what she had read. All she could concentrate on was the gall of that Cleave Cummins inviting her to ride and expecting her to saddle her own horse. Now she felt imprisoned in a tower overlooking the kingdom and she dreaded the return of the evil ruler.

Moments later, the clanging of metal on metal aroused her from her angry reverie. She opened her book to the first page again, and tried to read. The noise outside persisted. Finally, it stopped for a half minute, and she took a deep breath. It started again. She closed the book and headed downstairs.

She followed the sound to the back door and peeked through the screen. Joe was standing by the steps with a big leather strap between his teeth, pulling on it to ring an ancient chow bell. Kelly had not noticed the bell hanging from the porch beam the times she had walked, and then stomped, past it. She guessed it could be heard in the next county.

"What is all this noise?" she asked Joe, having decided not to speak to his owner, who was nowhere in sight anyway.

Joe didn't flinch, but kept clanging the bell.

"Stop that!"

The horse instantly dropped the strap and hung his head.

"I'm sorry, Joe. I didn't mean to yell at you."

Kelly opened the door and walked across the porch. She reached to stroke Joe's nose and he inched toward her.

"You're a good boy. Nothing is your fault."

She turned and went back into the house. As the door closed not too loudly behind her, Kelly heard the unmistakable sound of horseshoes clattering up the back steps and across the porch. She turned around to see Joe's nose pressed up against the screen.

"Joe! What in the world do you think you're doing?"

Joe didn't answer.

Cleave suddenly appeared at the porch steps.

"Joe told me that a princess doesn't saddle her horse."

Cleave picked up Joe's reins and offered them to her.

"I took care of it for you. I don't blame you if you don't want to ride with me, but please don't disappoint Joe. He seems to like you a lot. I'm not sure why."

Kelly wondered for a moment if she were standing there at the screen door or dreaming on the floral coverlet.

"I guess Rick and I will be riding out now. You and Joe can explore around the house, the barn, and the pens. He'll be gentle with you. I promise."

Cleave turned away and his spurs clanked across the backyard toward the barn. Rick came from behind the trailer shed on his horse, staying clear of Jet who was tethered to a hitching post. Cleave yanked the reins from the post, popped Jet on the rump for good measure, and joined his friend on horseback, heading down the dirt driveway at a slow trot.

Kelly ran upstairs in her triple-socked feet to retrieve her gloves, hat, and sunglasses. Then she returned to the mudroom for the earlier-discarded ropers. Crossing the porch in three long steps, she took Joe's reins and swung herself easily into the saddle. Like riding a bike, it all came back to her. She turned Joe in the direction of the other horses and gave him a gentle squeeze with both knees as she leaned forward and whispered in his ear, "Let's go, fella."

Joe seemed to understand that he was supposed to overtake the other horses and he gently picked up speed. Kelly had never been so comfortable on a horse, and gave Joe his head. He quickly caught and then galloped past the others who didn't change their pace.

Kelly hoped that Joe wasn't a jumper because the first cattle gate soon loomed ahead of them. She pulled back slightly on the reins, and Joe slowed as gently as he had started. Stopping at the gate, Kelly easily had Joe execute a neat pivot to wait for Cleave and Rick.

"Nice hat," Cleave said when he was within ten feet of Kelly. She had no idea whether that was a compliment or sarcasm, but she automatically said, "Thank you."

Rick didn't even look at her, and she wondered if he ever said anything in front of his friend. He had been reserved on the drive from Dallas, and now seemed afraid to talk at all.

Obviously, he's not a trial lawyer, Kelly thought.

"We were heading for the highway, but Joe likes softer ground," Cleave said. "Want a trail tour around the farm?"

"How far is it? I'm not used to riding, and I don't want to get saddle sore."

"Not that far."

Rick looked as if he wanted to say something, but didn't.

"You'll be okay."

Rick raised a brow, but remained silent.

Cleave turned back toward the house, and the other horses followed at a discreet distance. Each of them had been too close to Jet at least once.

"We'll go around the lake and through the woods," Rick said to Kelly as his horse sidled up close to Joe. "There's much more shade that way."

Though it was not yet ten in the morning, the sun was already doing its work. The Texas sky was cloudless and it would be scorching hot by noon. Kelly assured herself that they would be back inside by then.

Cleave leaned down and unlatched a small gate in the low fence dividing the front lawn from the acres gently sloping to the lake. He expertly backed Jet away from the opening to give the others safe passage, then closed the gate behind them and giggered Jet into a trot. The spirited horse led the others on a pathless way through the tall, thick, lushly green field grass.

Kelly imagined that Joe was enjoying the sweep of the grass against his legs as they all rode silently together.

"Be careful by the lake," Cleave said. "Snakes."

Kelly nodded, but didn't say anything.

"Did you bring a gun?" he asked.

"Not just now. It's in my suitcase."

"Carry it if you come down here alone."

It was then that Kelly noticed a shotgun protruding from Cleave's plain leather scabbard that matched his old saddle.

"All I brought is a thirty-eight," Kelly said.

"Can you hit a snake with it?"

"I can hit anything that threatens me."

Cleave tossed his head back and laughed aloud.

* * *

"Watch your head!" Cleave warned. He ducked under a branch and disappeared ahead of them into the thick woods.

When Kelly had viewed the land on the far side of the small lake from the master bedroom, she had seen nothing but mature trees and thick underbrush. This close, she could see an opening just large enough for a man on horseback to enter the forest. She gently shook the reins, and Joe responded by following Jet, staying about two lengths behind.

Kelly had no sooner ducked under the first branch than she had to swerve her head left to avoid a small protrusion from another tree. After the third obstacle, she leaned forward over the saddle horn and laid her head against Joe's neck, on the opposite side of his black mane.

"Take care of me, boy."

Kelly patted Joe's withers, and he flicked his ears in reply.

Though Kelly was wearing sunglasses, she kept her eyes closed. She was more concerned about protecting her eyes from tree branches than enjoying any view there might be. Already, she trusted Joe to keep her from harm.

Kelly had no idea how far they had traveled when Joe slowed to a stop. She cautiously sat up and looked around. She could hear Rick's horse behind her somewhere. About twenty feet in front of her, the woods ended with an opening onto a broad meadow. She patted Joe for giving her a true "heads up" about the new vista.

"Thanks, boy. You're an angel."

As they left the shade of the overhanging woods, Kelly prodded Joe with the merest hint of a gig from her borrowed boots. She lifted the reins and let Joe break into a full gallop across the meadow filled with wild yellow flowers.

Cleave was riding ahead on Jet, seemingly oblivious to the whereabouts of his companions. Kelly could hear Rick's horse keeping pace behind her, but she dared not turn around to look. Though she trusted Joe, she did not trust herself yet.

Kelly kept her eyes focused ahead as the lush meadow undulated in gentle waves, ever sloping upward. Joe moved effortlessly and smoothly across the familiar ground, enjoying

the freedom of sun and expansive terrain. Kelly guessed that they might be at about the same elevation as the farmhouse, or maybe even higher, but there was no way to see it through the forest even if she had not been afraid to turn her head.

Cleave halted Jet under a small stand of trees at the upper corner of the meadow. From there, he watched as Kelly and Rick approached at a gallop.

"That's the southwest corner."

Cleave was pointing to a shaded area behind him.

"You said you've examined plats for title companies, so I figured you'd want to know."

"I'm more curious about how far it is to the next corner."

"You know what curiosity did to the cat."

Kelly had the uneasy feeling that someone had warned her about the curious cat sometime in the past. She didn't press the issue, and Cleave didn't add any more information. Rick grinned and said nothing.

Cleave opened a small gate that appeared to have a big lock on it, but there was no actual lock. It was just a drop-over latch that anyone could have opened. Kelly didn't ask about it as Joe passed through the exit, leaving space around Jet.

"This is a county road that runs somewhat parallel to the one you came in on."

"What's along the south border?"

"More trees, a creek, and then a small farm road that intersects the two county roads."

"And on the north side?"

"Still trying to figure out how far we're going to ride?"

"It's a concern."

"There's a shortcut if you can't make it all the way."

Crossing the asphalt road, the riders lined up singly against any oncoming traffic, such as it might be in that sparsely populated area. Joe stayed a safe distance behind Jet.

"The farm goes all the way to the next intersecting county road, doesn't it? It's a trapezoid, right? Just tell me this, please, sir. Is it wider at this end or the other?"

"If you're already angling for a property settlement agreement, you should know that it just keeps getting smaller and smaller."

With that, Cleave took off at a gallop on the well-worn horse trail beside the road. Kelly had no inclination to chase after him and his mean horse. Joe was walking her along slowly enough that she felt safe in turning around to Rick.

"What's with him?"

Rick coaxed his horse up alongside her, onto the roadway.

"Too many bad divorces. He had a tough time, trying to hang onto this place."

"Rick, this is Texas, for Pete's sake! This is community property! No wife could get the farm. Not to mention that we've only had one date, and this... this... day, whatever this is, is hardly a prelude to a marriage and divorce."

Rick didn't say anything, but rode along quietly.

"What's your story, Rick? Divorced too? Angry?"

"I'm not angry. I've had three divorces myself, and I've dated a couple of nice ladies for awhile. Almost tempted to get married again."

"What happened to your marriage plans? If you don't mind telling me...."

"I don't mind. If I start to think about getting married, I find a woman I can't stand and I buy her an expensive house. It takes the marriage notion right out of my head."

Kelly laughed. "I hope you meant that to be funny."

"Sure. I meant it to be funny. I suppose."

Kelly sighed, and the two rode silently again.

Cleave was somewhere up ahead and out of sight. Kelly didn't care if they ever caught up with him. Why had he wanted to give her a tour of the farm anyway? Property Settlement Agreement.

Indeed.

* * *

Kelly and Rick rode side by side along the asphalt county road. Over the barbed-wire fence enclosing the western side of Pleasant Pass Farm, Kelly saw variations of open fields, ponds, shade trees, and patches of sunflowers, day lilies, and clover. Toward the center of the property, Kelly could see and smell recently-harvested hay, laid out in long, curving rows.

Joe noticed the approaching horse and rider before Kelly and Rick did. It was Cleave, returning to the abandoned riders at a gallop. Kelly made no pretense of being glad to see him. Rick, as usual, said nothing in the presence of his friend.

“Brought you some nice, juicy peaches.”

In spite of her consternation, Kelly was delighted with the thought of a farm-fresh peach. Cleave reached into a plastic bag that he had hung over his saddle horn, and handed Kelly the biggest peach she had ever seen. It was loosely wrapped in a paper towel.

Cleave handed a gigantic peach to Rick, and then took another one for himself. All the while, he kept Jet completely under control around the other horses.

Kelly took a bite of the peach, and savored it.

“Thank you.”

She was secretly proud of her manners in contrast to his apparent lack of them. The riders returned to a single-file line along the road, eating their peaches in silence.

When Kelly was down to the last big bite, she tossed the pit into the woods on the west side of the road, pulled gently on the reins, and stopped Joe without warning to Rick. He simply passed her on the road and paid no attention as she reached alongside Joe’s long neck and fed him the last bite of her peach. Then she and Joe trotted up closer to Cleave.

“How about another peach?”

“What makes you think I have any more?”

“Same thing that tells me you have more land. You don’t do anything half way. Now give me another peach, please.”

Cleave chuckled to himself and handed her one.

“Don’t plan on eating all of them.”

“Why not?”

“I want to save some for dessert tonight, with ice cream.”

“Then go buy another sack of them, but give me what’s left before you leave. Joe and I are hungry.”

“The princess and her steed must be fed.”

Cleave unhooked the plastic sack from the saddle horn. He held out his arm so Joe didn’t have to get too close.

“Is there anything else the princess needs?”

“Probably nothing you can provide.”

Cleave rode away, and Kelly heard a snort from Rick. She handed him a peach, and broke another one in half. She tossed the pit into the woods, and gave Joe the rest of it.

"I hope they were expensive, Joe. Eat all you want."

Kelly bit into another one, as juicy as the first.

"You sure figured out how to handle Cleave in a hurry."

"I've raised kids and Cleave still needs raising. I'm not interested in that job, but I'm determined to make the best of this weekend. At least I like Joe. And you. It's not all bad."

"Cleave will grow on you."

"So you said."

By the time Rick and Kelly were approaching the county road intersection, Cleave returned with more peaches. He had a bag hanging on each side of his saddle horn.

"How about resting in the shade for a few minutes?" Kelly suggested. "I'm hot, tired, and could use a break."

"We don't have time to dawdle."

Ignoring him, Kelly swung her leg over Joe's back and dropped to the ground. She found a grassy spot under an oak tree and sat with the original bag of peaches. She opened another peach for Joe, and bit into hers, while Cleave and Rick trotted across the road, leaving Kelly and Joe alone. She didn't even glance toward them. Moments later they came back and joined her under the tree. Kelly said nothing to either of them.

The longer she sat, the more she was afraid that she was going to be too sore to get back in the saddle. That would never do, so she forced herself to get up. Joe stood perfectly still while she took the reins and executed a smooth mount.

Joe and the other horses trotted across the road and picked up speed. Kelly hoped Joe wouldn't be like a friend's horse she had ridden many times when she was a kid. He was fine until he was heading back to the barn, at which point he would set out in a dead heat, jumping hedges, creeks, and whatever else was in his way. Kelly never was strong enough to stop the horse, so she had held on for dear life, and figured that if it didn't kill her, it would make her a better rider.

Fortunately, Joe was well-trained and well-behaved. The ride around the far side of the farm was brisk, but under control. As nice as Joe was, however, Kelly was more than

ready to sit on something that wasn't moving. The north end of the farm turned out to be wider than the south, so the large trapezoid that Kelly had envisioned did materialize. She was relieved when they finally approached the rusty entry gate she had driven through in the pickup truck with Rick earlier in the day. It seemed like forever ago.

The three horses trotted abreast once they were on the packed-dirt road on the farm property, but Kelly and Joe stayed on the outside, farthest away from Jet. As they passed through the electronic gate near the house, Cleave suggested that they work a few cattle. Kelly said she would watch.

"Where shall I sit?"

"On Joe. Under those trees."

Cleave and Rick headed into the field. They cut about twenty head of cattle from the herd and moved them beyond the barn toward a round arena that had an opening on its far back side. As they approached the wide entry into the fenced arena, the lead cow cut and ran, taking the rest of the herd with her. Kelly saw the cows run from the arena area to a line of trees far off in the distance. Cleave and Rick trotted after them, but not too fast.

Kelly watched the way the horses slowed as they approached the cows that were now standing at rest under the shade trees. The two men separated and slowly worked their way to the sides of the herd. Seemingly without effort, the horses induced the cows to start walking back toward the pen. As they approached the arena again, they picked up a little speed. Rick and Cleave closed in on the lead cow and had her headed straight into the opening. At the last second, the lead cow cut and ran again, taking the herd to the back of the field.

Patiently, Cleave and Rick retraced their paths. Kelly was anxious for them to finish because she was feeling more tired and sore by the minute. All she wanted was a shower, or maybe a hot, soaky bath. She could not believe her eyes when the lead cow cut and ran again.

Cleave hollered at Kelly from the other side of the arena.

"Can't you see we need some help here?"

Kelly thought they could use some help, but had no idea what she could do.

"What do you want from me?"

"Get over here and lend a hand!"

Kelly headed Joe through the field and joined the others as they started toward the cows. She had watched them go through this exercise three times. Perhaps all they needed was one more horse on the breaking side of the arena and that lead cow. Kelly thought she could handle that.

This time the three riders eased up on the herd in a split formation and started moving the cows toward the pen. It looked like it was going to work smoothly when that same lead cow cut and ran right in front of Kelly and Joe.

"Why didn't you stop her?"

"Why didn't you? It's your stupid cow!"

The long trek to the far end of the field started again.

Kelly couldn't believe that anyone would be so persistent about moving the dumb cows. What was the point of all this? She was feeling very sore all over, and wondered if she would be able to walk when she finally got off Joe.

As if she were reliving a recurring nightmare, Kelly rode alongside the herd as it approached the arena opening. A split second before she actually saw the lead cow cut, Kelly knew it was going to happen. She watched helplessly as the elusive herd ran back to the trees. Any hope that Cleave would give up now was dashed when he yelled at her again.

"You stop yelling at me, Cleave Cummins, as if it's my fault you can't herd your own cows! I'll just take Joe back to the barn, and you can do it without me."

"Sorry."

Kelly wondered if he had ever said that word before.

"Let's try it one more time. Please."

Kelly sighed and tried to readjust herself in the saddle to be more comfortable. There was no comfortable position to be found. The long saunter to the back of the pasture seemed interminable. Kelly and Joe took their place on the side of the herd, and Kelly imagined that Joe was watching that lead cow as much as she was.

As they approached the pen, Kelly saw that same flicker that had warned her the cow was planning to cut the last time. In desperation and exhaustion, she loosened her grip and gave

slack to the reins, grabbed the saddle horn for balance, and kicked Joe hard with both boots.

“Get her, Joe!”

Joe swerved to the left so hard that Kelly was afraid he was going to lose his balance and fall sideways to the ground, but he managed to cut ahead of the cow and stop her from running wild. She swerved to the right, and Joe stayed with her. She cut back to the left, and Joe was there. Finally, the cow gave up and trotted docilely into the arena opening. For the first time in her life, Kelly wanted to kiss a horse.

“We’ll take it from here,” Cleave called to her, but Kelly didn’t care. She and Joe were already headed to the barn. She didn’t know how to saddle a horse, but she knew she could manage to get the saddle off Joe. He was hotter and sweatier than she was.

Kelly dismounted behind the trailer shed and uncinched Joe’s saddle. Looking around, she saw a small tractor mower that would be perfect. She led Joe to the tractor, pulled hard on the saddle, and managed to make it fall astride the engine housing. Cleave would probably complain about it.

There was a long concrete pad inside a wood-fenced pen where thick black hoses were draped over curved metal holders attached to the posts. Kelly figured that this was the place to wash the horses.

Though she wanted a shower worse than she had ever wanted one in her life, she turned on the water for Joe. He shuddered as the water hit his flank, and Kelly felt it for temperature. Despite the heat, the water seemed too cool. Kelly stuck her thumb over the nozzle and turned the stream into a fine spray. Joe seemed to like that better.

After washing Joe and toweling him dry, Kelly brushed his coat, mane, and tail, and led him to the barn. She didn’t know which stall was Joe’s, but of course, he did. He trotted right to it, and headed for the feed trough in back.

Then, remembering his manners, Joe turned to Kelly as she was closing the wooden half-door. He lowered his head to tell her “thank you” for the nice shower. If only his owner could be so polite.

Chapter 6
August 6, 1994 ~ Saturday, noon

“... Please hold for President Coulter.”

Mandy frowned. A call from Cameron on the weekend could not be good news. She took a sip of iced tea, hit the “RECORD” button on her answering machine, and waited.

“Hi, Mandy! How are you?” the president asked.

Mandy frowned again. Cameron always greeted her the same way. She wondered if he ever truly wanted to know how someone else was, or whether his apparent concern about the feelings of other people was just a way to get them to like him more. She decided to try a little test.

“Do you want to know how I am from a medical standpoint? Because I had a series of female and cardiac tests done this past week. Do you want to know how I am at work? Because we are having serious issues at the firm right now, some of them as a result of Mallory’s leaving, or rather, as a result of Mallory’s being there in the first place. Or, do you want to know how I am relationally? Because maybe you heard that I broke up with my boyfriend last weekend. Or, do you want to know how I am spiritually? Because right now I’m having a few issues with God that need to be addressed. Or, do you just want to know how I am with my sister so you can get to what you really want?”

“Sounds like you’re having a bad day, and I got you at a bad time,” the president said in his most solicitous voice. “Tell me when I should call you back.”

Mandy laughed.

“That was just a test and you flunked. What d’ya need?”

There was a pause as Cameron considered what he might have flunked, how it might affect his relationship with Mandy, and what repercussions it could have with Kelly’s outlook.

“I’m sorry.”

Mandy laughed again.

“Of course you are, but what do you want?”

There was no way to avoid her directness, so he launched into his concerns about Kelly’s novel, and how he looked in it.

"I told you I'm not going to ask her to sit on that book. It means too much to her," Mandy said.

"That's not what I'm asking. I think we can agree on ways to handle this. Marketing strategies. Things to avoid. How to get through potentially adverse publicity."

"I'm listening."

In the next half hour, Cameron gave Mandy a mini-course in media relations. She listened and ran the tape recorder too.

Finally, she said, "It seems to me that you should be discussing all this directly with Kelly. I'm not her manager or her agent, and I haven't even read the fictionalized story of her life that has you so upset. Just call her. You still have her Dallas phone number in your head, right?"

"Right."

Then he let out a deep sigh.

"Mandy, I need your help with this. No one thinks it's a good idea for me to talk to Kelly directly. They're still afraid that she might record our conversations and publicize the recording to my disadvantage. I know she's no Sindy Towers, and she'd never do anything like that, but I have to deal with all these people around me."

"You're the guy in charge," Mandy said in a monotone while checking to see that her recorder was still running.

Cameron swallowed hard.

"It's not that simple."

"Probably not," she agreed. "Once we make a lifestyle decision not to follow our heart or conscience, we have no real sense of direction. It's easier to listen to other people, no matter how conflicting their opinions. I've done the same thing in the past. Maybe it's not too late for me to change, but I'm afraid that your course is set. Okay, how can I help you?"

"I'd like for you and Lindsey Brewster to talk about this. Be the go-betweens for Kelly and me. You've known Lindsey since high school and you know you can trust him."

"I can truthfully say I have the same depth of confidence in Lindsey Brewster's integrity as I do in yours."

"That could be taken as sarcastic, Mandy."

"I'm sorry, Cameron, if you're having some doubts about your own integrity."

* * *

After her shower, Kelly searched the kitchen. There were three large steaks in the bottom drawer of the refrigerator, but Kelly figured they were for dinner. She found several cans of tuna, some eggs, some onions, and a nearly empty jar of pickle relish. She put it all together with a little mayonnaise and mustard, and spooned it onto plain crackers. She was hungry enough that it tasted pretty good.

Kelly put the rest of it in a small Tupperware container and left it in the center of the refrigerator where even a guy could find it. She was just starting back up the stairs to get her book when Cleave and his sidekick walked through the back door.

"Honey, I'm ho - ome."

Kelly was not amused, but stopped before the first stair.

"What's for lunch, dear?"

"I fixed and ate some tuna. The rest of it is in the fridge. Help yourself. It was made from your ingredients."

"Really? You fixed tuna salad? I love tuna salad."

Kelly had no idea if that was sarcasm or truth. She didn't much care. Cleave opened the refrigerator in anticipation of a treat, and grinned as he lifted the lid on the tuna. He sniffed and smiled.

"Smells great! Any crackers?"

"It's your house. Don't you know what's in the pantry?"

"Annie buys stuff from time to time, but I don't keep up."

"I suppose that Annie is your wife, or girlfriend, and you probably forgot to mention her to me."

"I'm between divorces right now, and I don't currently have a wife. I thought you might be interested in auditioning for the girlfriend role, but now I'm not sure. Anyway, Annie cleans the house for me on Thursdays. Her husband Jake does odd jobs around the place part time."

"There are crackers in the pantry. I'm going upstairs to read my book."

"Don't you want to join us?" Cleave asked.

"No, thanks. I ate."

"Who put a burr under your saddle?"

Kelly looked at Rick. Was she awake or in a nightmare?

"A burr under my saddle? A burr under MY saddle? I was lucky to get a saddle. What's the idea of inviting me all the way out here to ride and then treating me like I'm some kind of hired hand? Making me to round up stupid old cows, and God knows what else if I had stayed out there."

"You're a great rider. I thought you were enjoying it."

"Enjoying it? I was saddle sore before we got halfway around this place, and then I couldn't even go inside for a bath. First, I had to take off Joe's saddle, and wash him down, and brush him, and put him in the barn before I could wash the sweat off me, not to mention I could've been killed if Joe had rolled over on me out there! I never saw a horse turn like that. And you think I was enjoying it? Think again, Cowboy!"

"Oh, come on now, Kelly. I know you're not saddle sore. You're an expert rider, and I'm not even mad that you tried to convince me you hadn't been on a horse in years. Obviously, you have experience on cutting cattle. Frankly, I didn't even guess that Joe had such good moves in him. He's only three, and barely trained, but you got him to perform like a champ."

Kelly looked at Cleave, then Rick, then back at Cleave.

"I've never been on a cutting horse, and I'm not a liar."

With that statement, Kelly turned and stomped up the stairs, leaving the guys with their tuna salad and crackers. They grabbed a couple of longneck bottles of beer from the refrigerator, and sat at the kitchen table for a half hour.

"I don't understand her at all."

"You've never understood any woman, Cleave. I don't think you really want to."

"This one's more interesting than most, but probably the hardest to understand. Not worth it."

Rick didn't say anything for a while, but sat sipping his beer. Cleave offered him another one. They drank in silence.

Finally, Rick said, "You know, I don't think she's hard to understand after all."

"What? What do you mean?"

"I mean what if she were a guy? You'd take her at face value and believe everything she said."

"Who would believe everything a woman says?"

"Anyone who wants to understand this one."

The phone rang. Neither man moved.

"Probably a sales call."

"Just as likely one of your ex wives."

"You want to answer it for me?"

Rick took another sip of beer. The ringing stopped.

"Not a very persistent salesman."

"Could NOT have been one of your ex wives."

The phone rang again. Again, neither man moved.

"Maybe a wrong number."

"Or, an ex-wife calling back."

"You want to answer it for me?"

"Do I look like I want to answer it for you?"

The ringing stopped.

"Humph."

"Yeah."

The phone rang again. Still, neither man moved except to take another sip of beer. It stopped after four rings. A minute later, Kelly bounded down the stairs and into the kitchen.

"Normally I wouldn't answer the phone in someone else's house, but apparently this was your not-so-subtle way of adding 'receptionist' to my duty roster of rounding up cows and fixing meals. I finally answered the third time he called."

Kelly turned to Rick. "The calls were from a guy named Juan who said that the manager and the chef got in a big fight. You need to get back to Dallas to make new arrangements."

Rick and Cleave looked at each other, and then at Kelly.

"Juan doesn't speak English," Rick said.

"Right."

"How did you know what he was saying?" Cleave asked.

"I told you I can understand Spanish, though I don't speak it very well. Don't you ever believe anything I say?"

To Rick, she added, "I didn't know you owned a Mexican restaurant in Dallas. I'll have to try it. With friends."

Cleave laughed aloud at her pointed omission of him.

"That restaurant was supposed to be just an investment on the side, but it got out of hand."

Rick got up from the table and carried his dish to the sink.

"Like being married," Cleave mumbled under his breath.

"I'll get my stuff and be ready to go in two minutes."

"No rush, Kelly." She turned to go upstairs.

"Wait a minute," Cleave said. "Please."

Kelly turned to face him.

"What? What do you want? Do you want me to wash your dishes before I leave? Mop the floor? What?"

"I don't want you to leave."

Kelly laughed aloud.

"Right."

She left and ran up the stairs. She hadn't really unpacked, so she grabbed her toothbrush from the bathroom, and zipped her luggage. She picked up the two small bags and left the floral guestroom without giving it another look.

Cleave was waiting for her on the landing under the big window. He looked enormous in that light, and she hoped he wasn't going to try something stupid. She stopped where she was on the upper landing.

"Kelly, I don't want you to leave."

"Here's some news for you, Cowboy. Life isn't always about what you want, so it's wonder you can't stay married. The shocker is that anyone married you in the first place."

Kelly started down the stairs, despite his large presence.

To her amazement, Cleave stepped back.

"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

She took another step down.

"I was rude."

She took two more steps.

"Inconsiderate and thoughtless."

She kept going down the stairs.

"And selfish. Yes, I'm selfish. I'm sorry that I'm selfish!"

Kelly disappeared around the corner at the bottom of the stairs. Cleave charged down the stairs after her, just as she was returning to face him.

"I'm glad we finally agree on something, Mr. Cummins. We agree that you are rude and inconsiderate and thoughtless and selfish. I came out here at your invitation to get to know you better, and I do know you better now. So, good-bye. No divorce. No property settlement agreement. Just, good-bye. Good. Bye."

Still clutching her bags, Kelly walked calmly through the kitchen and out the back door. Rick was waiting in his truck. He jumped out and ran around to open the front door for her and to put her bags in the back seat of the big pickup.

"Sorry I kept you waiting," Kelly apologized.

"Wasn't waiting a half minute."

Rick put the truck in gear and started down the driveway. Suddenly, he put on the brakes and looked at his passenger.

"Are you sure you want to go back to Dallas already? You could stay and ride in with Cleave on Monday morning. Do a little more riding in the meantime."

"I'm saddle sore already, but if you're concerned about having to take me home before you go to the restaurant, don't worry. I'll go there with you and call a friend to pick me up. Hey, it's a big city. I could even call a cab."

"No, I'm not concerned about that. I was just thinking that maybe you'd rather spend the weekend on the farm, as you had planned."

"Nothing was as I had planned. Why would I want any more of that... that... rude..., inconsiderate..., thoughtless..., selfish... cowboy?"

"I promise that he grows on you."

"So does skin cancer, and I don't want that either."

"Do you hear the bell?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Maybe Cleave needs something."

Rick put the truck in reverse and backed toward the sound of the bell.

Kelly sighed in exasperation. *Now what?*

Rick parked the truck and left the air conditioner running for Kelly's comfort. She focused her eyes to the left, looking at the cows in the pasture. She would avoid any further contact with the selfish cowboy who fancied himself an architect as well as a ladies' man.

In a moment, Rick tapped on her window.

"Cleave wants to talk to you."

"I don't care what Mr. Cummins wants."

Rick shrugged his shoulders, waved toward Cleave, and walked around the front of the truck. As Rick was getting into

the cab, Kelly heard a tap on the glass. She pushed the lever and rolled her window halfway down to face Cleave.

"I really want to talk to you," he said.

"And, I really don't care what you want."

"Please, just come sit on the porch with me for a minute."

"Whatever you have to say, you can say in front of Rick."

Cleave took a deep breath and let it out loudly.

"Fine. Here's what I have to say. I invited you here to get to know me better, but you got to know me worse. I've been through 'better or worse' too many times. I've always been worse, but I can be better. Please give me another chance."

Kelly turned from Cleave and looked directly at Rick.

"Is this the way that skin cancer starts?"

Rick shrugged his shoulders.

"I have no idea what this is. On my mother's grave, I've never seen or heard anything like this from Cleave. Never."

The truck was running, the air conditioner was humming, the radio was playing softly in the background, and the big cowboy was standing by the window like a penitent child.

"Fine. I'll stay, since I didn't have a chance to say good-bye to Joe. Thanks for the ride, Rick, and good luck with the restaurant. If Cleave and I don't kill each other in the next 24 hours, I'll be check out your Mexican menu on Wednesday."

"Lunch is on me."

"Great. I'll bring lots of friends."

Kelly patted Rick's hand. "Really, thanks." She slid out of the truck, opened the back door, and pointed to her bags.

"Please take my luggage to the guestroom, Cleave. I'll be waiting to talk to you on the porch."

* * *

Kelly contemplated the view from the porch while trying to decide which rocker would be the most comfortable. The chairs were of various sizes, styles, and vintages, unified by the same dark-colored stain that was on the farmhouse itself. She tried one and then another, feeling a bit like Goldilocks.

She settled on a medium-sized rocker with an undulating seat. It was much too small to be Cleave's favorite chair.

Through the open kitchen windows, she heard the man himself inside stirring around, opening and closing cabinet doors, and then the refrigerator.

"I should tell him I don't drink beer," she thought to herself, but then realized she had told him that at lunch last week. Last week? No! Yesterday. *"Even if he remembers my saying that I don't drink beer, he probably didn't believe me anyway,"* she almost said aloud. She hoped that he would bring her a cold beer, and she would then pour it over his head, but thought better of that, since her ride had already disappeared and it was a long hike to Dallas.

The screen door opened and Kelly heard Cleave walking across the back porch. From the sound of it, he had taken off his spurs. She looked up to see him coming around the corner of the porch to where she was sitting on the lake side of the house. He was carrying a small tray, with two glasses on it.

"Since you don't drink beer, here's some lemonade."

Kelly hid her astonishment.

"Thanks."

"I looked in the pantry, and there was some lemonade mix. I found a lime in the bottom of the refrigerator. I thought you'd like the sliced limes, since you told me that green was your favorite color, and you just can't get enough citrus fruit."

Cleave set the tray on one of the small, bench-like tables that were lined unobtrusively along the house. Kelly realized that they could be used for extra seating, and admired the planning of the wrap-around porch and its furnishings.

Cleave handed a glass of lemonade to Kelly, sat down in the large rocker beside her, and lifted the other glass in a toast.

"To the Princess."

Kelly smiled royally and clinked glasses with him. She took a sip of her drink, and smiled again.

"Delicious. My compliments to the scullery maid."

Cleave looked like he was going to say something, but he didn't. He smiled and took another sip.

"Tell me about your mother," Kelly said abruptly.

"Saint Sal? What do you want to know?"

"That was a good start. Tell me about what a strong, intelligent, determined woman she is. No, tell me something I

don't know about her, like she reads the Bible every day, goes to church on Wednesday nights and twice on Sunday. Or, tell me that she sang in the choir for most of her life, but was too proud to continue after her voice got a little shaky, so now she just does extra volunteer work, and can always be counted on to bake a pie or fry some chicken when someone is down."

"How'd you know all that? It's exactly true, but how could you know?"

Kelly laughed aloud.

"Fortunately, or unfortunately, we covered most of that in Psychology 101. There have been lots of little clues in your comments. I do have one serious question, though."

"Shoot."

"Don't tempt me."

They both laughed.

"Okay, what's your question?"

"How long can you and your mother be in the same room without getting into an argument?"

There was a long silence.

"Maybe five minutes. Ten, if she's busy cooking."

"Okay. If we make it through the weekend, I want to go visit your mother. By the way, where does she live?"

"Port Gibson, Mississippi."

He looked studiously at his lemonade for a few seconds.

"You want me to take you home to meet my momma after we've had one date?"

Kelly nodded.

"It's two dates, if you count today. If we don't make it through a third one tomorrow, it's a moot point, but if we do get that far, I need to see a few things up close and personal before I expose myself to skin cancer."

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"It's a private joke, and not really funny."

"What else do you want to know about my mother?"

"What was the big lie she told you?"

Cleave frowned.

"My mother is a very honest woman."

"Right. But, once, she told you one great big lie."

"You're wrong about that."

"Do I have to ask her myself?"

Cleave shook his head. He was silent for a very long time.

"Why should I trust you with this?"

"Because NOT trusting women hasn't worked for you."

Kelly watched his broad shoulders rise and fall while he stared vacantly across the expanse of land down to the lake.

"She told me that my daddy was killed in Korea. She told the same thing to everyone in town, but..."

He took an open-mouth breath, and no words came out.

"But, you found out years later that he had run off with another woman, right? When he got back from the war, he deliberately left you and your mom?"

Cleave nodded.

"How did you know that?"

"I like mysteries. I like unraveling secrets, and you give so many clues all the time. Hasn't anyone else ever guessed?"

Cleave shook his head.

"Then you've done a great job of keeping everyone at arm's length so they can't get close enough to hurt you. Is that the way you want to live the rest of your life? Roping women in? Then sending them away with some tokens of property? Getting rid of them before they get close enough to hurt you where it matters?"

"Where does it matter?" he asked.

"In your heart. And, I know you have one. Buried alive."

Chapter 7

August 6, 1994 ~ Saturday, 3:30 p.m.

After an intense talk, Kelly and Cleave were sitting on the porch, enjoying the slight breeze, when his mobile phone rang.

"Hello.... Sure, Landon, y'all come on.... See you then."

"Our matchmakers are bringing the dogs."

"What dogs? I saw two Beagles earlier."

"I've got a couple of Border Collies who picked up some kind of worms. Landon and Joan are picking them up at the vet in Tyler on their Saturday trip into town. They should be here around 5:30 or 6:00."

"Do we have enough steak for all of us?"

"Quite the natural hostess, aren't you?"

"I'm Italian. We like to eat, and we like to feed people."

"If you and Joan can split the big steak, there's plenty."

"Hmmm. I don't know. I had my eye on that one."

"And you may have it, Princess, if that's what you want."

"I was kidding."

"I don't think you were, but I appreciate your attitude."

Kelly realized that Cleave was growing on her already, and she was concerned because his relationship track record was worse than hers. A couple of hours acting like a decent human being could not indicate a life-changing experience. She decided to withhold her judgment... and her self.

"I'll get the potatoes ready, and make a salad," she said.

"Let's sit a while longer. This is nice. I'll fire up the grill in plenty of time. Don't you worry about anything, Princess."

Kelly relaxed into the rocking chair, and soon fell asleep.

She was awakened an hour and a half later by the sound of a diesel truck in the driveway and the smell of mesquite on the grill. She started to jump up, but was stiff as a board. Saddle sore. Hurting in every joint and muscle of her body.

She listened to truck doors opening and closing, people talking, dogs barking, and cows mooing at the little creatures who could herd them with a couple of nips on their legs. The commotion died down, and Kelly heard footsteps. Landon, Joan and Cleave came around the corner of the porch. Kelly still couldn't move and was embarrassed about her plight.

"Hi, y'all. Good to see you, but I'm completely stove up."

"What happened?" Joan asked. She looked up at Cleave.

"Kelly hasn't been on a horse in years, and I kept her in the saddle too long. Joan, would you please get some hot water going in the jetted tub? I'll help Kelly up the stairs."

"I'm sorry. This is terribly embarrassing."

"We've all been saddle sore," Landon said with empathy.

Kelly was only worried that Joan would think she was planning to sleep with Cleave, like some one-night stand. She hoped that he had not put her bags in the master bedroom. She need not have worried. After Joan started the bath water, she peeked to see Kelly's bags on the guest room trunk.

Cleave massaged Kelly's shoulders and suggested that she massage her legs before trying to stand up.

"Hope I won't have to carry you up those stairs."

"As if you could."

"Oh, I could. You have no idea what I can do, Princess."

After a few more minutes, Kelly decided she could stand.

Landon and Cleave helped ease her out of the chair.

Kelly was amazed that her legs would move, and she was glad to have the support of the strong guys going up the stairs. Joan had lit a couple of candles in the bathroom and laid out a heavy robe from the guest room closet.

"Can you get into the tub by yourself?" Cleave asked.

"Gravity will help me get in, but how will I get out?"

"If you run those jets awhile, you'll loosen up."

The men left. Joan put her mobile phone beside the tub.

"Here, Honey, if you need help, push this button. It will automatically call Landon's number, and I'll be up in a jiffy."

"Thanks, Joan. Thanks a lot."

Joan closed the door and left Kelly alone. The hurting guest slowly took off her clothes and eased into the tub.

Candlelight flickered against the room's white tile, and Kelly struggled to stay awake in the relaxing atmosphere.

Soothing jets of warm water pulsed against her stiffened muscles, and Kelly helped the process by massaging her legs again. She wanted to be angry at Cleave for all this, and then she started wondering how many other women had ridden his horses, soaked in his tub, and spent the night in his bed.

Of course, she wasn't going to spend the night in his bed, and she was a bit angry at herself for even thinking about such a thing. She was also angry that Cleave had seemingly taken it for granted that she would want to sleep with him. True, he had given her a choice, but his attitude was appalling.

* * *

"How about you go upstairs, Princess, and take another bath? I'll clean up the kitchen. A half hour in that whirlpool will do you a world of good. I use it a lot when I'm sore."

Kelly was happy to comply. A second whirlpool bath might be just what the doctor ordered. She climbed the stairs unassisted, filled the tub, and re-lit the candles.

As she soaked, she thought back over the past couple of hours. Joan had expertly taken over in the kitchen, and Cleave had turned out perfect steaks. Landon had regaled them with Texas Ranger tall tales, interspersed with cutting horse stories.

Somewhat to Kelly's surprise, Cleave had even bragged about Joe's stellar cutting performance in the field earlier in the day, but said the young gelding was just showing off for the princess, and couldn't do that well in a competition. Kelly hoped that someday soon Joe would show them all.

After a while, her aching muscles began to recover. The pain dissipated, and her anger was fading away as well. Kelly was feeling much better physically, but was not at all happy to realize that Cleave seemed to be growing on her.

After her bath, Kelly put on clean clothes, and padded down the stairs in slippers. Cleave was sitting in his large leather chair, reading a book by the light of an antique floor lamp that Kelly hadn't noticed in the daylight.

At night, the farmhouse was magical, with soft, indirect lighting inside and out. Above the fireplace, there was an art light over the requisite painting of a horse, but it didn't seem like a cliché. Everything seemed to belong together.

Kelly saw it all, and wondered if the feeling she had was about fitting in, or more about observing—like Margaret Mead in Samoa. It was definitely a different kind of world for her, and Cleave was certainly a different kind of guy.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"Much better! 'Ladies and Gentlemen, she walks, she talks, she's amazing...'"

"I love carnivals, too," Cleave said, picking up on her midway barker routine. "Let's go to the State Fair this year."

"The State Fair doesn't start until the first weekend in October, and this is early August. A lot can happen."

"Don't worry. It takes sixty days to get a Texas divorce, so we can't possibly be divorced by opening day of the fair."

Kelly just stared at him for a moment. He had delivered that line with a perfectly straight face.

"If you're practicing to be a stand-up comic, you should not do it sitting in an easy chair."

Cleave threw his head back and laughed.

"Come over here!"

She did.

He pulled her closer and encircled her with his strong arms. She did not resist, but melted into his chest.

"Okay, you'll do."

"I'll do? What do you mean? I'll do what?"

"You'll do as a dance partner. Put on those fancy boots you brought. Eel skin is comfortable and great for dancing."

"Do you intend to dance right here in the living room?"

"No, Princess. We're going out honky-tonking."

"I've never been to a honky-tonk in my life. I don't know how to do any of the country-western dances. I don't like bars and smoky places. And I'm still sore from riding."

"It's about time you visited a honky-tonk, Princess. I can lead you in the dances. The place has an excellent ventilation system. And the best way to get over being saddle sore is to ride it off. Now, go put on those fancy, dancing boots."

"But, Cleave, it's nearly nine o'clock at night."

"Right. And if I'm not there by ten, someone is likely to call the sheriff and he'll send out a posse looking for me."

Cleave encircled her with his arms and held her close.

"You'll pick up on country-western dancing as fast as you picked up on cutting cattle this morning. You just put your whole body into it," he whispered, "and let go."

Kelly found it hard to let go of her terror as Cleave drove much too fast over narrow county roads in utter darkness. Certainly, he knew the route from the farm to the honky-tonk like the back of his hand, but she couldn't shake the fear that some stray cow might wander into their path and cause an unavoidable accident. When they arrived safely, Kelly's fear turned to relief, but she felt whipsawed by the ordeal.

The honky-tonk was not at all what Kelly had expected. It was not a quaint little dive with a crowded, gravel parking lot and a tiny, tacky, neon sign in the window. Instead, it was a huge, rectangular, windowless, metal building on a sprawling asphalt lot with gigantic, tacky, neon signs announcing "Drink and Dance" and "Lone Star Beer," and "Budweiser."

There were so many signs that Kelly didn't focus on what the name of the place might have been. She didn't care because she knew she would never be there again.

The very large bouncer at the front door asked Cleave, "Got a knife or a gun on you?"

When Cleave said that he didn't, the guy warned, "Better get back out to your truck and get you one."

Kelly looked up at Cleave expectantly, but he just laughed and ushered her into the vestibule.

"Was he serious?"

"Of course not. It's just a line he uses for new folks. It fosters the East Texas myth and mystique."

Kelly nodded, hoping that Cleave was telling the truth. He walked over to a counter and paid the cover charge to an attractive young woman who greeted him warmly.

"Nice to see you, Cleave. We were beginning to wonder if you would be here tonight."

Still smiling, the young woman looked at Kelly.

"Welcome."

Something made Kelly wonder how well Cleave knew the cashier. She would die before she would ever ask, and berated herself for caring what he might have done with other women.

Cleave opened the next set of doors and they stepped into a huge room filled with scores of tables for two, four, eight, and more people.

The music from the band on stage was loud, but it was good, and Kelly thought she could tolerate it for a while. Cleave had told the truth about the ventilation system. Though it appeared that most of the people at the tables were smoking, there was not a blanket of haze hovering in the air.

The dance floor took up a smaller amount of the big room than Kelly would have expected. Clearly, drinking was the first priority, as the signs outside had suggested. She hoped that Cleave wasn't planning to get drunk and expect her to drive soberly back to the farm over unfamiliar roads.

He took her hand, as if that were the most natural gesture in the world, and led her along a snake-like path among the tables. Several people said, "Hey, Cleave," or some other version of hello, and many more nodded or tipped their hats.

Apparently, it was considered polite to leave one's hat on in a honky-tonk. Most of the men, including Cleave, were wearing summer-weight western hats of various shapes and styles. She had not previously considered how many ways there were to bend a brim, or how many types of crowns there could be, but she was suddenly quite sure that every variety could be found in this "Drink and Dance" place in East Texas.

Cleave found a table on the far right side of the room, fairly close to the dance floor. She took that as a sign he was more interested in dancing than drinking. She was relieved for a moment, until she remembered that she had no idea how to do any of the country-western dances.

Kelly also had no idea how she was going to "let go" as simply as Cleave had suggested.

Although she had studied ballet dancing from the first grade through high school, and had taken ballroom dancing for a couple of years, Kelly was not naturally good at any of it. Even worse than that was the fact that she had almost no ability to follow her partner. She always had to know exactly how to move her feet, or disaster would be the only thing that followed.

Cleave pulled out a chair for Kelly, and she wondered if this was *de rigueur* in a dive. She would have to watch to see. She wouldn't ask him.

A waitress in tight shorts showed up immediately, and Cleave ordered drinks without consulting Kelly.

"How about a *Dos Equis* for me, and a gin and tonic for the lady?" he said. Then he paused and added, "Hold the gin and add some extra limes."

The waitress returned in record time with the drinks.

"Run a tab?" she asked, while placing a couple of paper Budweiser coasters on the table and setting the drinks down.

"No, I got it," Cleave answered, handing her a single bill.

"Keep it," he added. Kelly wondered about the size of the tip. Of course, she would never ask.

Cleave picked up his bottle of beer, saluted Kelly with it, and took a sip. She squeezed a bit of lime into her tonic water, and tried it carefully, making sure that no gin had made its way into her glass. Even the smallest amount of alcohol would make her sleepy. The smallest amount of caffeine, on the other hand, would keep her awake all night. Tonic water was always a nice compromise.

After a few minutes of sipping their drinks without any conversation, Kelly started to worry. Surely, any minute, he would either gulp down the rest of his beer and order another one, or he'd ask her to dance. Both choices scared her.

"Let's dance," Cleave suggested, as the band started playing 'Texas Two-Step.' He got up without finishing his beer and walked around Kelly's chair to pull it out for her.

"I really don't know how to dance like this."

"I believe you, but you can follow me."

"But, I can't follow either."

"You can follow me, Princess."

Kelly frowned.

"You can follow me. I guarantee it, Princess. You still have no idea what I can do."

Cleave took her hand and led her to the dance floor. Kelly wondered if she would trip and knock over some other dancers, or simply die of embarrassment for stepping all over Cleave's boots. She didn't have the luxury of another moment to think about it. Cleave forcefully pulled her toward him and wrapped his arms around her.

"Let go!"

Instead of thinking about her feet, as she normally would when she was trying to dance, Kelly could only feel strong arms holding her tightly. She let her head fall against Cleave's shoulder while the rest of her body melted toward him, as limp as a rag doll being danced around the room.

Kelly had no idea what her feet were doing. They were so far away from Cleave's heartbeat. She was vaguely aware of sounds and colors and other couples moving and swirling around, but she focused only on the strong heartbeat and the arms that were pressing her against it.

The music stopped, and Cleave tilted her ever-so-slightly backward, then pulled her up and released his hold on her.

"Nice dancing. Surprised?"

Kelly nodded.

"I've never danced like that before."

"I believe you, Princess. You'd better get ready for lots of things you've never done before."

The music started again, and he led her back to the table.

"That's enough for round one," he said.

Kelly sipped her tonic water that was still icy cold. She knew she wanted Cleave to hold her again, but he sipped his beer and seemed to have retreated mentally into another world. That other world apparently did not include dancing, talking, nor Kelly. It was a long while before he returned.

The waitress had been to their table twice to check on the status of their drinks. The third time, Cleave noticed.

"Another round," he ordered, again without consulting Kelly, "but, give us a few minutes to dance before you bring our drinks. Thanks."

Kelly anticipated Cleave's taking her hand, holding her close, and leading her compliant body in a dance again. She even allowed herself to consider for a moment what things she might do with Cleave that she had never done before.

Her heart beat a little faster as she held out her hand toward him, but Cleave ignored her hand and walked ahead of her, wordlessly clearing a path through the crowd.

As they danced the second time, Kelly contemplated what had happened when Cleave was all alone in his private world. She wondered if he would, or could, ever invite her into it.

Chapter 8

August 7, 1994 ~ Sunday, 7:30 a.m.

Kelly awoke in the floral bedroom and stretched slowly to be sure she could move. Amazingly, after being saddle sore and dancing until past midnight, she felt fine. Maybe Cleave had been right about riding it off.

She listened, but didn't hear anything from Cleave's room. They had not discussed wake-up protocol, but Kelly couldn't imagine Cleave lying in bed "burning daylight."

She tiptoed to her door, opened it slowly, and peeked into the wide vestibule. The door to Cleave's room was open. His bathroom door was open. His bed was made. He was gone.

Kelly went to her room and looked out the east window. Cleave was riding that mean black stallion fast across the far pasture. She watched, fascinated, as he ran the horse hard and then pulled him up for a quick stop. Cleave slowly lifted the reins up and slightly back. The horse moved back. Gingerly. One step. Then another. Another. Kelly knew that horses didn't like to be put into "reverse," and she paid attention.

After Jet had backed up about ten paces, Cleave eased the uplifted reins to the side, and Jet moved backward in an arc. Finally, he did a complete reverse circle. Kelly thought she could get Joe to do that. Cleave patted Jet on the side of his neck a couple of times and then they took off again across the pasture, as fast as Jet could go. It was faster than Kelly would want to ride, but she thought Joe might like to run almost wild like that. Maybe she could get up enough nerve to try it.

Jet stopped short, and went through the "reverse" routine again. Kelly wondered how many times they had already done that while she was "burning daylight," and wondered what was expected of her as a guest at the farm this morning.

She vaguely remembered hearing a rooster crowing, seemingly in the middle of the night. If that rooster lived on this farm, then there would be hens, and surely there would be fresh eggs somewhere. She knew there were none in the refrigerator.

Kelly started to put on last night's jeans, but there was an odor of smoke on them. She tossed them on the bathroom

floor, took a quick shower, put on a clean outfit, combed her wet hair into a ponytail, and went downstairs to explore.

Kelly found an apron, put it on, and headed out the back door. She walked past the horse-trailer shed and the concrete pad where she had washed Joe. Under a heavy stand of trees, there was a large pen with a chicken coop. She opened the gate, saw that the chickens had already been fed, and walked through their corn to the straw-filled beds.

She found an egg in the first little coop, but it was much too light in weight to be fresh. She picked it up, stepped back, and heaved it over the top of the coop into the woods. The second egg met the same fate. After she tossed a third bad egg into the woods, Kelly began to wonder if these eggs were somehow special and naturally lighter in weight, but the chickens were ordinary, so she discarded that theory with the fourth bad egg. Clearly, no one bothered to gather daily.

Finally, Kelly found a heavier egg and another. She took the hem of her apron and made a scoop to hold them. There were seven in all, which would be plenty for a nice big omelet. She hurried back to the kitchen and found a glass bowl, filled it with cold water, and put all the eggs in it just to be sure of their freshness. All seven of them sank immediately to the bottom and turned on their sides. Perfect little fresh eggs.

There was plenty of bacon left in the refrigerator, even though Joan had cooked quite a lot of it for the baked potatoes last night. There was even a leftover baked potato as well, along with rolls, cheese, chives, and sour cream. There was a new jar of hot sauce in the pantry. Breakfast was sounding better by the minute, and Kelly was getting hungry.

She pre-heated the oven, and put the bacon on a tray to cook it the easy way. The electric coffee pot on the long counter in the kitchen didn't look as if it had been used in quite a while. She remembered that Cleave had ordered decaf coffee after lunch last week. Oops. That was lunch on Friday. Not yet forty-eight hours ago. She decided that Cleave probably didn't bother to make coffee in the mornings.

Kelly was preparing the ingredients for the omelet when she started to think about when Cleave might arrive back at the house. He would have to ride in, take the saddle off Jet,

wash the horse, and at least wash his own hands. She wiped her hands on her apron, walked out the back door and stood by the chow bell, considering for a moment.

What would be the correct way to summon Cleave for breakfast without making him think that there was some kind of emergency at the house? She tried to remember anything she might have read about bells and codes. Nothing came to her. She recalled cowboy movies with chuck wagons out on the plains, and whiskered old cooks clanging like crazy on a metal rim. That seemed to be a bit much for an omelet.

Kelly decided to ring the bell once, and then decide.

Clang. Pause. Clang. Pause again. Clang. Enough.

She went back inside and resumed her work. The oven was ready for the bacon, and she put it on the middle rack. She took the leftover rolls from the refrigerator, sprinkled them with a few drops of water, and wrapped them in some aluminum foil that she had finally found after searching through most of the drawers in the kitchen.

The rolls went into the oven on the top rack. She cubed the potato, smeared it with olive oil, spread it across a cookie sheet, sprinkled it with a bit of garlic powder, and put it on the bottom rack.

The bacon was smelling good. The potato was browning. There were some oranges in a big sack in the pantry and, though some of them looked a little tired, Kelly decided she could salvage enough to have a couple of glasses of juice.

She heard Cleave ride into the yard, and she peeked out the screen door to watch him pull the saddle off Jet. He gave the stallion a quick wash and headed for the house. As Cleave opened the back door, Kelly tossed the eggs into the skillet.

She removed the rolls, potato, and bacon from the oven, and put them on plates, leaving room for the eggs, which slid perfectly into place. Kelly put the plates on the table next to the juice glasses just as Cleave walked in with clean hands.

“Good morning, Princess. Let’s say grace.”

* * *

“You didn’t tell me you were a creative chef. I thought the tuna might have been a fluke. Why didn’t you tell me?”

"Would you have believed me?"

"Touché. Now, what else can you do that would be helpful around a farm?"

"Well, I can sing and play a guitar, in case you need some picking and grinning around a bonfire some chilly fall night."

"Really? You play the guitar?"

"Yes, but not very well. I've only learned a few chords which, along with a capo, are quite enough for hymns and most country-western songs. My formal training was on the piano and, naturally, I picked up playing the organ along the way. I started playing the organ in church when I was a kid."

"Seriously?"

"Yes. I'm great at sight reading, but I don't have any talent for playing by ear. I wish I did. In fact, playing the piano, in my case, is not so much a talent as a learned skill. I got it the hard way. By practicing."

"Hmmm."

Cleave nodded absently.

"I'm also pretty good at washing dishes and cleaning up the kitchen. Shall I get started on that?"

"You cooked. How about you go upstairs and get ready for church while I straighten up down here?"

"Church? We're going to church?"

"Sure. Did you think I was a heathen?"

"Do you really want to know what I thought?"

"No, I don't. But, yes, I go. Most Sundays. There's a little Baptist church just a couple of miles from here. Nice young preacher. Good country folks. I think you'll like it okay."

"That sounds good to me. I'll go upstairs and dry my hair. By the way, I can wear either a sundress or jeans. Any preference?"

"A sundress sounds great, but you'll look too good in it. The women will hate you, and I'll have to fight off the men."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Nope. Wear jeans."

"To church?"

"Yep. To church. Jeans, and your fancy boots."

"One more question."

"What?"

“Are you in the habit of taking all your female weekend guests to church with you?”

“Nope. None of ‘em. Not even most of the women I was planning to divorce. Of course, I never had a princess here until now. That’s a different thing.”

Kelly smiled, and headed upstairs. Cleave washed dishes.

They arrived at the Pleasant Pass Baptist Church a few minutes before ten. The asphalt parking lot was full of old and new pickup trucks, a couple of vans, and several jeeps. It was nothing like the parking lot at Preston Park Baptist Church where Kelly would normally be on a Sunday morning. There wasn’t a Mercedes or BMW in sight out here. Cleave parked his diesel pickup toward the back of the lot, under a large shade tree.

When Cleave and Kelly walked through the double doors of the old wood frame church, there was a noticeable pause in the buzz of conversations. Everyone turned around to look at them, and Cleave gave a little wave or a nod to several folks.

Kelly smiled at everyone, and followed Cleave to “his” pew. The fact that there was a space open for him confirmed that he did in fact go to church at least frequently. That was a plus in her mind.

The young preacher walked up to the front, formally greeted everyone, and prayed a short prayer. Then he announced, “I’m sorry to say that Miss MayNelle is a bit under the weather, so we won’t have her piano playing to lead us along this morning. I want everybody to sing out anyway.”

Kelly automatically raised her hand, and when she had the pastor’s attention, she said, “If you like, I’ll play the piano this morning.”

The preacher grinned, nodded, and motioned for her to come forward. She patted Cleave on the arm without looking at him, walked to the front, and introduced herself to the pastor. He obviously could see that she had arrived with Cleave, and she wondered for a moment what he might think of that, but she quickly tucked the thought away.

“Do you prefer the piano or the organ?” she asked.

“We’re not used to the organ, so the piano would be fine.”

Kelly walked over, pulled out the bench, and sat down.

When the pastor announced the first hymn, Kelly said, "I've never heard that one before, but I can read and play it. I just need to know how fast y'all want to sing it."

The pastor clapped lightly to give her the beat, and she started with the last line of the hymn as an introduction. She automatically led the singing as well, and was pleased that the congregation joined enthusiastically. After a couple of hymns that she did know, it was time for the sermon, and Kelly went back to sit with Cleave.

The young preacher called Kelly up front once more at the end of the service for the hymn of invitation, and then a final rousing song whose truth rang in her ears all afternoon:

*I think of my blessed Redeemer,
I think of Him all the day long;
I sing, for I cannot be silent;
His love is the theme of my song.*

*Redeemed... redeemed...
Redeemed by the blood of the Lamb;
Redeemed... redeemed....
His child, and forever, I am.*

Chapter 9

August 8, 1994 ~ Monday, 5:30 a.m.

The rooster was still on duty at Pleasant Pass Farm. As he had done on Sunday, he awakened Kelly while it was still dark, but this time she didn't go back to sleep. It was time to get up, get showered, get dressed, get breakfast, get in the truck with Cleave, and get back to Dallas. It was simply too much "getting" for so early in the morning.

Something else was bothering Kelly. Cleave had started the day on Sunday as nice as could be. He even did the dishes, although that wasn't much of a job because Kelly had cleaned up as she cooked. After that, it seemed like the dark cloud that had hidden his good personality for most of the morning on Saturday had returned with a vengeance.

By the end of Sunday evening, when they could have had a lovely ride at dusk, Cleave sat glumly in his big leather chair, pretending to be reading. Kelly had tried to sit on the sofa and read too, thinking she could participate in a parallel activity, but her mere presence seemed to annoy him. When she finally excused herself to go upstairs to bed, he barely looked up to say goodnight to her. She didn't understand his behavior at all, and wondered what mood he would be in this morning.

In the early light, she looked out her bedroom window and saw Cleave leading the already-saddled stallion from the barn. He mounted the horse quickly and they took off down the driveway at a good clip. Moments later, she heard them return. They probably just rode to the first gate and back. He stopped the horse and took him through the reverse routine. Then, they took off again, this time at a gallop, and they were gone too long for a quick turn-around at the gate.

Kelly ran from her window to the window in Cleave's bathroom that overlooked the front entry. Cleave and Jet were galloping furiously around the big loop that Kelly thought should have been a welcoming drive in front of the house. After a couple of turns around the oval-shaped track, Cleave stopped Jet and worked on the reverse maneuvers again. Then they took off at an even faster pace for a couple of loops, finally slowing to a lope, then a trot, then a walk to cool down.

When Cleave returned to the barn area and took the saddle off Jet to wash him, Kelly decided she'd better get in gear to fix breakfast. After church, they had stopped at a little convenience store to pick up milk, cereal and orange juice. Kelly thought that the least she could do was put it on the table. She finished dressing, ran downstairs, set the table, and even had time to pick a couple of flowers from the yard before Cleave walked in to wash his hands.

"Good morning," Kelly said cheerfully, as he came into the kitchen.

"Yeah."

"Are you hungry?"

Being too hungry always put Kelly in a foul mood, so she thought that might be the cause of his brusqueness.

"No. You go ahead."

With that, Cleave continued through the kitchen and went upstairs, leaving Kelly with a knot forming in her stomach. She sat down alone and ate a bowl of cereal. Then another. The juice was some lousy off-brand with a bitter taste.

Kelly, who was usually quite conservative, went to the refrigerator, pulled out the whole carton, and poured the rest of the offending juice down the drain. She suspected that she might want to pour Cleave down the drain at the same time, but she forgot that thought as she washed, dried, and put away her breakfast dishes, such as they were. She decided to leave Cleave's empty bowl and his full glass of juice right where they sat on the big kitchen table.

On the way out of the house, Cleave absently picked up the glass, and guzzled down its contents in one long swig.

"Good juice."

Kelly was still glad that she had poured it down the drain.

Cleave walked right past Kelly's two bags that she had deposited by the door. She picked them up and followed him across the back porch, getting angrier with each step, but saying nothing.

Princess. Indeed.

Cleave continued around to a side door of the bunkhouse that Kelly had not noticed previously. The door opened into a three-car garage that had held Cleave's car and pickup truck.

Kelly supposed that the empty space had been designed and was reserved for whatever woman Cleave was planning to divorce next. She promised herself that if she ever did show up at the farm again, she would never park in that spot.

Cleave popped the car's trunk and Kelly dropped her bags in it. He didn't seem to notice how distant and rude he was acting. She decided there was no point in starting her work week with an argument she could not win. Silently, she got in the car and put on her seatbelt.

The garage door opened at the push of a button on the car's sun visor, and they backed out without saying anything. Cleave seemed to be silent effortlessly, but Kelly had to work at it. She vowed not to say the first word.

The cattle gate at the front of the house opened automatically as the car approached. They drove without a word along the winding, hard-packed dirt road that she had traveled with anticipation a mere 48 hours ago. When they approached the cattle gate that opened to the county road, Cleave activated the remote control above the sun visor, and the cattle gate swung open.

Kelly had been a little surprised on their Sunday drive to church to realize that the rusty old gate that Rick had opened manually could be activated by remote electronics. A nice, deceptive ruse by the big-city architect.

"This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it," Cleave quoted as he turned onto the county road.

Kelly said nothing in response, but assumed that this was part of some ritual he engaged in on his way to work. She wondered what his idea of rejoicing was, since he still glum and grumpy after reciting the scripture.

Kelly decided that she didn't really care what his idea of rejoicing was. She wasn't going to hang around to find out.

* * *

"You can drop me at my office," Kelly said to Cleave as the Dallas skyline appeared ahead of them. "There is no need to take me all the way home. I'll get a ride with someone heading to the Park Cities this afternoon."

That was a long speech after the silent journey into town. Following his one-sentence scripture recitation, Cleave had turned on the radio, listened to the news, listened to sports, and listened to some stupid disk jockey. Though the day was beautiful and the interstate was clear, Cleave never appeared to be rejoicing. Kelly had maintained her vow of silence.

"I don't know what's wrong with you this morning. You haven't said a word."

"Hmmm. Let's see. I said, 'Good morning' to you when you came into the house, and you just grunted, 'Yeah.' Then I asked you if you were hungry, and you said, 'No. You go ahead.' After that, you let me carry my own bags to the car, and you ignored me the whole time.... That's what's wrong with me, and that's why I haven't said a word."

"Well, get over it, Princess."

"I'm over it. Believe me, I am completely over it."

Fifteen minutes later, Kelly felt odd, walking into her office carrying two overnight bags, but it had been no secret that she was going to be out of town for the weekend.

"Your sister has called three times since eight o'clock," her receptionist said, as Kelly walked through the front door.

"Sorry about that. She sometimes loses track of time and thinks I'm ignoring her."

The phone rang at that very moment. After giving the standard greeting, the receptionist held the phone away from her ear, and pointed to the mouthpiece.

"Mandy, again?"

GailAnn nodded.

"I'll take it in my office."

Kelly turned down the hallway to her own wonderful space. Stepping across its threshold, she felt immediate relief. Such a pleasant space! Peace at last.

"What's up, Leetle Seester?"

"I've had two more calls from Cameron, and I'm not happy about this."

"You don't sound happy, but I've been dealing with someone else's unhappiness all morning, so I'm not going to let it contaminate me and ruin my day. Anyway, what did he want? A date?"

"Don't try to be funny. This is not a joking matter."

"It could be, if you'd lighten up."

"He wants to cut a deal about publishing your book."

"Okay, Counselor, you're going to have to speak in plain English. Obviously, he's not a book publisher, so what kind of a deal does he envision?"

"He wants us to talk about it. I was thinking that we could plan to talk on the phone this afternoon, when you get home from work. He wants Lindsey Brewster and me to act as the go-betweens so he won't have to talk to you directly."

"Coward."

"Me?"

"No. Cameron. He's still as chicken-hearted as he ever was. What in the world did I ever see in him? So, you and Lindsey Brewster, huh? Isn't he that little squirt you called 'Bambi' in high school?"

"Yeah, the same."

"So, what's Bambi doing now?"

"You shouldn't call him that. He's Cameron's right-hand man. He's so powerful that he doesn't have an official title."

"Then I'd guess he's actually Cameron's left-hand man, and I'll call him Bambi if I want to."

The younger sister sighed audibly and hoped that Kelly eventually would forget about calling him 'Bambi.' Mandy figured that might happen if she never mentioned it again.

"Fine. Call him whatever you want. Can you be available for a conference call about six, your time?"

"Sure, as long as you don't mind hearing me chew my dinner while we talk."

"I suppose that's a reference to the chewing noises in your ear right now."

"Precisely."

"Sorry. I didn't get a real breakfast this morning."

"That's okay. Tell me about it. No, don't tell me anything. I need to get some work done. I'll talk to you at six. And remember, 'This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.'"

"Whatever."

Mandy hung up the phone in her law office, and took another bite of a chocolate-covered donut.

As Kelly was hanging up her phone, GailAnn buzzed her.
"It's Cleave Cummins on line two."

"G.A., please tell Mr. Cummins that I'm preparing for a board meeting at noon here, to be followed by back-to-back meetings at city hall all afternoon. I have a conference call scheduled at six o'clock, and I am expected at a Sunday school directors meeting at Preston Park Baptist Church from 7:30 to 9:00 tonight, after which I'm going to treat myself to going to bed early because I had an exhausting weekend. Suggest that he call me late morning tomorrow."

"But, you're not going to be here tomorrow."

"Precisely."

The flowers arrived two hours later.

The card read, "A little something for the board meeting."

"Who sent these?" GailAnn asked.

"One of the board members, I suppose," Kelly lied glibly.

Unbeknown to Kelly, GailAnn polled the board members as they arrived, so she could be sure to send a 'thank-you' note to the correct donor. When no one took credit for the flowers, she immediately knew that they were from that Cummins guy who had a two-hour lunch with Kelly last Friday.

It had to be the same Mr. Cleave Cummins who had just found out about the board meeting when she told him earlier. For some reason, Kelly was choosing to avoid him.

Of course, GailAnn was more than a little curious about what might have happened between the two of them over the weekend, but she didn't mention it to anyone, especially Kelly.

G.A. liked her job. A lot.

* * *

Kelly was walking back and forth in her backyard pool when Mandy called at six o'clock on the dot. Kelly headed to the side of the pool where she had placed her wireless phone on a towel. The phone didn't have great range, but she was usually able to walk across the pool and talk at the same time without losing the connection.

She needed to keep moving today, because the riding and dancing on Saturday and Sunday still threatened to make her sore again. She repressed further thoughts of the weekend.

"Hey, is that you?" Kelly asked into the receiver.

"Who else?" Mandy answered.

"My question exactly. Is Lindsey on with you?"

Mandy heaved a sigh of relief. At least Kelly wasn't going to insult 'Bambi' directly, no matter what she had threatened. Without mentioning it, she was glad her sister was polite. She hoped that Bambi and friend would be the same.

"No, it's just me. They faxed the questions I'm supposed to ask you to get this negotiation started."

"Okay. I'm guessing that they didn't want a list of questions faxed from the White House to show up on my fax machine, so you're going to have to do this the hard way, right? Go ahead and run through the questions fast, and then I'll decide what and how I'm going to answer."

"But...,"

"No 'buts,' Leetle Seester. If you want the answers, give me all the questions first."

"Okay. Here goes:

""One: Do you have a publisher? If so, who is it? Need company name, contact person, address, phone, *et cetera*.

""Two: If you don't have a publisher yet, have you contacted any publishers in any way, including in person, via a third party, phone, mail, *et cetera*? If so, who, address, *et cetera*, as above.

""Three: Do you have an agent yet? If so, who? *Et cetera*.

"Okay, okay, Kelly, you see where this is going. Do I have to read every last question here? It's three pages long. Single spaced."

Mandy sighed with exasperation.

"No, you don't have to read all that junk. I know exactly what interrogatories look like, and, unfortunately, this is it. I can imagine every single question they want to ask. I can also imagine why. You can tell Bambi that I haven't yet contacted anyone, agent or publisher, because I just ended ten years of writing the book and I want a little breather. I'm tired."

"Right. I got that."

"You tell Bambi and his keeper that I don't even want to think about marketing my novel until after Labor Day. It's summer, and I want to enjoy the rest of it."

"Okay. Got it. Let me call him right back and tell him this. I'll let you know if there's anything else."

The phone rang again less than three minutes later.

"Lindsey said that Cameron said to tell you 'thanks' and they will be back in touch after the fifth of September."

"I'm sure they will."

An hour later, Kelly was walking the three long blocks to Preston Park Baptist Church, afraid that she would be preoccupied during the meeting with thoughts about her conversation with Mandy and the long list of questions that Cameron had sent via Bambi and the fax. Instead, during the meeting, she kept thinking about her weekend with Cleave.

Kelly realized that she felt like a yo-yo. She had been up and down, and up and down, and up and down, all weekend. It wasn't just the stairs and the horses, but the strange moods of one Cleave Cummins, master of Pleasant Pass Farm. Kelly was exhausted and was fighting hard to concentrate as the church meeting went past its nine o'clock deadline.

Worse, people stood around and talked afterward. Then, someone suggested that they all go to the yogurt store down the street, and, though Kelly loved that yogurt, she said she would have to take a pass. The word "pass" jumped at her when she said it, and she realized that she was getting a little too concerned about Pleasant Pass, Texas, and its environs.

Hopefully, a good night's sleep would change everything in Kelly's very tired mind.

It didn't.

Chapter 10

August 9, 1994 ~ Tuesday, 8:00 a.m.

Kelly looked around the large, cheerful, community room to check that everything was perfectly in place for the Fair Park Area Housing Conference that she had been planning for the past several months. She was satisfied with all she saw.

The registration tables were attractive and organized for easy use. The white folding chairs were lined up neatly in rows, and not placed too closely together. The refreshment tables at the back of the room were laden with enough coffee, iced tea, water, and cold drinks to wash down the half ton of muffins and pastries that had been donated for the event by her favorite bakery.

The small stage up front was flanked by impressive, but borrowed, potted plants. The panelists' table was draped with a cloth that hung perfectly even along the floor in front, to hide the speakers' legs. An American flag, a Texas flag, and a City of Dallas flag behind the speakers' table gave the setting an air of officiality. Of course, it was official, but looks matter.

Kelly walked onto the stage to test the microphone. It sounded fine. Then she went down each aisle, testing the microphones that could be used for questions from the crowd. She hoped that there would be a big crowd. There should be, she assured herself. The pre-registration had been impressive. She hoped that all the speakers would arrive on time. That was sometimes a challenge with public officials.

She looked at her checklist for the tenth time. Everything was done, done, and perfectly done. All she had to do now was relax and enjoy the day.

The first registrants started milling around before 8:30. They were "the usual suspects," as Kelly called them. When she organized an event, she could always count on certain "civic meddlers" to arrive early, stay late, and ask lots of questions in the open forum. Most of them would consume their weight in muffins as well. She greeted each one by name and made them feel welcome.

By 8:45, all the speakers had arrived, and several of them had given interviews to the local ABC television reporter who

was waiting in the parking lot. The room was almost full. The only other possible glitch now could be with the caterer who would bring the box lunches. Kelly called her to confirm that everything was on time, and felt a rush of relief.

Kelly called the conference to order at exactly 9:00 a.m. with the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag. It reminded her of grade school, and that made it a comforting ritual. *"...One nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all."*

She introduced herself, the panelists, and the head of the city's housing department who would be the moderator for all the morning sessions. The deputy mayor would handle the afternoon. If he didn't show up, as he sometimes didn't, Kelly would take his place. That was no big deal.

After lunch, the crowd would diminish somewhat in size. Any formality that the seriousness of the topics warranted in the morning would have faded with the ingestion of muffins and pastries, plus the carbohydrate-heavy sandwiches which would arrive soon enough, with cookies for dessert.

During the applause that followed the introductions, Kelly stepped down from the stage and walked to the back of the room where she could keep an eye on everything. Over the next couple of hours, newspaper reporters wandered in and out of the room. Kelly always gave them a little bag of the muffins and a couple of cold drinks to take with them.

It was against the media's code of ethics, and considered a form of bribery, to give a reporter food or anything else worth ten dollars or more. Kelly thought that was a silly rule, but she always made sure that they got their \$9.99 worth of goodies. She also gave them hand-outs about the issues along with background information and the brochure of the day with her direct phone number on it.

She frequently chuckled to herself when other community types complained about not getting media coverage for their events. Unless the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor again, Kelly could always count on a good story in the next day's papers. Maybe the \$10 "bribery" limit was justifiable after all.

The biggest issue of the day's conference was the potential redevelopment of the area around Fair Park. It was south of the I-30 freeway, and had become an inner-city eyesore with

boarded-up commercial buildings. Falling-down houses lined its residential streets that were now too dangerous to walk even in broad daylight. Kelly had been close to gunfire once on South Carroll near Gurley, though it was just a couple of drug-dealing teenagers, and she didn't take it personally.

Kelly still had an open mind about what should be done in the Fair Park area. The issues were broad and deep.

Lunch arrived on time, and everyone seemed to enjoy the break after an intense morning crammed with information and opinions. A few boisterous discussions in the entry area gave Kelly some momentary concerns, but she interjected herself in the middle of those, and tempers cooled.

In a day that couldn't be going much better, the deputy mayor arrived right on time to serve as moderator for the conference that resumed perfectly on schedule at one o'clock. The only thing that Kelly had miscalculated was the size of the crowd. There were quite a few unexpected additions to the audience in the early afternoon, taking the places of the people who had left with their box lunches at noon.

By 2:30, when the serious "question and answer" session began, the room was packed, and there was a straggly line of people standing in the back. At a few minutes after 3:00 p.m., Kelly was asked to go to the stage to field some of the questions about the real estate and legal issues involved.

Since she had, over the past several years, recruited hundreds of volunteer lawyers to work on such issues, Kelly was comfortable discussing what kind of help her group could provide. Many of her downtown real estate lawyers had specifically agreed to concentrate on the Fair Park area to represent the homeowners and renters who could, and most surely would, be displaced by any serious upgrades in their neighborhood.

As the four o'clock closing hour approached, Kelly took a deep breath and was thankful that the day had gone so well. She treated herself to one of the remaining apricot pastries that she had been eyeing all day. It was a little drier than she liked, but the filling was sweet and satisfying.

"We have time for one more question," she heard the deputy mayor announce. "Yes, sir, you in the back."

"My name is Cleave Cummins. I'm wondering if Ms. McCain would be interested in working with a local architect to do long-range planning in Fair Park. *Pro bono*, of course. If so, how should I get in touch with her?"

"Thank you, sir. That sounds like a great idea," the deputy mayor answered for Kelly. She silently prayed to disappear into a potted plant.

"Kelly, would you like to respond to the gentleman?"

"Tell him I sometimes respond to flowers, and sometimes I respond to chocolate. Right now, I'm too tired to respond to anything. I think we should all grab another couple of cookies and call it a day."

Everyone laughed and left in a good mood.

Everyone except Kelly.

* * *

Kelly went to bed early, exhausted from her long day at the conference, but she couldn't get to sleep. *What in the world was going on in the mind of one Cleave Cummins?* He had some nerve going to her conference, though she realized that, as an architect, he had been on the invitation list before they met.

Still, he had no right to ask a question like that in front of God and everybody. *What was he thinking?*

She was tempted to call him to find out, but though she lifted the phone receiver a dozen times, she was determined not to do it. Let it go. Let him go. She even told herself that he was already gone.

She turned on the television, and there was a country-western singer being interviewed about his latest album. It reminded her of Cleave, so she changed the channel. There was a feature on modern architecture, and it reminded her of Cleave, so she changed the channel.

There was a documentary on cutting horses, and it reminded her of Cleave, so she changed the channel. On the Christian television network, they were singing "*Redeemed... Redeemed... Redeemed by the blood of the Lamb...*" and it took her back to Pleasant Pass Baptist Church on Sunday with Cleave. She changed the channel.

The weather channel was focusing on the rainfall heading into East Texas. Again, she changed the channel. The home shopping network was selling western cut clothing. She switched once more. A local security company was touting the benefits of detection devices and electronic gates. A new Dallas dealership was advertising a car identical to Cleave's. The food channel had a feature on grilling steaks outdoors.

Finally, watching a commercial about the health benefits of eating eggs, Kelly lost it. She started laughing hysterically. *Here I am alone in my room at 11:00 o'clock at night, laughing. Am I a sick person or what?* she asked herself, still laughing. *I must need a vacation.*

She thought about how nice it would be to spend a week somewhere in the country in a beautiful bed-and-breakfast inn overlooking a peaceful lake. She was still laughing about that notion when the phone rang.

Surely, she wouldn't answer it, but she did stop laughing.

Her recorder picked up the call on the third ring.

"Kelly, this is Cleave. I thought you might be awake."

There was a long pause. She thought about answering, but what would be the point? She didn't want to talk to him, and the best way to say that was not to make an announcement about it, but simply not to answer the phone.

After the pre-set, thirty-second recording time, the call would disconnect automatically. It seemed to be taking longer than usual as Kelly waited in the silent darkness of her room.

Finally, there was a click, followed by a dial tone.

Kelly held her breath for several seconds, waiting for Cleave to call again to leave a longer message. He didn't. She was disappointed that he had given up so easily, and she hated herself for even caring about what he did.

The next morning, Kelly looked and felt as if she had not slept at all. She wasn't sure. She remembered images of being at the farm with Cleave, but didn't know if she had dreamed them, or if she had been thinking about him as she tossed and turned, trying to fall sleep. She knew she must have had some rest because she was awakened by the alarm at 6:30.

As she was slowly getting dressed for work, she vividly recalled getting ready to go "honky-tonking" with Cleave four

nights ago. Now it seemed as if weeks had passed. Kelly wondered if the intense emotions she had been feeling were somehow distorting her sense of time and of everything else.

She recalled the terror of Cleave's driving too fast over the narrow country roads at night. She pictured the bouncer and the cashier and the other patrons at the honky-tonk. She wondered about the moods and the private world that seemed to be inherent parts of Cleave.

Worst of all, Kelly remembered the excitement she felt when Cleave Cummins encircled her with his powerful arms, pulled her close against his body on the dance floor, and whispered in her ear, "Let go."

Chapter 11

August 10, 1994 ~ Wednesday, 9:00 a.m.

Kelly paused a moment before opening the office door.

"Good morning, GailAnn. Any calls for me?" Kelly asked in a voice more chipper than she felt, "besides my sister?"

"No calls. Not even Mandy. How was the conference?"

"Great. Huge crowd. Lots of questions. No shots fired."

"I guess you saw the interviews on the six and ten o'clock news last night. I brought you an extra copy of *The Dallas Morning News* article. Nice photo of you with the DM."

"Thanks."

Kelly took the offered page. She had been so preoccupied with thoughts about Cleave that she had not even glanced at the morning paper. She also had forgotten about posing for the photo with the Deputy Mayor after the conference. At that point in the day, she had been too upset with Cleave.

She was really angry with herself that she had gone to bed early and then spent a sleepless night thinking about Cleave, without giving any thought to turning on the local TV news. That cowboy was becoming a definite liability, and she vowed to forget about him, at least for the rest of the day.

The flowers arrived at 11:00 a.m. by way of a courier service that specialized in downtown deliveries. There was an exquisite crystal bud vase (not the typical plain one from a florist) containing two yellow roses and some sprigs of greenery. There was also a small gold-foil box of assorted dark chocolates from Neiman Marcus.

GailAnn signed for the delivery, and peeked at the card.

"Congratulations on a job well done! You were in total control all day."

"Who sent them?" she asked her boss.

"Beats me," Kelly said with a shrug. "No signature."

"Isn't it odd to get flowers two days in a row, both from unknown senders? With different couriers!"

"Of course, it's odd. It's also a bit annoying. I don't even know who sent them."

"I'll bet," GailAnn thought to herself, but she said nothing. Her boss was obviously in no mood to hear any more about it.

Kelly was also in no mood to work, so she called her friend Diane to invite her to lunch. While placing the call, Kelly remembered that she had planned on going to lunch at Rick's restaurant on Wednesday. That sounded fine to Diane.

Kelly always chose to drive because Diane worked in one of the big, ugly, Cleave-Cummins-type, downtown buildings with underground parking. It was more trouble for Diane to go in and out of the garage than it was for Kelly to leave her free-standing office in the historic area east of Central.

On the way to lunch, Kelly told about her weekend with Cleave and how frustrated she was with his erratic behavior.

"Sounds like he's crazy about you."

"Or, maybe he's just plain crazy. God only knows how many times he's been married."

"Oops! Watch it, friend! You're stepping on toes here. I'm working on breaking Elizabeth Taylor's record, and I'm not even a movie star. I think he's crazy about you. He just doesn't know how to handle it."

"Apparently, he just gets married, and then gets divorced. He seems to handle that routine quite well."

"Maybe he's afraid he wouldn't want to divorce you. Or, even worse, maybe he's afraid you wouldn't want to marry him in the first place."

"Too bad because I already told him I wouldn't."

"You what?"

"Oh, I don't mean that he proposed and I turned him down. I mean I just said something about his selfishness."

"What exactly did you say? Give me the true scoop."

Diane was a legal secretary, and always insisted on getting accurate reports. They walked into the restaurant and Kelly signed the waiting list.

"I think I said, 'Life is not always about you and what you want. No wonder you can't stay married. The real shocker is that anyone would marry you in the first place.'"

"Hmmm. And he called you back after that?"

"Yes. Plus, he sent flowers. Twice."

"Yep. He's crazy about you. I'd bet money on it."

Kelly and Diane were soon seated at a small booth near the back of the restaurant. There had been no sign of Rick,

and Kelly didn't want to ask for him. The waiter brought two glasses of ice water, two bowls of salsa, and a huge basket of hot tortilla chips.

"I'm José. May I bring you something to drink?"

The women ordered iced tea, and José went to get it.

"You can tell a lot about a Mexican restaurant by its chips and salsa," Diane said, scooping some of the red sauce and taking a bite. "This is good."

The waiter returned with the iced teas balanced on a round black tray that also held a crystal bud vase with two yellow roses and a gold-foil box of assorted dark chocolates from Neiman-Marcus. He set the tea glasses on the table, and then handed the bud vase to Kelly. He gave the box of chocolates to Diane, and walked away without another word.

"What's this?" Kelly asked incredulously.

"This is I, being right. Obviously, he is crazy about you."

Kelly opened the card.

"Lunch is on Rick. Dinner's on me if you answer my call. I hope your friend will respond to the chocolate bribe because obviously I need all the help I can get."

Kelly read the card again, and then handed it to Diane.

"He had me long before the card. If you don't want this one, I'll take him!"

"He's a real jerk. He's one of those guys who wants what he can't have. Total, selfish jerk."

"Just my type. All my husbands were jerks, but I never had a romantic jerk. I like this guy."

"Then you go to dinner with him. It's creepy that he sent flowers to me here. How did he know I would be here?"

"You said you'd be here on Wednesday with a friend, and here you are. I think it's his way of saying he believes you, and he's sorry for doubting anything you ever said to him."

"You're certainly reading a lot into vase of flowers and a box of chocolates."

"And you're certainly missing his point if you don't!"

By the time they had finished their delicious lunch, Diane had extracted a promise from Kelly to answer the phone the next time Cleave called.

Despite her reluctantly given promise to Diane, Kelly hoped she wouldn't have to follow through with it. Cleave, however, did call her that afternoon. It was three o'clock.

"How about having dinner with me six o'clock at the Petroleum Club? We can linger over drinks there and watch the sunset, high above the cares of the world."

"How about you meet me for dinner in Fellowship Hall at Preston Park Baptist Church at 5:30? It's underground, and there will be no drinks or sunset, but it is, in its own way, above the cares of the world."

"Fine. If you insist on introducing me to your church family already, I'll be there. After all, you went to church with me on Sunday. Fair's fair. The next logical step is for you to meet my mother in Port Gibson on Friday."

"Fine. But if we're going all the way to Mississippi, we will visit my daughters in Vicksburg."

"Fine. You'll meet my mother on Friday, and then we'll see your daughters on Saturday."

"Fine. What else?"

"Nothing else. I'll see you at 5:30."

"Fine."

Kelly slammed down the phone. Then, wondering what in the world she had done, she called Diane, and told her about the conversation.

"Ha! Were you afraid I'd make a move on your jerk?"

"I don't know what I was thinking. I don't even like the guy, and I just agreed to meet his mother this weekend."

"You'll love her! I'm sure you're two peas in a pod."

"Speaking of peas, I declined a dinner invitation at the Petroleum Club to keep Cleave from getting what he wanted."

Diane laughed at her friend.

"Oh, Cleave's getting what he wants alright, and you'd better get used to it."

Chapter 12

August 10, 1994 ~ Wednesday, 5:55 p.m.

Cleave was waiting, hat in hand, outside the wide entry doors of the fellowship hall when Kelly arrived almost late.

Why doesn't he still look old and bald to me? Kelly asked herself. *Surely, he wasn't this attractive when we met last month. Last Friday, she corrected herself, trying not to smile. Even his stupid western suit doesn't look so stupid now, and I've known him for less than a week.*

He greeted her with his silly little half-smile, like the cat that had swallowed the canary. Kelly figured he had devised some scheme that she wouldn't enjoy.

"Good evening, Kelly. Glad you suggested dinner here. The fried chicken smells great."

"It always is," she replied.

Kelly wondered if Cleave was being sincere or sarcastic about the fried chicken. He had wanted to eat at the Petroleum Club with its world-class chef, where he could escort a lovely princess for his downtown friends to see. He could hardly be thrilled to have fried chicken in the basement of Preston Park Baptist Church.

"Oh, Cleave's getting what he wants alright," Diane had said with a big laugh, "and you'd better get used to it."

It suddenly occurred to Kelly that Cleave never had any intention of taking her to dinner at the Petroleum Club tonight. No. He was simply conniving to get invited to her church supper. Of course. He knew it was Wednesday. He was raised in a Baptist Church. At this very minute, his mother was probably eating fried chicken at a Baptist Church in Port Gibson, Mississippi. Kelly was furious.

"Good to see you, Kelly," her pastor intoned pleasantly. "I see you've brought a guest tonight."

"This is Cleave Cummins." Kelly said, wanting to add that she didn't actually bring him, but only met him there, and it was a result of some kind of a ruse on his part.

"Cleave Cummins. Cleave Cummins. Oh, yes, of course! You're one of the architects who submitted plans for our new community center."

Kelly was even more furious now at the nerve of this guy, trying to use her to get a commercial contract. She was so embarrassed that she wanted to run out the door.

“First-time visitors are always our guests, so tell the cashier that dinner’s on me. Yours too, Kelly.”

The pastor turned to greet other church members, and Kelly headed for the serving line, not caring if Cleave followed her or not. In fact, he stopped to talk to people along the way, and put his hat on a chair at a large table with plenty of empty seats. He tilted a chair for Kelly.

Meanwhile, Kelly was standing at the end of the line, hoping that a huge group of people would get behind her, leaving Cleave to fend for himself. She was thrilled when two families with a half-dozen kids in tow joined her. One of the children from her Sunday school class the past year engaged her with news about his summer activities.

She hardly noticed when Cleave slipped into the line beside her, but almost everyone else in the room noticed. Kelly was a well-known member of the church and of its popular singles group, but in her several years at Preston Park Baptist Church, she had never gone to any church function with a man. Speculation abounded.

Kelly dutifully sat beside Cleave, and was more than a little irritated that he seemed to feel comfortable there. She barely tasted her meal, though Cleave ate his with enthusiasm. She was nibbling at a piece of lemon ice-box pie when the pastor went to the microphone to pray and then introduce the song leader for the evening. To Kelly’s consternation, Cleave retrieved song sheets from the table, handed one to her, and joined in singing the hymns.

There was not one “Christian” thought in Kelly’s head at the end of the music. The pastor went back to the microphone, gave his formal welcome, and asked for the introduction of any guests. Kelly had not considered that.

An older couple stood to introduce their daughter and son-in-law in town from Amarillo. The new choir director introduced elderly parents who were visiting from Tulsa. The singles minister introduced several new recruits for his class. Kelly avoided Cleave’s eyes.

After a few other introductions, Kelly relaxed. She was not going to speak for the opportunistic architect.

Then the pastor himself announced to all, "We have another special guest here tonight. Some of you may be familiar with the architectural work of Cleave Cummins, who has submitted a proposal for our community center. Cleave, will you please stand to let everyone greet you."

There was the obligatory applause that had followed the introduction of each guest, but Cleave couldn't let it go with that. No, he just had to embarrass Kelly. He waved his hand to acknowledge the welcome, then spoke.

"You need to know that I'm not here tonight to solicit your support for my firm's architectural proposal. I'm a guest of Miss Kelly McCain, who didn't even know that I was involved with the building program. I'm just here to enjoy the food, the fellowship, and the good pastor's words. Thank you for making me welcome."

The applause that followed Cleave's short, surprisingly articulate speech was almost more than Kelly could stand. Fortunately, there wouldn't be a quiz about "the good pastor's words" because she had no idea what he said that night.

The pastor did make a point of shaking Cleave's hand at the end of the evening. He took Cleave's big paw in both of his smaller, non-cowboy hands, and pumped up and down several times.

"Glad to have you here. Come back often."

After that, Cleave had the nerve to invite Kelly to have a cup of decaf coffee at a neighborhood bistro.

"Better not. You have a long drive back to the farm."

"I'm staying in town tonight."

"Where?"

Surely this nervy guy didn't think she was going to invite him to stay at her house.

"I have a condo near downtown, so I don't have to drive home when I'm too tired or had too much to drink."

"You don't seem either tired or drunk, so don't let me keep you here."

Cleave threw back his head and laughed.

"You really are something," Cleave said through his laughter, but Kelly was not at all amused.

"Come on, Princess. Have a cup of decaf with me. I'll even spring for another piece of pie, since you left half of yours on the plate tonight."

"I didn't think you would notice."

"I'm an architect. I notice details, and it was obvious that you didn't eat most of your dinner or your dessert. It's probably because you were mad at me. The least you can do is tell me why."

"The last time I told you why I was mad at you, when you ignored me at breakfast and then didn't carry my bags to the car, you told me to 'get over it.'"

Cleave reached for her hand, and cradled it gently.

"And you probably swore right then and there that you were not only 'over it,' but you were over me as well. Am I right, Princess? Yet, here we are again, and you're mad at me again. This time, I'm not going to tell you to 'get over it.' I'm going to tell you to get used to it."

"That's bizarre. Why would I want to get used to it?"

"I don't know. It's just a hunch I have. I think we need to get used to each other."

Kelly finally realized that he was holding her hand, and she jerked away from his grasp. Immediately, she knew it was too late. It was much too late. She should never have let him hold her hand for that long while she was angry with him.

He might erroneously start thinking that she liked having him hold her hand. He might think that she could get used to him. He might even suspect that he was growing on her. What nerve.

"Decaf and a piece of pie?"

He took her hand in his once more.

"Why not? I really didn't eat that much dinner."

Kelly let her hand relax into his. Cleave laughed and pulled her a little closer to him.

"You know you're mean when you're hungry?"

Kelly started to jerk her hand away again, but it was too late. He had already dropped it.

* * *

"Tell me why you were mad at me at church tonight."

Kelly looked around as they sat down at a small table. There were other couples, but none close enough to hear them.

"You didn't really want to go to the Petroleum Club for dinner tonight, did you?"

"I can go there any time, but it's rare to get an invitation to a church supper with a princess. It was my first time, in fact, and I liked it. It was certainly more relaxing than taking you to church in Pleasant Pass the other day."

"What was wrong with that?"

Kelly recalled that he had acted particularly moody after church on Sunday.

"I don't take women to church with me," he said simply. "Not even the women I'm planning to divorce."

"You told me that the other day, but I didn't believe you."

"Well, you can believe it. You can even ask around. My first wife was a Methodist, and I got married in her church. We had two kids and she took them to her church every Sunday, but I just couldn't force myself to go with her. After we divorced, I swore I wouldn't get married in any church again. It seems to me that even taking a woman to church gives her funny notions."

Kelly paused to wonder what kind of convoluted thought process had taken Cleave to that conclusion.

"What funny notions?"

"Things like 'til death do us part' and other ideas that lead to Property Settlement Agreements."

"Ha! And you think that I'm a piece of work? You are one sick puppy. 'Til death do us part?' Indeed. It was just a Sunday morning service in a little out-of-the-way church."

"You're the one who marched to the front and played the piano. What was that about?"

"I've done that lots of times in little churches, and even a couple of big ones, when I happened to be visiting on a day they were without a pianist. What's the big deal?" she asked.

"The big deal is that I don't take women to church. Everyone was already staring at us. Then you had to march

up there in front of God and everybody to play the piano. I didn't even know you could play like that. Anyway, everyone was staring."

"First of all, I told you on Saturday that I played piano, and that I had played the organ in churches. Once again, you thought I was lying, right? As for the looks, people were just staring because that's what people do in little churches. They don't have that many visitors, so they stare at newcomers. It's nothing. It's human. People stare."

"You're used to having people stare at you because you're drop-dead gorgeous. People stare at you everywhere you go. Surely, you noticed that at the conference."

"Cleave, people were staring at me at the conference yesterday because I was standing on the stage in front of them. I was introducing people, and answering questions. That's where the audience focuses. They were not staring because I was drop-dead gorgeous."

Cleave laughed.

"You believe that, don't you? You think that hundreds of guys attend these events just to hear the Deputy Mayor and a bunch of political blowhards talk about what they're going to do for poor people in Dallas, right after hell freezes over."

"I believe I'm doing important work."

Kelly answered him firmly, but suddenly she was unsure of everything. *Why do I feel bad whenever Cleave says something that he thinks is a compliment?* She felt hot tears forming.

Cleave reached into his inside pocket and handed Kelly a handkerchief. It was a nice, clean, soft, ironed, pure cotton handkerchief, with his initials monogrammed on it. The sight of it made her forget about crying. There was something sweet and old-fashioned about a big ole cowboy reaching for such a lovely handkerchief and offering it to her.

"Do you always carry this?"

"Yeah, I do. I got in the habit after my first divorce."

"Why?"

"It seems I have a knack for making women cry."

"Would you like to get over that? I don't want to get used to crying around you."

"You just tell me what to do, Princess. I can learn."

Chapter 13

August 12, 1994 ~ Friday, noon

"Cleave, I have to tell you something important," Kelly said as he picked up her bags and headed out the door. She grabbed her purse, set the alarm, and followed him.

"Really, this is important," Kelly insisted, as he popped the trunk and deposited her bags in it. He seemed to be paying no attention to what she was trying to say.

"Listen to me, Cowboy! I am having serious second thoughts about making this trip."

"Get in the car, Princess. You can have your serious second thoughts on the road."

After opening Kelly's door for her, Cleave went around to the driver's side, got in, and handed her a little white sack.

"What's this?"

"A hamburger and fries. I figured you'd need something to eat before we got out of town."

"I had breakfast."

"I'm guessing that was a long time ago. Eat."

It's not as though I'm being kidnapped, Kelly thought as she put on her seatbelt and took her first bite of the hamburger. *I could stay home if I really, truly wanted to, but I did say I'd go, and I have to tell the truth with this guy, so here I am, going.* The fries were hot and crispy. The hamburger was not overcooked. It was a better beginning than she had anticipated.

Cleave started the car and set his mind toward Port Gibson, Mississippi. It was usually less than a six-hour trip, but he had no idea how long it would take to transport a princess that far. He turned south on Central Expressway and joined the throngs already leaving Dallas for as long a weekend as possible.

Cleave reached into the back seat and lifted a cooler lid.

"The drinks are cold. Grab me a Coke. Please, ma'am."

Kelly handed him a Coke, chose a root beer for herself, and replaced the cooler's lid. She ate her burger and fries in silence as Cleave maneuvered through heavy traffic smoothly. His pace was faster than Kelly would drive, but he handled a car as well as he handled a horse, so Kelly felt relatively safe.

When she finished eating, Kelly wadded her lunch trash into a compact package and deposited it in the little plastic bag hanging below the dash. They were passing the Terrell exit, and Kelly marveled that it had been such a quick trip so far.

She was still concerned about the wisdom of going all the way to Mississippi with Cleave, but it would be a chance to have at least a little visit with her daughters. On the other hand, she would have to explain Cleave to them, and that might not be easy to do.

She hoped he wouldn't be a jerk in front of them. And then she hoped that he would, so they would get to know him better. But, then, what would they think about her traveling with such a jerk, especially when she had met him exactly one week ago?

Worse than her concerns about her daughters, Kelly had real misgivings about going to meet Cleave's mother. It had seemed like a better idea when she first proposed it. Still, Port Gibson was a lovely place and a visit might be nice.

Kelly thought it was ironic that she and Cleave had both lived in Mississippi, in relatively close proximity, and had never heard of each other. Vicksburg and Port Gibson were less than an hour apart and both were beautiful towns full of historic mansions. Kelly and Cleave had visited the other's home town many times, but, of course, Cleave was older, and was already in college when she entered high school.

Thinking about high school made her think of Cameron. She wondered if Cleave had ever met him. Cameron had been all over the state in high school, as if he were running for some statewide office even back then, and he could have met Cleave a half dozen different ways. They were both Baptists in a state where Baptist youth groups did a lot of things together.

"Are you finished with your second thoughts yet?"

Kelly was startled by the question.

"What?"

"Your serious second thoughts. In Dallas, you said you were having serious second thoughts about making this trip. We're approaching the exit to Pleasant Pass. We can go on to Mississippi or spend the weekend at the farm. The turn-off is three miles ahead. It's your choice, Princess."

Kelly sighed. She hadn't considered that they could just go to the farm for the weekend, but it almost sounded worse.

Cleave could be a real jerk at the farm. Of course, he had said that he couldn't be in a room with his mother for more than five minutes without getting into an argument. That didn't sound too good either.

"Let me ask you again. How long can you be in a room with your mother without getting into an argument?"

"Five minutes, unless she's cooking. Then, maybe ten."

"Okay, I'm going to tell you something, and I mean this. We can go to Port Gibson, but if you have one argument or even one sarcastic word with your mother while we are in her house, I will never see you again. That is not a threat. That is a promise. No Property Settlement Agreement needed. It's a verbal promise from me, and I'm serious about it. I will never forgive you if you do not behave yourself this weekend."

Cleave grinned and sped past the farm's exit.

"Redeemed!" he sang, "Redeemed!... Redeemed by the blood of the Lamb... Redeemed!... Redeemed!... His child, and forever, I am!"

Kelly wasn't sure if this was the sincere Cleave or the sarcastic Cleave who had spontaneously starting singing the joyful hymn, but she joined him, and they sang every verse. Then they sang "Amazing Grace" and "Holy, Holy, Holy" and dozens of old standards as the East Texas countryside flew by.

Soon enough they passed Tyler and Longview. It seemed like only moments later when they crossed the Louisiana line.

"We'll stop in Bossier City. I'm sure you'll need to go to the bathroom."

Kelly was astounded at his thoughtfulness. Maybe he had indeed turned over a new leaf.

"And I'd like to spend about thirty minutes at the Blackjack table."

He's still a selfish jerk, Kelly thought, but she had never stopped in Bossier City and she really didn't mind.

As they walked into the casino, Cleave handed Kelly a hundred-dollar bill.

"What's this for?"

"It's gambling money. It's for gambling."

"But, I don't gamble. I think it's a waste."

"Oh, go have a good time. I'll be at the Blackjack tables, but I'd rather you not hang around and watch. I'll meet you back here in half an hour."

"Fine. I'll go to the bathroom, then I'll have a good time, and then I'll meet you here in thirty minutes."

Kelly tucked the hundred-dollar bill in her pocket. She was back at the rendezvous location in twenty-five minutes, and Cleave was only five minutes late. During that ten-minute lag time, she watched the faces of people coming in the front doors, and the very different expressions of most of the people who were leaving. Fun? Indeed.

"How'd you do, Princess?"

"I had a great time, thanks. And you?"

"Hmmm. Well, I dropped \$600, but it could have been worse. I was down a thousand at one point."

"Does that mean you want to go back and get the rest of your money?"

"Spoken like a gambler, but, no. I've had enough for today. It was just a little amusement on the way to our real destination. By the way, do you have any of that hundred-dollar bill left?"

"Don't be jealous, but I have the original hundred, plus twenty more. Do you want it?"

"No, it's yours. Good for you. Lucky girl."

"Right. Lucky girl. Lucky enough to be a princess."

* * *

After the brief stop at the casino in Bossier City, it seemed to Kelly that the exits for the little towns along I-20 in northern Louisiana were only minutes apart. She and Cleave were alternately talking and singing and talking some more and then falling into long but comfortable silences.

Dayline, Minden, Sibley, Arcadia, Grambling, Ruston, Chaudrant, Calhoun, Monroe, and Delhi were behind them. As they were approaching Tallulah, Cleave told Kelly that he needed to make an important phone call. Kelly nodded and held her breath as Cleave drove and dialed.

"Saint Sal, it's your favorite son."

After a brief pause, he continued, "Coming to see you.... Right now.... Yes, in the car.... Right this very minute.... Almost at the Tallulah exit.... Yes, her name's Kelly McCain.... Vicksburg.... No, she lives in Dallas now.... A lawyer.... About a week.... Twice.... Three daughters.... Baptist.... Every Sunday, plus Wednesday night.... Yes, she teaches Sunday school... Yes, ma'am.... Yes, ma'am.... I'll ask...."

"What do you want for breakfast? Pancakes or waffles?"

"Fluffy pancakes or crispy waffles, either one would be great," Kelly said. "I do prefer honey to syrup, so maybe we should stop at a store in case she doesn't have any."

"Miss Kelly likes her pancakes fluffy and her waffles crispy, but she must have honey instead of maple syrup. She suggested that we stop on the way to procure some.... Okay, great, because I didn't really want to go grocery shopping.... We'll get there around 7:30 or 8:00, after dinner, so don't fix anything for us tonight.... No, we'll be leaving after breakfast, going to have lunch with her daughters in Vicksburg, and I need to be back at the farm by tomorrow night.... Yes, ma'am.... Yes, ma'am.... Always.... Bye."

"What was the 'always' about?"

"She told me to drive carefully, and I always do."

"Right."

They sped past the Tallulah exit, heading east toward the Mississippi River Bridge. It felt good to be going home, but somewhat strange to be going there with this guy Cleave.

"Don't tell me that was your only call to your mom about our visit this weekend."

There was total silence from Cleave.

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Was that the first mention of this visit to your mother?"

"You said not to tell you that."

"It was a figure of speech."

"I'm trying to learn to listen to your speeches very carefully, and you clearly said, 'Don't tell me that was your only call to your mom about our visit.' I'm trying very hard not to tell you that, but you're making it difficult."

"Cleave, that's terrible! How could you?"

"How could I what?"

"Not tell her!"

"It was easy. I just didn't call her all week."

Kelly closed her eyes, and leaned back against the head rest. She was trying to decide how she would feel if one of her daughters called at the last minute to say she was bringing some guy home. She concluded that having a last-minute visit was better than having no visit at all.

"Did I do something wrong again? I'm trying to get this right, you know."

"No, you didn't do anything wrong. I was just surprised that you hadn't mentioned the visit sooner. Some people don't like to be invaded by unexpected company."

"You might recall, Princess, that, as late as noon today, you were still having second thoughts about making this trip. Perhaps I was having second thoughts about announcing it to my mother too soon."

"That's fair enough and I'm really sorry that I sounded critical about it."

"You're forgiven. Besides, if I had told her we were coming, she might have found a way to get out of town herself. I think she's a little bit tired of meeting the women I'm planning to divorce."

"Are you planning to divorce me someday?"

"No, ma'am. I don't think a commoner can divorce a princess."

Chapter 14
August 12, 1994 ~ Friday, evening

"You shouldn't have gone to the trouble of making that delicious peach pie," Kelly said to Cleave's mother, "but I'm certainly glad you did. It was excellent. If we don't finish it for breakfast, could we take some back to Dallas?"

"Of course, Kelly. Son, I like a girl with a hearty appetite. You can trust a girl who's not afraid to eat. She knows who she is and what she wants. It's about time you found one."

Cleave started to say something, but thought better of it.

"Cleave's always dragging home a skinny woman more concerned about how she looks in her jeans than about talking to an old woman over a piece of pie. You look fine in your jeans, honey, but you can eat and talk too. I like that."

"You hear me, Son? This one's a keeper, but I don't know how in the world you're gonna manage it."

Cleave was surely about to get into an argument with his mother, but he caught the look in Kelly's eye.

"I don't either, Mom, but I'm gonna try."

"Well, y'all probably want to take showers and settle in for the night. Cleave, I can tell by that silly grin on your face when you look at this girl that you'd like to bed her down, but you're not doing that here. You sleep in your old room, Son.

"Kelly, the guest room is on the front of the house, and you'll have to share the hall bath with Cleave. I tried to train that boy, but he's messy. You'll just have to deal with it."

Once again, Cleave started to say something, but he saw the look on Kelly's face, and changed his mind.

"I raised three daughters," Kelly said to Cleave's mom, "so I have plenty of experience both in trying to train kids, and in having to live with the results of my mistakes and failures."

Cleave's mother threw her head back and laughed.

"I like this girl, Cleave. She can deal with failures. God knows, we all have 'em."

"Speaking of failures," Kelly said, "I can't seem to walk away from that pie. May I please have another bite or two?"

Cleave's mother picked up a knife.

"Large or small cut?"

"How about one of each?"

"I guess you'll sleep well enough tonight," Cleave said, as he poured more milk into Kelly's glass.

"Miss Sally, I think you did a great job with Cleave. Look at him, pouring milk for me, as if I were a princess. Yes, you did a great job. It's hard to raise kids without a husband, and I finally realized that even if there's a man in the house, if he isn't a true biblical husband, he's worse than worthless."

Sally Cummins looked at Kelly quizzically for almost a full minute. Kelly focused on her pie. Cleave concentrated all his will power on not yelling at both of them during the long silence.

"Did Cleave tell you about his daddy?"

"He told me that his daddy had served in Korea. A hero."

Kelly paused, trying to decide how far she should go with this line of conversation.

"You know, Miss Sally, sometimes we do things and tell stories to our children, thinking that we're doing the very best for them. After I got divorced from the girls' daddy and moved to Dallas, he completely ignored them. He never even called, but I knew all along that he wouldn't because he didn't bother to see them when we were still in town during those months after the divorce.

"I thought it was a good thing that I would be moving away and they wouldn't feel abandoned as if their daddy had left them. They could blame everything on me, because I was the one who took them away. And blame me, they did."

Sally nodded and tightened her mouth.

"You moved to go to law school in Dallas, didn't you?"

"Yes, ma'am. Yes, I was going to law school, but I also needed to get away. Then I made what turned out to be a very bad decision, but I did what I thought was best for the girls."

"What was that?"

"I had some old stationery from their father's office, and every week, I would type a letter to them from him. I filled it with news of what was happening in Mississippi, but I got all that from my mother and my sister. The girls were only four, five, and seven years old at the time, so they didn't realize that the letters were postmarked in Dallas."

“That was a sweet thing to do for your children. I’d like to think I would have done something like that.”

Cleave didn’t say a word.

“I thought it was a sweet thing, too, at the time, and it worked pretty well for a couple of years. As it turned out, their dad managed to use that artificial connection that I had forged for him as a kind of leverage, but in time, the girls started to notice their father was not the generous, chatty guy who had shared everything with them in letters. He was a self-centered man only concerned with what he wanted, and all he wanted was to have the appearance of an intact family. It would have been too much effort to make that happen.”

Sally looked at Cleave, but neither of them said anything.

“He had no real concern for his children, or me, and I made a mistake trying to shield my daughters from the truth. As scripture says, ‘all things hidden shall come to light and God will reveal the purposes of the heart.’ Eventually, the girls came to an understanding of what I had done and why.”

“That’s good,” Sally said.

“Yes, but to achieve a real reconciliation with them, I had to talk to my daughters about it. I had to tell them what I was thinking back then, and why I did what I did. They needed to know that, although I thought it was best for them at the time, I was wrong to try to protect their father’s reputation by lying about his behavior.

“There is no value in living and perpetuating a lie, no matter how long it has been going on. There can be no solid, healthy relationships based on lies. Whether we recognize it or not, lies insidiously drive wedges between people.”

There was a deafening silence in the old kitchen when Kelly stopped talking. She decided to concentrate on her pie. She didn’t even raise her eyes to see the expression on Cleave’s face, but she could imagine it well enough. She waited. She heard the clock ticking. She heard the hum of the air conditioner and the refrigerator. She heard herself chewing her pie. She heard milk going down her throat.

The old woman pushed her chair back from the table and rose to her feet. Kelly was suddenly so filled with compassion that she stood and threw her arms around Cleave’s mom.

"Thank you for your pie and your son and everything!"

Sally Cleaver Cummins didn't say a word, but gave Kelly a little pat on the shoulder, and then turned to go to her room.

Without looking at Cleave, Kelly carried her plate, fork, and glass to the sink. She rinsed them much more thoroughly than was necessary, waiting for him to say something, but he was silent. She put some liquid soap on a sponge and washed the plate and the fork vigorously.

She cleaned inside the glass with the soapy sponge and carefully removed a small trace of lipstick from the rim. She rinsed everything for a long time in very hot water. She took a dish towel from the top drawer and started methodically drying each tong of the fork.

"No matter how long you take to do the dishes, I'll be right here waiting for you."

He could see Kelly's shoulders rise and fall with the deep breath that she took and released.

"Or," he continued, rising from the chair and moving behind her, "I'll be standing right here."

Kelly felt his arms encircle her.

"I'll be standing right here, with my arms around the most wonderful princess in the world."

Kelly placed the fork on the drain board, and turned to face Cleave. He embraced her gently, and she wrapped her arms around him, pressing her head against his shoulder. After a moment, he lifted her chin with his right hand. She looked into his eyes and saw her future.

Cleave kissed her tenderly on the forehead and then on each cheek. Finally, he kissed her lightly on her lips. When she did not resist, he kissed her again, more insistently.

"Mmmm. Your mouth is good for more than just eating and talking, Princess. I've been wondering about that all week, and now I know. For sure."

He kissed her again and she did not resist.

Chapter 15

August 12, 1994 ~ Friday, later in the evening

Kelly sat on the edge of the guest room bed and listened to the sounds of Cleave in the shower down the hall. She had insisted that he go first because she wanted time to soak in the tub and to think without being rushed. When Cleave kissed her there in his mother's kitchen, that first kiss ignited strong, old emotions, and Kelly knew she needed to deal with them.

Moments after the water was turned off, Kelly heard the sound of the shower curtain being pushed aside. Less than a minute later, the light switch clicked off, and the old wooden door creaked open. Cleave emerged from the bathroom wearing an old Texas A&M tee-shirt and a pair of gym shorts.

He turned toward her room instead of his own. Kelly felt a little twinge of excitement. And fear.

"What are you doing in here?" she whispered loudly, as he came through her open door. "Your mom will have a fit!"

"Your turn in the bathroom," he whispered back at her.

"Thanks," she said sheepishly.

She stood and he gave her a little kiss on the cheek.

"Good night, Princess. I trust the old battle-ax didn't put a pea under your mattress. I'm going to find the brownies. She always has brownies hidden somewhere in the kitchen."

Cleave left her room quietly to search for brownies. Kelly took her nightgown, robe, and toiletries to the bathroom and locked the door. Though the moon would not be full until the next weekend, there was enough moonglow coming through the window for Kelly to see without using the overhead light.

In the semi-darkness, she turned on the hot water, and squeezed a few drops of "Joy Shower Gel" into the tub, inhaling its distinctive jasmine and rose aromas. She shed her clothes and stepped into the big old tub for a long soak.

When the tub was full and the water was turned off, Kelly heard the unmistakable sound of voices in the kitchen.

Sally and her son were obviously at the table again. Kelly would have given anything to eavesdrop on them, but their words were muffled by the hallway between them. Kelly quit trying to spy and settled back with her own thoughts.

The kiss. It was that kiss that caused the trouble, bringing back memories of Cameron's first kiss so many years ago.

That kiss with Cameron had been in her own kitchen in Vicksburg, just a few miles from Port Gibson, and yet so far away. The emotions surged through her again. Uninvited.

She was only 13 when Cameron kissed her the first time. Now she was in her mid-forties. Surely, if Cam had kissed her only that one time, she would have long since forgotten it. If she had mentally let him go when he went off to college, the feelings would not have lingered.

If they had stayed away from each other instead of being inexorably drawn together year after year, through his marriage and hers, none of this would be happening now. She could be soaking in the tub thinking only of Cleave instead of being carried back to Cameron.

Nothing could change what they had done. Kelly knew that. Writing about it for the past several years had helped her deal with the raw emotions. She could face herself squarely in the mirror now, but she had not been prepared for the feelings that were triggered by Cleave's kiss in his mother's kitchen. She would definitely have to do something different now.

Then she remembered that doing something different was what had led her to meeting Cleave. She had simply changed seats in her favorite café. That led to meeting his friends. That led to meeting him. She had no idea about any of it at the time, and yet it had been easy enough. Yes, easy enough, she decided. She would simply do something else different now.

Instead of turning on the shower to wash her hair, she let herself slide down under the warm, Joy-filled water. She let her thoughts about Cameron come out of her head, float down the length of her hair, and slide off into the water.

She had to surface for air after a few moments, but she took another breath and slid under the water again. She deliberately thought more thoughts about her years with Cameron and she pictured the scenes flowing from her brain, flowing down the length of her hair, and flowing harmlessly into the warm bath water, flowing from her and dissipating into oblivion. She ran her fingers through her hair, relaxed at a new level, and felt the tension leave her body.

When Kelly emerged the third time, she turned on the showerhead and allowed the residue of gel, conditioner and memories to flow down the drain. She felt clean. Free.

She knew that Cameron would reappear in her life, if only because his threat to destroy her still hung over her head. Nevertheless, she vowed then and there that she would not let any of her old feelings for Cameron resurface to dominate the “marketing” negotiations scheduled for the next month.

Neither her feelings for Cameron nor her feelings for her own sister would control Kelly in any way. She was clean. She was free. She could deal with anything now. As she stepped gingerly from the tub in the dark bathroom, Kelly began to sing softly,

*Redeemed... redeemed...
Redeemed by the blood of the Lamb;
Redeemed... redeemed...
His child, and forever, I am.*

The next morning, Kelly awakened happy that she had forced herself to go to sleep after her rejuvenating bath. She had been tempted to eavesdrop on Cleave’s conversation with his mother, but thought better of it for several reasons, not the least of which was her own personal need for privacy. She wouldn’t want someone nosing into her conversations, and she respected Cleave’s. Still, she was curious.

When she heard stirring in the kitchen, Kelly dressed quickly and walked down the hall to see what was happening. Cleave was sitting at the table with a glass of juice while his mother was preparing pancake batter.

“Good morning,” Kelly said cheerfully.

“I hope we didn’t wake you, dear. I wanted you to get a good night’s sleep. You had such a long day yesterday. Cleave told me all about it when we both sneaked back into the kitchen for brownies.”

“I had a lovely day yesterday.”

“Cleave said you won some money at the casino.”

“Is that what he said?”

“Did you really tell your mother I gambled yesterday?”

"Good morning. Yes, I did. I gave you \$100 to bet. You came back with \$120, saying you had a good time."

"Right, but told you I don't gamble. It's a waste."

"What about the money? The extra twenty bucks?"

"I found a twenty in the bathroom and there was no one around, so I stuck it in my pocket. The hundred was a sure bet and the twenty was pure luck. My kind of gambling."

Sally laughed.

"I told you, Son, that you can believe a woman with a hearty appetite. If she says she doesn't gamble, then she doesn't gamble. Kelly, how many pancakes for you?"

"How about starting with three? And where's that peach pie? I hope y'all didn't devour it along with the brownies."

Kelly opened the refrigerator, and pulled out a gallon jug of milk. She poured herself a full glass and sat down.

"I'm sure you would tell me if there were something you wanted me to do in your kitchen, Miss Sally."

"You've got that right, dear. It's my kitchen, and I like to be in charge here."

"I couldn't agree more. What a woman does in the kitchen is fun, personal, and important."

Sally checked for bubbles and started flipping pancakes. Kelly took the opportunity to smile at Cleave. He fully appreciated her comment about activity in the kitchen, and gave her a surreptitious wink.

Breakfast around the old table was delightful that morning. The pancakes were fluffy, the bacon was crisp, the local honey was fresh, and the conversation was light.

Kelly realized that Sally had a somewhat gruff way of talking to her son, but under it all was a strong foundation of maternal love and pride. Sally had probably decided, when she was left to raise little Cleave alone, that pushing him with high expectations would ultimately make him a better man.

Sally had probably tried hard to give the boy what an absent father could not. In the process, she may have cheated him of some of the love that he craved. He still didn't know how to get it. Kelly had no intention of becoming his mother and coddling him, but this little visit confirmed what she had suspected about Cleave in his relationships with women.

The big question left unanswered was whether or not the Cowboy could and would give the Princess what she needed. The jury would remain out on that issue, but maybe the visit with her daughters later that day would provide some insights. She looked forward to it.

Kelly was truly disappointed that they had to leave Miss Sally's house so soon. Cleave might have shared the feeling. It was clear that Sally did.

"Kelly, I can't tell you how much your visit has meant to me," the older woman said, while Cleave was loading the bags in the car. "You're good for my son. I hope you'll stay patient with him. He has a good heart, if you can find it. I think you may have the key."

Sally gave Kelly a hug at the bottom of the steps, and reached out to include Cleave as he returned from the car.

"Son, you'd better treat this girl like a princess. If I ever hear about you being mean to her, I'm gonna hitch a ride to Dallas and give you what for."

"Yes, ma'am. I'm gonna treat her right. I might have to call you from time to time to ask you how to handle her."

"You just listen to her. She'll tell you exactly what she wants, and when she wants it. You better trust her to know what she needs, and you surely better believe every word that comes out of her mouth. If you don't, you have no chance."

Kelly felt tears forming and saw them in Sally's eyes too.

"Good lands," Cleave said impatiently, "I never saw such carrying on in the front yard."

"Get used to it!" Kelly and Sally exclaimed at the same time, using one of his favorite expressions.

Cleave dropped his head to his chest.

"I don't have a chance here, do I?"

"It's up to you," the two women responded together.

"That does it! We're leaving now."

"There are three more females for you to deal with in Vicksburg, Cleave, unless my mother and my sister drive over from Jackson. Could be five more."

"Help me, Momma! Help me! Save me from her family!"

“Okay, Son, if you’ll give me a few minutes to get ready, I’ll ride up to Vicksburg with you to meet them.”

She turned and tromped up the porch steps, heading for the front door.

Cleave stood there undecided about what to do for a moment. He was obviously worried that his mother was serious about joining them. Kelly thought it might be fun.

When Cleave’s mother reached her front door, however, she turned back to wave at them.

“Bye! Y’all have a safe trip and come back soon!”

Knowing that she had put a little touch of fear in her big son, Sally laughed and disappeared into the house.

Chapter 16

August 13, 1994 ~ Saturday, early afternoon

“Your daughters are drop-dead gorgeous, too” Cleave said as he opened the car’s passenger door for Kelly. He walked around the car, got in, fastened his seat belt, and turned to look at her. “Hmmm. I guess they got their looks from their dad since their mom still has hers.”

Kelly chuckled a bit, but she was feeling nostalgic after being with her girls for the past two hours. The time had flown, and she realized that their lives seemed to be rushing ahead at a hectic pace, going God-only-knows-where.

It was some consolation to think that God, in fact, did know where it was all going. On the other hand, God didn’t share the details with Kelly, so it wasn’t that comforting.

“Want to meet my daughter in Memphis?”

“It’s a long way back to Dallas. Are you kidding?”

“Yes, of course, I’m kidding. We’ll only go as far as the farm tonight, if that’s okay with you, Princess. We can go to church together in the morning, ride a bit tomorrow afternoon, maybe invite Landon and Joan to come over for dinner, and then drive back to Dallas on Monday in time to go to work.”

“You want me to go to church with you again? After last Sunday, when I embarrassed you by playing the piano in front of God and everybody?”

“I guess I forgot to mention that it was the best ivory-tickling that church has ever heard. We can only hope that Miss MayNelle is still under the weather tomorrow.”

“Cleave, that’s a terrible thing to say! And what will everyone at church think if I’m there with you again?”

“They’ll think I haven’t blown it yet. The pastor will probably want to come by the house for tea. You’ll be asked to join a committee, and I’ll be put in charge of raising funds for next year’s summer camp scholarships.”

“You are kidding, right?”

“Hardly. I know these people out here. They are going to take your presence very seriously.”

Kelly did not know how to respond to that, so she sat quietly as they headed across the Mississippi River Bridge

with the west-bound traffic. She stared out the passenger window and searched upriver for barges, as she did when she was a kid on the bluff such a long time ago. Cleave's car was moving too fast to allow her to see much progress from the barge coming downriver. Cleave always seemed to be moving fast, but she supposed he enjoyed the pace.

"And you?" Kelly asked, as they crossed into Louisiana. "Are you taking my presence very seriously?"

"There is no other way to take the presence of a princess."

"Come on, Cleave, cut your cute talk about the princess and tell me the truth."

"You are something, always demanding truth on the spot. Okay. I have known you for one week, and I already know you better than any woman I've ever met. Maybe it's because you're more like a man in a lot of ways. At the same time, though, I'm afraid I can't ever know you completely because you are very deep and, let's face it, I'm not.

"Kelly, I think that what you truly want from a man is to be known completely, and loved for who you are. You need to be understood and appreciated. I'm not sure I could ever know and understand you that well. I could certainly appreciate you, and I probably could fall in love with you... the best I know how.... I may have already done that."

Cleave stared straight ahead as he spoke, not daring to look at Kelly for her response. She said nothing for a long while. They passed the Delhi exit. The name reminded her of India and the Taj Mahal. She wondered if Shajahan, the ruler who had constructed the amazing mausoleum for his favorite wife, had ever truly understood her, even after they had 14 children together.

Kelly wondered if a man could ever truly understand a woman, but Cleave knew something. He knew that she wanted to be understood. That was certainly a good first step. Why did Cleave think he couldn't go all the way to knowing her completely? She wondered if that might be expecting way too much from him, or from any man.

"You've been awfully quiet for most of this trip home," Cleave said as they passed the county line. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine, thanks. I guess I'm tired and feeling a little nostalgic. Plus, I'm not crazy about being in the car for such a long time. I don't know how you can keep driving, especially into the Texas sun. Squinting my eyes is wearing me out."

"I don't mind driving, but I did buy my farm on the east side of Dallas so I'd never have to drive into the sun, either going to work in the morning, or coming home."

Kelly nodded. She knew enough about real estate to know there were plenty of reasons for the acreage east of Dallas to sell for twice as much as that on the west. No one liked driving into the sun, whether they ever consciously considered that factor or not. She felt sorry for the people who lived in Fort Worth and commuted to Dallas every day. She couldn't imagine having a job that could justify that much miserable time on the highway.

When they exited the interstate and turned onto the county road to Pleasant Pass, Kelly felt immediate relief. The overhanging trees shading the road offered a sort of welcoming transition back to the farm. It was hard to believe that only a week had passed since she saw that side road for the first time with Rick last Saturday.

"Have you heard from Rick this week?"

"He called on Wednesday afternoon to tell me that a gorgeous blond had nearly caused a riot in his restaurant. It seems that all the wet-backs were leaving their posts in the kitchen to get a look at her. Otherwise, nothing new."

Kelly smiled. She wondered if there were any truth at all to his story, but it didn't matter. She decided to take it as a straightforward compliment. If she expected him to take her at her word, she would have to start believing Cleave, no matter how outlandish his statements were. It was only fair to apply the same rules to each of them.

"I can hardly wait to have a nice soak in your big tub," Kelly said, as he turned onto the long dirt driveway.

"Enjoy it. I'm going to take Jet out for awhile. Got to ride a head-strong horse often and hard to keep him in line, or he'll think he can take over."

Kelly thought that she detected a double meaning in Cleave's words, but she decided to go for face value. She was too tired to be clever, and didn't want an argument.

The sun had set and the tub water was cool by the time Kelly heard Cleave and Jet returning down the drive. She hurried to dry herself, get dressed in clean jeans, and saunter to the back porch. She sat on the bottom step while Cleave washed Jet, put him in the barn, and stowed the saddle and gear in the tack room.

The two Border Collies delivered back to the farm by Landon and Joan last weekend had been following Cleave and Jet on their jaunt, but walked over to the porch to examine the newcomer on the back step. Kelly was interested in them too.

"Let me look at your name tag," Kelly said, reaching for the collar and pulling the female toward her.

"Nell? We rhyme if I call you Nelly, and I think I will. Sit down here, Nelly." The dog complied.

Kelly pulled the male closer.

"Jim," she said, reading his tag and scratching behind his ears. "Good boy, Jim."

The dogs sniffed her and groveled and vied for attention as Kelly enthusiastically petted both of them. They didn't leave her side when their master approached.

Kelly had not turned on the porch lights, not wanting to draw insects to the house. At first, Cleave didn't see her sitting on the bottom step with his two cattle dogs. He did not appear to be happy when he noticed the trio.

"If this isn't a fine how-do-you-do! There you sit, not breaking a sweat, taking over my dogs."

"I'm not taking over your dogs, Cowboy. They're only here to guard the house."

"Did you feed them?"

"No. I don't know what they need, or where it is."

"I'll get it."

Cleave walked past her into the house. He returned a few moments later with a huge stainless steel scoop filled with dry dog food. He carried the food over to the corner of the porch and poured it into two dark brown bowls that Kelly had not noticed on the dark brown planks of the porch.

Then Cleave gave a little whistle. Both dogs ignored him as they kept rubbing against Kelly and enjoying her caresses.

"Stop petting my dogs!"

Kelly stopped and rose to her feet.

"Excuse me? Did you just command me to stop petting your dogs?"

"I did. They're working farm animals, not lap dogs."

Kelly abruptly turned her back on Cleave and started walking toward the barn. The dogs followed her. Cleave whistled at them again, this time a little louder. Again, they ignored him. Kelly would never want to encourage a dog to disobey its master, but she also thought that Cleave deserved a come-uppance. She kept walking and the two dogs kept trotting along beside her.

"Nell! Jim! Get over here!" he yelled louder.

Kelly stopped and knelt down in the dirt. She put an arm around each of the two recalcitrant animals, and whispered in their ears.

"You two better get back to the house and eat your dinner or we're all going to get in trouble."

Then standing, she commanded loudly, "Go home!" and they scampered back to Cleave. Kelly didn't follow them, but walked into the barn.

"Joe?... Joe?"

Kelly heard a rustling in the dark, and hoped it was just a horse in the straw. Surely, if it had been some other kind of animal, the dogs would have already reacted. Joe made a soft, snorting noise, and stretched his neck over the rail. Kelly didn't realize that she had been apprehensive until she heard herself exhale loudly.

"Joe, how are you, big fella?"

He nuzzled his nose against her hand, and lowered his head so she could pet him between his ears. Then, Kelly went into the tack room and felt around in the dark. She found a length of rope, fastened a large noose with it, slipped it loosely over Joe's head, and opened his gate.

Cleave was coming toward them as Kelly led Joe from the barn with the loose rope around his neck.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Joe and I are taking a walk. It's a lovely evening, and I think that a peaceful walk with a gentle gelding is exactly what I need. You have to ride a stallion often and hard to keep him in line, and frankly, I don't have the energy or the inclination for dealing with a stallion tonight."

"You're just too cute, aren't you? You think you can take a horse for a walk like a dog on a leash?"

"I don't know about other horses, but I can certainly take Joe for a walk."

"Do you want me to put a saddle on him?"

"No, thanks, I just want to walk. Joe understands that. Now, if you'll excuse us...."

Cleave stepped aside. Kelly and Joe sauntered slowly down the driveway in the light of a dim moon. Kelly let Joe stop to nibble what he wanted.

Cleave had stomped over to the porch, but was watching from a distance.

"Stop that! You're going to spoil my horse! I don't let him eat clover!"

"Don't pay any attention to him," Kelly whispered as Joe took another nibble. She stroked his neck and flanks. "That cowboy is mean and selfish and he doesn't care what anyone else wants. We will have our treats when we want them."

Smelling a heavy aroma in the dusky night, Kelly found some honeysuckle and pulled off a bloom. She pinched the end of it just enough to pull the stamen out, drawing a delicious morsel of sweetness from it. She savored the taste, and then enjoyed another and another, while Joe nibbled on clover. She realized that she didn't want to walk so much as she wanted to enjoy a star-lit evening with someone who understood her.

Kelly looked at the brilliant array of stars in the East Texas sky. Far away from the artificial lights of any town, the vast heavens above little Pleasant Pass were punctuated with countless sparkling celestial gems. On such a night, it would be lovely to lie on a quilt in the field, stare at the stars, and talk in muted whispers with an affectionate companion. She sat down in the thick grass, leaned against a post, and fell asleep.

Chapter 17
August 13, 1994 ~ Saturday night

Joe gave a little attention-seeking snort. Kelly awoke from her brief nap on the ground, wondered what time it was, and reached up to pet Joe on his nose. She stood, and Joe rubbed his head against her. His gesture made Kelly feel even lonelier and more aware of needing a human touch. She wondered why her companion of choice tonight had to be a horse.

Unkind thoughts about Cleave Cummins distracted her as she resumed her slow walk down the long dirt driveway. Joe padded along beside her, rubbing his nose against her shoulder to let her know that he understood.

When they arrived at the gate, it opened automatically, but Kelly turned back toward the house.

Joe contemplated the easy escape route through the gate. Both he and Kelly knew that she could not stop a thousand pound horse by pulling on a simple rope around his neck. Cleave would never forgive her if Joe broke loose because she hadn't put a bit in his mouth.

Kelly dropped the rope, and patted Joe on his flank.

"Let's go back to the barn, big fella."

She started walking toward the lights of the barn, trusting Joe to follow her. She heard the gate close automatically and in a moment she felt Joe's breath on her arm.

"Good boy," she said, reaching for his nose. "You're a very good boy. If only you could train Cleave as well as he has trained you."

Joe tossed his head and snorted loudly into the night air. Kelly understood that he was laughing.

By the time Kelly returned Joe to his stall in the barn, she was relaxed and ready to deal with Cleave civilly. He was visible to her through the screen door, sitting in his large leather chair, reading a book by the light of the old floor lamp.

Cleave looked peaceful and serene, but Kelly knew that his looks could be deceiving. She opened the door quietly.

"Nice walk?"

"Yes, thank you. It was lovely. Joe is such a dear."

“Apparently, you have not yet noticed that Joe is actually a horse and not a deer. I suspect he will be acting like a lap dog soon enough.”

Kelly laughed.

“You simply have to control everything, don’t you?”

Cleave closed his book and frowned at her.

“Let me remind you that this is my farm. Joe is my horse. Nell and Jim are my dogs.”

“Yes, and I’m sure that you have a chronological series of Property Settlement Agreements to confirm those facts. Please take note that I have not, and I will not ever, try to take ownership of any of your things.”

“No. You’re just coming out here and upsetting the way things have always been!”

“Silly me. I was under the distinct impression that you were not totally happy with the way things have always been. You have a seriously flawed track record with women that supports my conclusion. If you have not been happy in the past, why are you afraid of a few little changes now? But, if you were happy, why in the world did you change that?”

“Can you ever shut off your overly-analytical brain for a couple of hours? Just be a woman?”

“Are you implying that a woman should be a creature with her brain shut off?”

“I don’t know what I’m implying, at least, not about women in general.”

Kelly stared at him and said nothing.

“I don’t like it that you’re always analyzing me.”

“If you consistently acted decently toward me, I wouldn’t have to be analyzing what’s going on in your head. I’m being myself. Sometimes you seem to like me as I am, and sometimes you don’t. You call me ‘Princess,’ but half the time, that’s your sarcastic response to something that I want. The rest of the time, it’s a complimentary term to describe, in your words, the ‘drop-dead-gorgeous woman’ you seem to want to show off. What in the world do you want from me?”

Cleave rose from his chair and dropped his book on the cushion. He walked over to Kelly, put his arms around her, and whispered in her ear.

"I wanted to go dancing with you tonight, but you preferred to pet my dogs and take a walk with my horse."

"Your dogs and your horse are sensitive to my needs, and you're not. Plus, you yelled at me."

"I didn't yell!"

"I have absolutely no interest in having a 'he-said / she-said' argument. There are no winners. Maybe you didn't yell at me. Let me put it another way. I didn't like your words and your tone when I was petting Nelly and Jim. I will not tolerate, and I certainly refuse to get used to, behavior like that. You managed to control yourself at your mother's house and not get into an argument with her. Why can't you do the same for me?"

"That was less than 24 hours with my mother."

"You told me previously that you couldn't be in a room with her for more than five minutes without getting into an argument. You managed to adopt a new behavior this time. You did something different."

"That's because you were there with your threat hanging over my head."

"I don't want to hang threats over your head to make you behave decently. If it's too much of an effort, you'll soon get tired of it and resent me for it. Perhaps trying to be decent is what always led to your Property Settlement Agreements."

"No. That can't be it."

"Why not?"

"Because I never tried to be decent before."

Kelly laughed, and threw her arms around him.

"You are so amazingly attractive when you drop your phony defenses and tell the truth!"

"Are you saying I've been a liar up until now?"

"Cleave, I think that you have lied to yourself for so long, you don't know what a lie is. Then, you think you're hearing lies everywhere, even when they don't exist."

"There you go, analyzing again."

"It's what I do. Get used to it."

It was Cleave's turn to laugh.

"So, you're going to keep analyzing me?"

"Okay, I'll make you a deal. As long as you're decent to me, I won't analyze you."

"And if I quit being decent to you? Then what?"

"I still won't analyze you. I promise. I'll just leave."

"Fair enough, though I think that's a bit of a threat."

"As the saying goes, 'it's not a threat, it's a promise.'"

"All right, Princess. Would you like to take a little walk with me now? Would that be a decent thing to do?"

"That would have been lovely earlier, but I already took a walk with Joe."

Cleave sighed deeply, but didn't say anything.

"I would, however, love to go dancing with you now. Do you know any good honky-tonks in this neck of the woods, Cowboy?"

Cleave grinned and pulled her close.

"I do, Princess. I do, I do."

Kelly ran upstairs, changed her blouse, and put on her dancing boots. The previous week's honky-tonk scene was repeated, but this time the bouncer left off his knife-or-gun question, the cashier greeted Kelly by name, and the waitress kept Kelly's glass of tonic fresh without ever being asked.

The biggest difference from the previous week came on the way home. It was after two o'clock in the morning, but Cleave was stone-cold sober when he confessed to Kelly, "My mom told me the truth about my dad last night."

"Wow! What happened then?"

"After she told me about her lies and her reasons for lying, I told her that I had known the truth since I was a kid. I explained that I had seen my dad in Memphis a few years after he supposedly died in Korea. When my class took a field trip to the Memphis Zoo, I saw him there with a woman and a little boy. My dad never saw me."

"That must have been a difficult conversation."

"Yes, and that's all I'm going to say about it. I'm not going to have you analyzing me, but I'll admit that my mom cried and I might've shed a tear too. I just wanted to tell you 'thanks.'"

Chapter 18

August 14, 1994 ~ Sunday, morning

Kelly heard a quiet tap-tap-tap on the bedroom door. She forced herself awake and squinted into the daylight streaming through the windows. The floral wallpaper reminded her that she was still at the farm.

"Is that you, Cleave?"

"Yes. May I come in?"

"Sure."

The door opened slowly. Cleave came in with a glass of orange juice in one hand, and jar of roses in the other.

"Good morning, Princess."

"Good morning, Cowboy."

"I hated to wake you, but it's getting late, and I know you wanted to go to church this morning. Are we okay?"

"We're fine. This is lovely."

Cleave set the jar of roses on the small bedside table and handed the juice to Kelly, who was now sitting.

"Don't get used to this fancy treatment."

"I wouldn't consider it. Then it wouldn't be special."

"Hmmm, I never thought of it that way."

"What time is it?"

"Right at nine o'clock. Are you ready for breakfast?"

He laughed at his own question.

"Of course, you're always ready for a meal and it's ready for you. I've got bacon in the oven and toaster waffles. I'll be waiting downstairs."

Cleave walked down the stairs, and as the smell of bacon frying wafted to her room, Kelly repeated aloud, "Don't analyze. Don't analyze. Don't analyze. Enjoy it."

The phone rang as Kelly walked into the kitchen. She looked at Cleave and tried not to analyze why he seemed to be ignoring it. It stopped, and then rang again.

"I guess you want me to answer the phone," he said.

"I guess you'd rather do it than have me do it."

He nodded, and lifted the receiver.

"Hello.... Speaking.... She is.... Sure.... Bye."

"It was one of your fans."

"What? One of my fans?"

"It was the preacher saying that Miss MayNelle's still sick and he wants you to play the piano. You heard me say 'yes.'"

"Without asking me first."

"For Pete's sake, Kelly. Last week you volunteered. I thought it was fine. What did I do wrong now?"

"Nothing. It is fine. I'm glad to do it. Meanwhile, the bacon smells great. Thanks for fixing breakfast."

Cleave pulled out her chair.

"Let's say grace."

After breakfast, Cleave did the dishes while Kelly put on some makeup and tried to get rid of the puffiness in her eyes after the late night of dancing. She needed more sleep.

They arrived at church a few minutes before ten. Again, the asphalt parking lot was full of old and new pickup trucks, a couple of vans, and several jeeps. Again, Cleave parked his diesel pickup toward the back of the lot, under a shade tree.

They walked in and sat together in Cleave's pew until Kelly went forward to play hymns and lead the music. She returned to sit beside Cleave during the sermon, and then played the piano for the final hymn.

Without any discussion, they casually slipped into a routine of spending weekends at the farm, with Kelly playing the piano at the church on Sunday mornings. Miss MayNelle seemed to be happy to retire from her decades of music duties. Kelly just as easily retired from her shorter stint of teaching Sunday school to second-graders in Dallas.

As Cleave predicted, the pastor soon suggested a visit to the house, during which Kelly assured him over a cup of tea that she and Cleave were not "living in sin" every weekend. He didn't seem to know or care about their dancing at the honky-tonk on Saturday nights.

The next week, one of the ladies of the church asked Kelly to be on the committee to oversee the monthly pot-luck lunch after church. Of course, she called it dinner, as folks in East Texas do. Kelly agreed to serve. The next "dinner" would be the last Sunday in August, and Kelly took her large stainless-steel roasting pan to the farm so she could cook three chickens at once in Cleave's oven.

It seemed natural to start taking such items to the farm, along with clothes for Mondays back at the office. It became convenient for Kelly to share a dry-cleaning bag with Cleave, and then to leave notes for Annie the cleaning lady to make a special effort in the bunkhouse because friends were coming for the Labor Day weekend.

The young pastor, with his wife, came for the Labor Day barbecue at the farm, and he took the opportunity to ask Cleave to head the fund-raising for the next year's summer camp scholarships. The preacher took no note, or at least didn't say anything, about the amount of beer consumed by Cleave and his cutting horse friends as they all enjoyed steaks on the expansive porches.

After the barbecue and the exodus of all their guests that evening, Cleave walked into the kitchen where Kelly was starting on the dishes. He wrapped his arms around her and whispered, "Thank you for a lovely day."

"It was lovely. It couldn't have been better."

"I have a surprise for you," he said, as a truck pulled into the yard. "I asked Annie to come clean the kitchen and porches, so I could take my princess on an evening ride."

"Great. What do I need to do?" Kelly asked. She dried her hands with a linen towel she had brought from home.

"Put on riding boots and meet me outside the barn."

Kelly was delighted. She had asked many times about taking a leisurely horseback ride at dusk, but Cleave always made some excuse, including Jet's temperament. He left Jet in the barn this time and rode a gelding. Kelly rode Joe.

At the end of the pleasant ride, as they watched the last glimmer of sunlight disappear across the lake, Kelly realized how truly romantic it could be. Finally, she thought she understood Cleave's reluctance to share such an evening. It probably brought back memories of other women and the inevitable Property Settlement Agreements.

"Is this what you wanted, Princess?"

Kelly reached over to touch his hand.

"It's exactly what I wanted, Cowboy."

Kelly didn't want to go back to work on the day after Labor Day. The weekend had been too much fun with all the guests at the barbecue, followed by the long-awaited evening ride with Cleave. Then she realized that it had been only one month since they met. One month exactly. It had only seemed like a long wait for that evening ride.

Cleave accelerated along the I-20 on-ramp, merged with the traffic heading into Dallas, opened the console, and pulled out a square envelope. He handed it to Kelly.

"In case you thought I had forgotten."

The card pictured yellow roses in a blue Mason jar. Inside, Cleave had written in classic architect block letters:

"A MONTH CAN BE A LIFETIME – THANK YOU FOR PUTTING UP WITH ME THIS LONG."

He had signed it simply, "Cleave." He had not included "love" or any other sentiment. "*Don't analyze. Don't analyze. Don't analyze,*" Kelly told herself. "*Enjoy it.*"

"This is so sweet. I feel bad that I forgot what day this is."

"Maybe this puts me up a point."

"It's not a contest."

At that moment, Kelly heard the opening of a favorite old Elvis song on the radio. She was tempted to raise the volume, but Cleave always wanted control of the radio station and the volume, as much as everything else in his life.

Cleave turned up the radio's volume and he reached for Kelly's hand while keeping his eyes focused on the highway. He began singing softly with the music, "*I can't help falling in love with you.*"

Kelly was immediately transported mentally back to high school. There was Cameron, driving that big Buick, pushing an eight-track tape into the player, and singing along with Elvis, "*I can't help falling in love with you.*"

Kelly glanced down and saw her hand in Cleave's. She looked across the front seat and saw Cleave driving. She closed her eyes and listened to Cleave singing to her.

Cameron Coulter is nothing but a memory, Kelly told herself, and like all memories, he can reappear in the blink of an eye. Memory can be triggered by a song, or a smell, or a touch. That doesn't mean I have to dwell on the memory.

Kelly opened her eyes, and sang along, *"I can't help..."*

They were interrupted by the ringing of Cleave's mobile phone. He answered and handed it to Kelly.

"It's your sister."

"Great timing," Kelly said to Mandy.

"I thought you'd be driving to work by now."

"Yeah, but with Cleave. What do you need?"

"Lindsey Brewster just called. He and Cameron want to talk with us at six today. He sent me a fax with all the issues spelled out. Will six o'clock work for you?"

"Six o'clock? Sure, but please don't call me on Cleave's phone again unless it's urgent."

"Sorry, but I wanted to get this out of the way ASAP. It seems that the president of the United States has a few things to consider besides the marketing of your book."

"So do I."

"Talk to you at six. Bye."

Kelly handed the phone back to Cleave.

The song, as well as the mood, was gone.

"Trouble in river city?" Cleave asked.

"Nothing I can't handle."

"Can I help?"

"No, you can't. No one can, but thanks for the offer."

"Okay, then. Join me for dinner at The Petroleum Club. I would have asked you sooner, but I wanted to surprise you that I remembered our anniversary."

"I was surprised. I was even more amazed that you remembered it while I didn't."

"So, dinner at six?"

"You heard me set an appointment with Mandy at six. Is this some kind of a test?"

"You promised not to analyze. I'm being decent to you."

"You have to admit it's an interesting coincidence that you would ask me to go to dinner at six, right after hearing me make another appointment for six. Not to mention that the last time you invited me to dinner at The Petroleum Club, it was a backhanded way of being invited to the church supper. Listen, Cleave, I can't have dinner at six. Is later okay?"

"I'll pick you up at 6:30."

"Seven."

"Six forty-five."

"Fine."

Cleave dropped Kelly at her office in Dallas, where she was greeted by a bouquet of 31 yellow roses. GailAnn had read the card, which said only, "31 roses." G.A. didn't realize it was for 31 days, but she dared not ask. She knew that Kelly wanted to keep this guy out of sight, though he must have brought her to the office today.

G.A. also noticed that Kelly had gotten in the habit of leaving her car in the gated parking lot over the weekends. Still, her boss did seem to be focused on her work when she was in the office.

Chapter 19
September 6, 1994 ~ Tuesday, morning

From her early childhood experiences of school's starting the day after Labor Day, Kelly still considered it to be the true beginning of the year. Therefore, she had scheduled a new initiative in one of the housing projects for that day.

By noon, it was all she could do to keep her mind focused on the business at hand as she met with Hispanic leaders from the housing project and a group of lawyers from the Hispanic Bar Association whom she had recruited to help.

At three o'clock, she called for a break and phoned the office to check messages. Gail Ann reported, "None."

"It's nice to hear someone speaking English," Kelly said. "Talk to me, G.A."

The receptionist was happy to tell Kelly about her Labor Day weekend activities. When GailAnn asked about what her boss had done over the past three days, Kelly told her that it was time to get back to the meeting.

"I guess you had a nice time," GailAnn said. "You got flowers," she added before she said, "Good-bye."

"*Flowers from Cleave, and faxes from Cameron,*" Kelly said to herself. "*A strange start for the new school year.*"

Kelly pushed all thoughts of her personal life from her mind, and walked back into the meeting. It was the worst time of day for her, and it seemed that everyone was talking faster and faster. She was getting a headache trying to follow and take notes.

"*Favor de hablar mas despacio,*" Kelly requested.

To her relief, everyone did slow down enough for her to get back into the conversation. By four o'clock, she had a list of the next steps for the group to take, and the individuals who would be responsible for accomplishing them.

An older Hispanic woman would be Kelly's main contact in the housing project and Kelly was disappointed that they had not chosen a bi-lingual person for the role. She suspected that Marta might have been a deliberate passive-aggressive choice because it would be more difficult for Kelly and any outsiders to communicate with her.

"Do not analyze. Do not analyze. Do not analyze," Kelly repeated as she drove home ahead of the traffic.

Although she was going to have dinner with Cleave at The Petroleum Club later, Kelly had a hearty snack as soon as she got home. Then, defying all rules she had learned in childhood, she headed immediately to the pool.

Kelly realized that she wouldn't have time to wash her hair before Cleave arrived, so she decided not to swim but simply to walk in the refreshing water. She needed to move after sitting all day, and she needed to relieve the tension that was building over her pending conversation with Mandy.

* * *

Kelly paced back and forth in her backyard pool, waiting for Mandy's call. It was 6:03 when the phone rang.

"Talk fast," Kelly said. "I have to be out of the pool by 6:30 to get ready for a dinner date with Cleave."

"Okay," Mandy answered. "I have a list of questions about your marketing plans. Let's start there."

"That's easy enough. I have no marketing right now. When I do devise one, I have no intention of sharing it."

"We're on speaker here. Did you hear her, Lindsey?"

"Loud and clear. Skip to the next items."

"Okay," Mandy said. "Kelly, the first thing is they want you to agree not to tell any publishers or the media about the full extent of your relationship with Cameron."

"Fine. I never intended to tell anyone which is why I wrote a novel instead of an autobiography. Next point?"

"They want you to use only the word 'relationship' when you talk about Cameron, and they want you to emphasize that you were childhood friends."

"No problem with that. Next?"

"You should say that the story is loosely based on your life. Semi-autobiographical, like most first novels."

"Of course. That's what it is. Next?"

"They don't care if you admit that 'from time to time' you and Cameron had sexual relations, as long as you do not give any exact dates or locations."

"What's their point?"

"Lindsey? The point?" Mandy asked.

"Okay, Kelly, it's to give the impression to the world that because you and Cameron knew each other for more than thirty-plus years, the sexual encounters could have occurred only when you were both single."

"I don't have a problem being vague with that."

"They do not want you to use the 'A' words."

"And they define the 'A' words how?" Kelly asked.

"'Adultery' and 'Affair.' They don't want either of those words used with potential publishers or the media."

"Fine, but, that's redundant. I already agreed to use only the word 'relationship.' What else?"

"That's it."

"That's it? All this for that? I never intended to do any of those things anyway."

"They want it completely understood and agreed."

"Fine. Here's my recap. First, I won't tell publishers or the media the full extent of my relationship with Cameron. Second, outside the book, I will paint only a broad-stroke picture indicating that Cam and I had a thirty-three year relationship that began when we were children.

"Third, I will say only that the novel is loosely based on my life and/or is semi-autobiographical, as most first novels are. Fourth, it's okay to indicate that Cam and I had a sexual relationship from time to time as long as I don't give specifics about dates or locations, thereby giving the impression that perhaps we were both single on such occasions.

"Fifth, I will specifically avoid using the 'A' words, which they define as 'Adultery' and 'Affair.' That's it. Did I get all that to their satisfaction?"

"Lindsey?"

"Fine."

"Since this was supposed to be a negotiation rather than a dictation, I want to know what's in this arrangement for me," Kelly stated emphatically.

"What do you want?" Mandy asked.

"Two things. I want an assurance, and then I want a way to confirm that this deal is still in place."

"What assurance?"

"In exchange for my not telling the truth about Cameron," Kelly began, "I want the highly esteemed and honorable President of the United States to promise that he and his people won't tell any lies about me."

"Lindsey?"

Pause.

"Fine."

"Wait. Let me re-phrase that, since I know how Cameron thinks. He knows full well that he is neither highly esteemed nor honorable, so in his mind, there is no such person, and this is no agreement at all. Here's the deal I want: In exchange for not telling the truth about Cameron, I want Cameron to swear that he and his people won't tell lies about me."

"Lindsey?"

Pause, with laughter in the background.

"Fine."

"Okay, and now I want some way to know that our deal is still in place and operating."

"Lindsey?"

A much longer pause ensued while Lindsey talked privately with Cameron beyond the range of the speaker phone. Kelly looked at the clock on the side of the cabana. This call was taking longer than she had hoped.

Kelly walked up the pool steps and grabbed the towel that was hanging on the hand rail. She was dry by the time Mandy resumed the conversation.

"How about this?" Mandy relayed. "To confirm the deal, Cameron and Lindsey will adopt an official White House position. If any publisher or media person needs to verify the truth of what you have told them regarding your relationship with Cameron, but within the guidelines we discussed, you tell them to call the White House and ask for Lindsey.

"The caller, of course, will assume that the official White House position will be a denial. Instead, you tell them in advance that Lindsey Brewster will say, "Quote. The White House will have no comment. Unquote."

"That is practically a denial in itself," Kelly said.

"No, it's not," Mandy insisted. "Think about this."

Kelly walked into her kitchen and looked at the clock. Cleave would arrive in a few minutes.

"What?" Kelly asked.

"You will tell the publisher or the reporter the exact words of the official White House position. That will include the words 'quote' and 'unquote.' No one will think that's a denial, because it's very obviously something different. It's obviously a code of agreement."

"Okay," Kelly said. "That's fine with me, but for now, I don't have any marketing plans, and I'm fairly sure that I'm not going to be referring anyone to the White House. If I finally do, though, this better work, or the deal is off."

"Right. Now memorize Lindsey's phone number to use so no one will have to deal with the White House receptionist and a tier of gatekeepers."

"Lindsey?"

"We're good here."

"I certainly hope so," Kelly said.

She disconnected the phone, headed for the bathroom, took a one-minute shower to rinse some of the chlorine off her skin, and quickly put on a sundress with a light jacket.

Cleave was ringing the doorbell as Kelly was retrieving her purse from the dining room table.

When she opened the door, he gave a little whistle.

"Looks like you must have had time for a nap after work today, Pampered Princess."

"Not exactly a pampered princess," Kelly replied, thinking about her just-ended negotiation with the White House, "but thanks. I'm ready for a lovely dinner."

There were yellow roses on their table when Kelly and Cleave arrived at The Petroleum Club. The dinner service was flawless, and the food was delicious. After dessert, Cleave handed Kelly a small, blue, Tiffany box.

"Don't get too excited about this," Cleave said. "It has nothing to do with a Property Settlement Agreement."

Kelly opened the box and was delighted to see a gold, horseshoe charm with the distinctive "T & Co." logo.

"It's a horseshoe for our good luck," Cleave explained. "A cowboy needs all the luck he can get with a princess."

* * *

“Thank you for a delightful evening, Cleave” Kelly said as they walked toward her front door. “I really appreciate your remembering our one-month anniversary. Roses at work, and more roses at dinner. The horseshoe charm. It’s too much.”

“Not for a princess,” he said. Cleave put the vase of roses down on the step and took Kelly in his arms. He kissed her gently on her forehead and then on both cheeks, but he deliberately avoided her lips.

“Would you like to come in for a few minutes?”

“That would be nice.”

He picked up the vase of roses while Kelly unlocked the door. Striding through the entry hall, Cleave glanced to his left at the dining room table, where roses from the office held center stage, and then went to the living area on the right where he put the roses on the coffee table.

“Would you like some herbal tea? It’s late for caffeine.”

Cleave nodded, took off his jacket, and made himself comfortable on the sofa while Kelly put water on to boil. She filled a small tray with cups, saucers, and tea accoutrements, and carried it to the coffee table. Then she sat beside Cleave to wait for the teapot to whistle.

“This is a nice place,” Cleave said. “Your fantastic piano would look right at home at the farm. We could put it in the corner of the great room and you could see out the window to the lake while you played it.”

“I’m only at the farm on the weekends. I need my piano closer every day.”

“What if I need you closer to me every day? What if I need you on the farm with me more than on the weekends? What if I need you in my bed?”

“That would be unfortunate because I’m not sharing a bed with you unless we have a serious commitment. And, if you think I’m hinting at a marriage proposal, I’m not.”

“We’ve been together a month. I’ve never waited that long for any woman.”

Kelly smiled and patted his hand. “That might explain your inordinate number of Property Settlement Agreements.”

She walked to the kitchen, poured the boiling water into a silver teapot, carried it to the living room, filled the cups, and put the pot on the tray. She busied herself with sugar and lemon while Cleave sat quietly, apparently thinking.

"You're suggesting that I keep getting divorced because I get married too soon?"

"I'm suggesting that you get married too soon because you get women in your bed too soon. That causes you to lose perspective, and you make irrational decisions based on what feels good at the time. You don't pay attention to the most important things."

"And I suppose you're going to tell me what those most important things are."

"Oh, no, I'm not! The most important things are personal and they are all different. If ours ever coincided, we might be able to marry, but meanwhile, we can't even talk about them without an argument. I prefer to enjoy your company."

"So, tell me one thing that's important to you."

"Okay. My writing."

"Writing? You mean grant requests and proposals?"

"No. I mean writing novels."

"You want to write a novel?"

"I've already written one that took me ten years to finish, and now I'm working on its sequel."

"Why didn't you tell me that already?"

"You never ask me about things like that. You are not interested in what makes me tick, unless it has something to do with what you want at the moment."

"You promised you weren't going to analyze me."

"I'm not. It doesn't take deep thinking to notice that you don't ask me about what's important to me. Granted, you make sure that I don't miss any meals when we're together, but you have your reasons for that."

"What are my reasons?"

"You know that I get grumpy when I'm hungry and you don't want me to be grumpy because that would adversely affect you, so you make sure we stop to eat. It's not about my need for nourishment. It's all about your need to have pleasant company."

"You must be getting hungry again, because you are becoming unpleasant."

"We're talking here, Cleave. I'm sorry if this strikes you as unpleasant. I'm not complaining about your behavior, and you certainly can be very sweet and generous, as you have been today. I'm simply noticing that you always seem to expect a pay-off. You even broached the subject of my going to bed with you, as if you are entitled to have me now because you've been nice to me for a month."

"I have no idea what you want!"

"That's true. No, it's only partly true. You do know what I want because you expressed it to me quite eloquently when we were on the way back from visiting your mother."

"What in the world did I say then?"

"You very accurately observed that what I want from a man is to be known completely, and loved for who I am. I need to be understood and appreciated."

"I do appreciate you!"

"You appreciate what I can do for you, but you do not appreciate me for who I am."

"You tell me that you're an honest person, Kelly. I figure that means 'what you see is what you get.' I like what I see, so what's the problem?"

"The problem is all the things you can't see. You can't appreciate a rainbow when you are yellow-blue color-blind."

"I am yellow-blue color-blind."

Kelly laughed aloud, but Cleave wasn't laughing.

"I'm sorry. You really are yellow-blue color-blind?"

"No, but I need a break here. What can I do?"

"Why don't we just keep being together as we have been, and see where it goes?"

"We're not really together. You sleep in the guest room."

"But I could be sleeping in another county. Cleave, I quit teaching my Sunday school class to spend weekends with. I have no social life in Dallas to be with you. I haven't written a word in my book in the last month because I've been focused on being with you and adjusting my schedule to suit you."

"I thought you were having a good time with me."

"I am. Mostly. But, Cleave, all you're focusing on is what you're NOT getting from me. It's still all about you, in your mind. You want to be satisfied in bed, and that's something I want too, by the way, but you're too willing to ignore everything else to get there. I've made that mistake before, and I don't want to make it again."

"This is about that phone call from your sister today, isn't it? What did she say about me?"

"The phone call wasn't about you."

"I'm not going to accuse you of lying."

"You'd better not. I'm telling you that the phone call was not about you. Everything is not about you."

She paused and considered delving into the whole story. The time did not seem right.

"It's getting late. You probably should go home so we can both get some sleep. It's been a long day, and it was lovely. Let's just think about that tonight."

"Now you're throwing me out."

Kelly sighed and poured herself another cup of tea.

"Stay as long as you like. Everything must be about what you want."

"I want to know a lot more about you. Tell me what your sister said about us."

Kelly laughed aloud.

"You could not be that bone-headed and have earned double degrees!"

"How did you know about my double degrees?"

"I saw your diplomas in the hallway at the farm."

"Oh, I forgot they were there."

"Did you see my diplomas in my office?"

"I don't pay attention to things that like."

"Indeed."

"What did your sister say about us?"

"Nothing."

"What was so important about the call then? And why did it have to be at six o'clock?"

"If it's not about you, it can't be important, right? Okay, Cleave. It was a four-person conference call, from another time zone, at the most convenient hour for everyone."

"Everyone except you. You had a dinner engagement."

"With you! I had a dinner engagement with you! Cleave, can you not hear yourself? You still think it's all about you."

"Okay, just tell me about the phone call."

"It was about marketing my novel."

"Why didn't you just say so?"

"I would have said so, but instead, I was addressing your very specific concerns regarding what my sister said about you. You did not ask me an open question, which you tend to avoid because you're really not interested in what I have to say, either more broadly or more deeply."

"Sorry. I'm glad you got your book on the market."

Cleave stood to leave.

"Thanks for the tea."

"Cleave, I'm tired and it really is too late to be talking about anything serious, but I can't let you go tonight thinking that I have my book on the market. Once again, you jumped to an easy conclusion, and discounted my concerns."

"Now what?"

"My book is not on the market, Cleave. There are some very powerful people who do not want it on the market, now or ever. The phone call was about that."

"Okay, fine. That's all I need to know. Get a good night's sleep and we'll talk tomorrow. Meanwhile, forget about the phone call. If I know you at all, I know you'll figure out a way to get what you want. It won't matter what your so-called 'powerful people' try to do about it."