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MORE THAN A MISTRESS
The Pendletons

Leanne Banks

More Than a Mistress

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Daniel Pendleton is restless. The eldest of six brothers and one sister, he was forced to grow up quickly after the deaths of their parents.Now, with his siblings all grown up, he finally has time to sow his own wild oats, to escape the role of the responsible, reliable Pendleton, if only temporarily. And there's just one woman he wants to live out his forbidden fantasies with: Sara Kingston.Sara firmly believes she can be nothing but bad news to a good man like Daniel. Her sensible side says she should avoid getting involved, but her sensual side wants nothing more than to give in to his offer of a passionate, no-strings affair. And after a few searing kisses, she gives in.Daniel thought getting Sara into his bed would get her out of his system. He didn't count on falling in love. Or that secrets from Sara's past would cause her to push him away…

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More Than a Mistress
Leanne Banks

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Previously published.

This book is dedicated to everyone who ever wondered if they were good enough…for love.

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Prologue

She wore a red silk slip.

The military would have called that slip a smart weapon because the vibrant undergarment didn't miss a single one of her lethal feminine curves, from high-thrusting breasts to a slim waist down to inviting hips.

Daniel's hands itched to trace those curves, to slide his hands into her long, tousled brown hair and bring her closer so that he could taste her mouth.

Her hazel eyes glinted gold in the wavering candlelight, and he could read the message in Sara Kingston's gaze. She wanted him. At last.

His heart raced as he reached for her. She was soft and warm, everything he'd ever wanted. He pushed the red slip down her shoulders and pulled her closer, catching his breath at the sensation of her breasts nestling against his chest.

He kissed her, stealing her little gasp. Daniel wasn't sure who was leading whom in this voyage of pleasure, but at the moment he felt too good to care.

He lifted one of her hands to his lips and noticed how small it seemed within his larger one.

"Fragile."

Sara's lips tilted in sultry, mesmerizing invitation. She moved back slightly and slid her fingers down his chest to his abdomen. "Capable."

Daniel's gut tightened. He knew what was coming.

Sara, with the sweet, sexy smile, wrapped her fragile, yet capable hand around him and stroked.

He groaned, feeling the breath back up in his chest. He swelled within her hand, the familiar punch of arousal flooding his blood. She brought him so much pleasure, but he felt the slightest edge of panic. She'd touched him before, brought him to the edge time and time again, only to leave him wanting.

He sensed her resistance to him was something she couldn't help. It was there shadowing her eyes, the sadness and the wanting. She wanted more, but something stopped her.

He reached for her shoulders when she began to fade away. "Stop! Don't go. For God's sake, don't leave me this time."

Her gaze grew tormented. "I don't know. I'm just not sure."

Daniel kissed her. "Be sure. I want you so much."

He saw the dreaded word forming on her mouth and kissed her again.

"Don't say no this time." He'd heard her say it so many times. It was like the lash of a whip across his soul. He needed her. He didn't understand why, he just knew he did. "Say yes. I'll take care of you."

Flashes of uncertainty came and went in her eyes. "Are you sure?" Her voice was small, almost childlike.

His heart turned over, and he dragged her closer, his hands caressing her thighs and seeking the treasure of her arousal. "Yes, but I need to hear you say the word. Just one little word, Sara."

Tentatively she moved over him, her hair swinging in a soft, fragrant curtain to his shoulders. She licked her lips, seeming to take courage.

"So close, Sara," he coaxed, swallowing past the dryness in his throat. "Just say the word."

"I want you."

"Say it," he muttered in a rough voice.

She hovered for a moment, then her eyes lit up. "Yes," she whispered and eased onto him. "Yesss."

Something tight and achy burst free in his chest. His excitement went beyond the physical. Her affirmative answer meant she accepted and trusted him. It meant that her feelings for him were

stronger than what lurked in the shadows. They stared at each other, and he laughed at how utterly invincible he felt. He'd never been this excited in his life.

Daniel didn't know which sent him running, tumbling over the edge: the way she clasped him inside her or that she'd finally said yes to him. Finally.

He raced down a track of sensation, a freight train roaring in his head, as he struggled to hold on to Sara. But her image bled away. His heart pounded furiously and his lungs screamed for oxygen. His release was powerful, shattering, propelled by too many nights of wanting and not having.

Shudders racked his body, his hands clasping and unclasping. But it wasn't sweet Sara's skin he touched. It was the cotton sheet on his bed.

Daniel's eyes flew open.

He was so disoriented, it took several deep breaths before he recognized his room. His familiar furniture seemed oddly out of place. Where were the candles? Where was Sara?

The night air cooled him quickly.

"Damn," he muttered, pushing aside the sheet and sitting on the side of the bed. Resting his elbows on his knees, he slid his hands through his hair in complete bewilderment. Another dream, Lord help him.

He let out a long, heavy sigh and shook his head. Oh, sure, this one had been different. This time she'd said yes, and she'd given him a measure of physical release.

His body was somewhat appeased, but his spirit wasn't.

Wearily he rose from the bed and followed his usual routine. He trudged to the connecting bathroom, stepped into the shower and jerked the cold-water faucet on full force. His body quivered, rebelling in shock. Something had to be done. He couldn't continue this way.

At thirty-three, Daniel Pendleton knew himself well. He knew what other people saw when they looked at him—a hardworking, upstanding, responsible citizen. The eldest of seven brothers and one sister, he'd managed the family farm since his father had died years ago. His father's death had taken away his opportunity to go to college, which still brought a sting of disappointment and regret. Daniel, however, wasn't the type to wallow in misery. He set his mind on something and got the job done.

He'd been involved with a few women, but he'd always made it clear that he wasn't interested in forever. His family obligations had stripped him clean of any desire for more permanent connections.

Daniel turned the faucet off and reached for a towel, thinking that he'd been reasonably pleased with his life until lately. Until Sara Kingston had taken up residence in his dreams. He scowled, scrubbing his chilled body with the towel.

He wasn't happy with his present state. Discontent had been rumbling in his gut, making him irritable, which wasn't the norm for him. His family would say Darnel wasn't difficult to please. His sister would claim he was her most easygoing brother. His friends would say he was the kind of man you could depend on.

There were things his family didn't know about him, though. Things nobody knew about him. When something got in his way, Daniel could be ruthless. Nobody knew it, because nobody had been stupid enough to get in his way.

Now there was Sara. She taunted and teased him night after night. She'd gotten into his blood like a fever no antibiotic could treat. He wanted her.

Daniel balled up the towel and crammed it into the clothes hamper. He'd given himself time to get over this foolishness, but time hadn't done the trick.

Glancing at the luminescent numbers on his alarm clock, he felt resolution harden within him like steel. It was time, once and for all, to get Sara Kingston out of his system.

There was only one way to do it. He would have to take her to bed.

Chapter One

"No," Sara said, softening the rejection with her most polite smile. "It's nice of you to ask, but I really need to check on the appetizers." She backed away, hoping she hadn't offended the client, but something about the way the man looked at her made her uneasy. She shouldn't have worn that red slip tonight.

Sara rolled her eyes. Paranoid! The man wasn't Superman. It wasn't as if he could see what kind of underwear she was wearing.

She checked the well-stocked linen-covered tables. Her boss, Carly Bradford, had pulled out all the stops and thrown a huge Christmas party aboard Matilda's Dream, the riverboat Carly owned and hired out for parties. Travel agents, local business representatives and Carly's seven brothers danced, dined, laughed and flirted on the three decorated decks. Not being one for social affairs, Sara had tried to beg off, but Carly was more than a boss. She was a friend, and she seemed determined to include Sara in every family event.

"You make a career of checking on the appetizers," a deep male voice said from behind her.

Sara stiffened. Daniel Pendleton. Ever since she'd accidentally spilled soup in his lap six months ago, he'd made her feel about as desirable as coffee dregs. Daniel had burned his hands in a barn fire, and Carly had asked Sara to help take care of him. Daniel hadn't been the least bit grateful. Their relationship was at best civil.

Sara took a calming breath and inhaled the faint scent of sandalwood and soap. She turned to face Daniel. "Carly's busy keeping everyone entertained. I'm just trying to be useful."

"Thought Carly said she wanted the staff to take the night off and act like guests." He gestured toward a waiter outfitted in black. "She even got a temp agency to provide waitstaff." His mouth tilted into a grin. "You're supposed to be having fun."

The white slash of his teeth disconcerted her.

"Wanna dance?"

Surprised at the invitation, Sara blinked, then automatically shook her head. "No," she managed. "I—"

"Why?"

She stared into his trademark Pendleton violet eyes and drew a complete blank.

If a name had to be put after the word masculine in the dictionary, it would have to be Daniel Pendleton. He had broad shoulders, a flat belly and slim hips, all of which were shown off to perfection tonight in a well-tailored navy suit. His dark brown hair had just a hint of a wave, and the few lines on his forehead and around his eyes added maturity to a handsome face.

It was more than how he looked, though, she admitted. It was the quiet confidence he emanated. Everything about the way he walked and talked said, Don't worry. I can take care of it. Sara had to take only a baby step farther in her mind to wonder how a man like Daniel took care of a woman.

No.

Daniel Pendleton was in the prime of his life, a good man, Sara reminded herself, and she was convinced that it was her curse to ruin good men.

She shrugged. "I just don't think—"

"C'mon." He took her hand, lacing his fingers through hers, and tugged. "It's just a dance. I'm not gonna bite you."

Before she knew it, one of his large hands wrapped around her waist, the other firmly held her hand, and Sara was fighting a topsy-turvy sensation while she stared at the knot in Daniel's maroon club tie. She was suddenly acutely aware of her femininity in a way she hadn't been in years.

And it felt entirely too good.

The texture of his hands lured her attention. A working-man's hands. She'd always been held by men with smooth, white-collar hands. Daniel's palms were callused, his fingers blunt, and Sara got the distinct impression that he was very selective about how he used his hands to convey strength and gentleness.

"What's wrong with my hand?"

Sara jerked her gaze up to his. "Nothing." Seeing the disbelief in his eyes, she searched for something to say. "It looks like it healed well."

"Yeah." He flexed his fingers around hers. "I lost my fingerprints in that fire, though. Now I could take up a life of crime and no one would be able to catch me."

Sara shook her head. "They'd remember your eyes. Besides, you're a good guy, the head of the clan, a pillar of the community. Your sense of integrity wouldn't let you do anything too bad."

His gaze held hers. "Even good men have their weaknesses, Sara."

Her stomach took a dip. She didn't expect this, not from Daniel.

He nudged her away from a couple who kept bumping into them. "Where did you spend Thanksgiving? Carly said she tried to rope you into coming to our celebration."

Despite Carly's repeated invitation, Sara drew the line at holiday get-togethers. Although she had a secret yearning to be part of a real family, she would have felt out of place. "Chattanooga."

He nodded. "You used to live there?"

"Yes." He seemed to be waiting for her to continue, so she reluctantly expounded. "I've helped serve food at the homeless shelter for the past three years. I guess it's become a tradition." Lord knew she didn't have many other holiday traditions.

"Oh."

Just a trace of skepticism oozed from that single word. Sara puzzled over his tone, searching his features…until she remembered what Daniel had said to her in that heated moment right before his soup had met his lap. A lick of anger spiked her pulse. "You don't sound like you believe me."

He hesitated, his brow furrowing. "Well, no…"

Sara could have kicked herself for allowing herself to get into this situation. She'd always made a point of avoiding Daniel. He thought she needed lessons in proper moral behavior. The crushing point of it was that there'd been a time when he wouldn't have been far off the mark.

Not anymore, dammit!

Fighting a sudden deluge of emotions, Sara stiffened, and tightened her grip on his shoulder. "What did you expect? That I entertained a few University of Tennessee fraternity houses?"

He shook his head. "I never—"

"You might as well have. I know what you think of me, Daniel. You made it very clear. You said you thought I was leading your precious baby sister down the path to ruin." Sara pulled her hands away from him. "If Carly coerced you into dancing with me, let me make myself clear. It isn't necessary. I'd just as soon you keep your distance."

Spinning away from him, Sara headed toward the galley. She'd just reached the hall when her hand was snagged, jerking her to a stop. She knew before turning who was in possession of her hand.

Daniel tugged her around. "Do you always jump to conclusions on the basis of one word?"

Sara pulled fruitlessly, glaring at him. "I know what you said about me being a bad influence."

"That was a long time ago, and it caught me off guard when Carly sent you to help me with my lunch after I'd burned my hands."

Not mollified, Sara pursed her lips. "You didn't have to insult me."

"You didn't have to dump the soup in my lap either."

Sara finally jerked her hand free. "I did not dump it in your lap. You were waving your arms like a madman."

His eyes went dark, and the suggestion of a grin tugged at his mouth. “Guess being a madman should disqualify me from pillar-of-the-community status. So, how do you feel about having dinner with a fallen man?”

Sara blinked, feeling the currents between them shift yet again. “No,” she said instinctively. The word came easily to her. “You’re doing this because Carly put you up to it and—”

He pressed his index finger over her mouth, stopping her breath with that one touch. “Carly doesn’t have anything to do with this.” He paused only a second, his expression deadly serious. “I’m asking you for me.”

Sara’s stomach twisted into a knot, and she prayed for him to remove his finger.

He did, pulling his hand away, studying her. “What do you say?”

Sara barely held in a sigh of relief. “I say you’re crazy.”

Daniel frowned. Her response wasn’t what he’d hoped, but Daniel had always favored the direct approach. It was the same way he approached most things in life. Lengthy deliberation followed by swift action. “Sara—”

“Sara.” Carly’s voice rang out.

She began backing away. “It’s Carly. Gotta go.” She gave a too-cheery smile. “Goodbye.”

She was a vanishing blur of brown hair, black velvet and fast-moving shapely legs. At a much slower pace Daniel went back to the main deck, realizing there was quite a bit he didn’t know about Sara.

His brother Troy strolled up to him. “You ready to go?”

Daniel looked over the whole room, his gaze catching on the woman who’d occupied too much of his mind lately. Fresh determination surged through him. “Not yet. You might want to ride home with Jarod.” He filched a single red rose from one of the many bouquets around the room, still keeping her in his sight. “I’ll be late tonight.”

I shouldn’t have worn red.

Sara berated herself a dozen times as she pushed through the door of her two-bedroom home. On the way to her bedroom, she tossed her sensible black wool coat and leather purse onto the chintz floral sofa, kicked off her flat patent-leather shoes and started working on the zipper to her demure black velvet dress.

She shimmied out of the dress, threw it on the bed and pushed down her stockings and garter belt. Then she stood in her darkened bedroom wearing nothing but her sinful red silk slip.

She shouldn’t have worn red.

Men seemed to sense it. She was convinced they had some kind of sonar when it came to detecting her past. No matter how prim the outer layer was, they seemed to sense the sensual Sara underneath it all, the Sara who enjoyed all kinds of pleasures, from the sensation of velvet, silk, sun and water on her bare skin to the flavors of a succulent rare steak; fresh, yeasty bread; and strawberries dipped in rich, dark chocolate. The Sara who hid over a dozen bottles of perfume underneath her sink and had trouble deciding which to wear because she liked them all.

Sara pushed back the hair from her face in frustration. Even now, at the age of twenty-seven, she fought a constant battle with herself, torn somewhere between being the quiet, reserved woman who garnered the respect of the community and the sensual one she hid in the privacy of her home. The sensual one had been known to get her into trouble.

A stab of pain cut through her as she remembered the senator. He’d been such a nice, decent middle-aged man, but so lonely since his wife had been ill. Sara had been his receptionist. Her first job at eighteen, and she’d been thrilled and scared. It all began quite innocently with her working late nights, then having coffee with the senator and other staff at an all-night diner. He’d been like a father figure to her, and God knew she’d never had a father in her life.

When her apartment building had been destroyed in a fire, the senator found a place for her to live. It had been easier to say yes than no, easier to accept the affection she craved. He gave her a single red rose the day she moved in, and one yes led to another and another and…

One year later the press found out, and the nice senator blew his brains out.

Sara's mind seemed bent on punishing her tonight. The thought of her deceased husband loomed over her like a dark shadow, and still more guilt flooded her. When he'd learned about her past, he'd hated her for it. When he'd died in an automobile accident, he was still hating her.

Sara shuddered at the memories. Sinking down on her bed, she wrapped her arms around herself. She didn't want to turn on the light. She didn't want to see herself in the mirror. She needed to let the guilt and shame pass.

It would have been comforting to have a man hold her during that painful moment. An image of Daniel Pendleton with the strong, gentle hands and broad shoulders seeped through her mind like mist.

Sara impatiently shook it off and rose from the bed to turn on the light. She was lifting the hem of her slip to strip it off when her doorbell rang. She glanced at her brass alarm clock and frowned. Twelve-thirty. Who in the world could it be at this hour?

Snatching the ankle-length kimono from the hook on the back of her closet door, she wrapped it around herself, marched to her front door and looked through the peephole.

Daniel Pendleton. Her heart gave a tiny, involuntary flutter.

She opened the door, saying the first thing that came to mind. "Is something wrong with Carly?"

"No." Daniel looked into Sara's wary eyes and immediately knew he'd have to temper the Romeo bit. She looked small and vulnerable and mussed in a thoroughly inviting way, but she also looked distrustful. He shoved the rosebud into his pocket and stepped through the doorway. "Mind if I come in?"

"Well—"

"I wanted to make sure you got home okay." He paused, sweeping the living room with a curious glance. His first impressions were of femininity, comfort and privacy. Puffy curtains and pastel miniblinds covered the windows. On the mantel he noticed a lot of candles and a stuffed teddy bear wearing a floppy hat and lace dress. One end table held a bestselling novel, a few women's magazines and a bottle of nail polish. An image flashed through his mind of Sara wearing the red silk slip as she painted her nails and blew them dry. He could almost feel the warmth of her breath, and just the thought of it made him tug at his starched collar.

Her coat and purse had been thrown carelessly on the floral sofa, which, in Daniel's opinion, held too many little pillows and was too small for sleeping. But he could imagine ditching those little pillows, easing Sara into his lap and kissing her until they were both ready for bed.

He'd trade the lower forty for a peek at her bedroom.

"I'm fine," Sara said.

His gaze automatically went to her. "And we never finished our conversation."

Sara looked at him blankly.

Daniel's mouth lifted in a slow grin. "Dinner."

Uneasy, Sara picked up her coat and hung it in the closet, feeling Daniel's gaze track her every movement. He seemed to take up an enormous amount of space in her house. "I think it would be best if we didn't."

"Why?"

She wished he hadn't asked that. "Because you're Carly's brother and she's my boss."

Propping himself against the sofa, he crossed his arms over his chest. "So?"

"So it could get awkward." She tried, surreptitiously, to kick her shoes under an end table. When Daniel's gaze slid to her feet and seemed to settle on her red toenails, Sara felt terribly self-conscious. It was one of her little eccentricities. She painted her toenails bright, flashy colors while

she kept her fingernails trimmed and painted them neutral colors. She cleared her throat, wishing for steel-toed boots.

He stood and walked closer to her, setting off all her warning bells and whistles.

“Does that mean you don’t want to?” he asked.

Sara swallowed. “I—” She searched for an honest but polite response and came up empty.

His eyes narrowed thoughtfully as if he truly wanted to understand. “You don’t like the way I look?”

She shook her head, wishing desperately that she wasn’t having this conversation. “No. That’s not—”

His gaze swept her from head to toe. “You’re not attracted to me?”

She felt her cheeks heat. “I didn’t say that.”

“You’re still missing your husband?” His voice held sympathy, but no pity.

He gave her the perfect excuse, and Sara almost took the easy way out. “I miss him.” She felt dishonest letting the statement sit between them. Sighing, she lifted her hand and briefly touched his arm. “But that’s not why I don’t go out.”

Daniel’s hand slid out and captured hers. “Then I don’t understand.”

Sara’s pulse jumped. A strong, solid male hand held hers, and the simple act short-circuited her brain. How could she explain that she had a unique ability to ruin good men? His thumb caressed her knuckles, and the gesture seemed more intimate than it should have. Was it the late hour or the man?

She took a deep breath. “I’m not very good at male-female relationships,” she admitted.

“Maybe you’re just out of practice,” he said, twining their fingers together one by one. His gaze hovered on her mouth, and Sara had the oddest sensation of being thoroughly kissed. She could almost feel his mouth, soft and mobile, on hers. He would slowly slide his tongue past her teeth and explore her vulnerable softness, then tease her into giving him what he wanted. Oh, yes, she’d bet Daniel Pendleton would know how to tease a woman.

She shook her head at the sudden heat rising in her body. She licked her burning lips and heard his quick intake of breath.

He squeezed her fingers, a silent reprimand for her involuntarily provocative gesture. His gaze rose to meet hers. “Practice makes perfect, Sara, and I think,” he said in a low, rough voice, looking at her through hooded violet eyes, “you should practice on me.”

Chapter Two

A flicker of awareness darkened Sara's eyes, then her eyelashes lowered as if they were a silk curtain. Daniel felt her withdrawal before she moved away.

She whispered something under her breath. He couldn't make out the words, but her tone was that of a chiding reminder. Clutching the front of her robe, she shook her head. "It's so late. I appreciate—" she hesitated, leading him to believe she did not appreciate it "—your checking on me. It was kind of you. I'm getting up early tomorrow morning." She moved toward the door. "I bet you are too."

She put her hand on the doorknob, and Daniel experienced the urge to goad her into dropping the polite shield. She exhibited the dignity of a queen, and her will was far stronger than he'd anticipated.

He reluctantly admired her at the same time that he was stymied by her.

Shoving his hand into his pocket in frustration, he felt something sharp jab his finger. He jerked, grimacing. A thorn from that damn rose, he realized belatedly.

Most of his calculations about Sara had been off tonight. Cranky enough to use Sara's politeness against her, he walked toward her.

"I guess we'll have to figure out those dinner arrangements another time," he said, getting closer and closer, betting the clutching and unclutching of her hand meant that his nearness made her nervous. That was okay. Nervous was better than nothing.

She opened her mouth to refuse, he was certain, and Daniel covered her hand on the doorknob, stopping her cold.

Feeling both predatory and frustrated, he smiled. "You're going to Erin and Garth's wedding, aren't you?"

She hesitated. "Yes."

"Carly said your car's been a little temperamental, so I'll take you."

He bent his head toward her and watched another protest die on her lips. "See you next Saturday," he said, pushing the door open. He took one last glance at her before he left, and what he saw sent his blood pressure into the ozone. Her robe gaped slightly, and underneath that long robe sweet Sara Kingston was wearing the wicked red slip from his dream.

"Is Sara off today?" Daniel asked his sister with forced nonchalance.

Carly shook her head. "No. She's gone to the post office. She'll probably be back in a few minutes." Carly riffled through the papers on the top of her desk, obviously looking for something. "Why do you want to know?"

Daniel shrugged. "No reason. When I made sure she got home from the party the other night, she seemed a little edgy."

Carly frowned. "Edgy? I wondered about that. She's been dropping things lately."

His interest perked up. "Dropping things?"

"Yeah. Like on the floor." She pulled a letter from the pile and smiled. "There it is." She turned her attention toward Daniel. "I noticed you danced with her at the party."

Baby sister didn't miss a thing. "You said you wished I would act nicer to her."

Suspicion glinted in her eyes. "You didn't make any lewd propositions, did you?"

Daniel didn't consider them lewd. He lifted his hands in innocence. "Me?"

Carly wasn't totally convinced. "I'd like you to bear in mind that I couldn't replace her if she quit. She's competent enough to run this business without me. I told you about how her husband died, and since you know what a good friend she's been to me," she said meaningfully, "I hope you will be careful with her. She's more tender-hearted than she appears."

"I'm always careful," Daniel muttered, feeling a sharp jab of irritation. Since he was the oldest, he'd always had to be careful. Every once in a while he'd like to indulge himself and do something irresponsible, disreputable and enjoyable, but he always managed to restrain himself. Lately that restraint was wearing thin.

As for Sara's heart, he had no desire to claim it. He wanted her body. And he just wanted to borrow it until he got her out of his system. It had become a matter of survival, and it would be his greatest pleasure to make sure Sara got as much out of their affair as he did. "There's nothing for you to worry about."

A knock sounded at the door. "Carly?"

"Come in," Carly called.

Sara pushed open the door, holding a stack of papers. "I need to clarify something on this contract with—" She saw Daniel and promptly dropped the papers.

"Oh my." Distressed, Sara dropped to her knees. She wasn't a fumbler. She made it a point not to fumble, trip or fidget. It was all part of the cool, competent image she worked hard to project. That cool, competent image covered a boatload of vulnerability and self-doubt. The senator had helped her acquire a poise that lifted her beyond her seedy background. But the last few days, to her chagrin, she'd been a total klutz, all because of Daniel Pendleton.

Suddenly Daniel was beside her on the floor, collecting the papers. "Here, let me help you."

"No. That's okay." Past caring that the papers were out of order, she gathered them together in her hands as quickly as possible. "I think I've got them now."

She stood; Daniel followed. She could feel his gaze on her, and an awkward silence hummed between them.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw him shove his hands into his pockets. She wondered what that gesture meant. She'd once read an article about how body language often told the truth more than a person's words did.

"Since I was in town today," Daniel ventured, "I was wondering if either of you ladies would like to have lunch with me. I thought I'd try one of those places on the wharf."

Carly sighed, shaking her head. "Count me out." She pointed toward the desk. "All you have to do is take a look at my desk."

Relieved that Carly had paved the way so nicely for her, Sara shrugged. "I brought a sandwich to eat at my desk, so…"

Carly looked contrite. "Sara, don't feel like you've got to miss lunch just because I'm working. You've stayed late every night this week."

Sara shook her head. "But—"

"I'm beginning to feel like Simon Legree and Scrooge all rolled into one. Please. Appease my guilt and go."

Feeling cornered, Sara glanced at Daniel, then back at Carly. "Are you sure? I'm so distracted with these contracts, I'm sure I'll be rotten company."

"I'm sure," Carly said.

Daniel hitched one dark eyebrow in amusement. Sara knew he could tell she was trying to get out of it. "I'm sure too," he said in a low, taunting voice.

And he was, Sara thought. Daniel Pendleton was always insufferably sure of himself. It was one more reason for her not to like him. "I'll get my coat," she said reluctantly, deciding to order something that could be eaten quickly.

To her dismay they ended up at the Cimarron Rose, where barbecued baby back ribs, onion-ring loaves and gooey cinnamon rolls were the order of the day.

"A salad," she said firmly.

"Anything else?" the waitress asked.

"No. Just a salad."

Daniel frowned for a moment, then gave his order—an entire rack of those baby back ribs along with crab legs and a baked potato.

Sara reconsidered her choice. There was no reason to deprive herself of some of her favorite foods just because she was eating with Daniel. It wasn't as if they were sharing a candlelight dinner for two in the privacy of her home. That thought gave her a jolt.

The waitress sent Daniel a broad smile and started to leave.

"I've changed my mind," Sara said quickly, not meeting Daniel's gaze. "I'd like an onion-ring loaf, a half rack of baby back ribs, Western-style sauce and a baked potato." She closed the menu. "Please."

"Sure you don't want crab legs?" Daniel asked after the waitress left. He wore a subtle, teasing grin.

"No." Sara chewed her lip to keep from smiling back at him, but failed. "If I eat any more, you'll have to wheel me out of here in a cart."

Daniel's gaze fell over her in assessment. "I wouldn't need a cart to carry you even if you tripled your order. Not with your weight."

"You have no idea what my weight is," Sara said, turning the subject away from the notion of him "carrying" her.

"Bet I could guess."

The way he said it caused a tickling sensation in her stomach. She usually squashed this kind of flirty conversation. It was too personal, and she needed to keep her distance. But something about him, the I-dare-you-lady expression, made her want to accept the little challenge. "Okay. Winner gets the onion-ring loaf."

His eyes widened. "High stakes. How close do I have to get?"

Sara stared at him, feeling her pulse leap. Close.

"In pounds," he clarified.

Her mind going blank with relief, she pulled a figure out of nowhere. "Two pounds."

"Oooh. That's tough." He shook his head. "I'll give it a try."

That was when Sara realized this conversation had been a huge error. Daniel's gaze measured her neck, and she felt the warmth of it as if his hands gently touched her skin. He studied the width of her shoulders down her white silk blouse to her elbows. Then she watched the motion of his eyes as they moved to the bow that rested against her throat.

Sara's breath hung suspended while, ever so slowly, that violet gaze lowered to assess her breasts. Beyond her lacy bra his gaze caressed like fingers, cupping the weight of her, testing her softness. Sara felt a stinging arousal shoot straight to her nipples. Her face flamed with heat, and she nearly grabbed a napkin to hide herself.

Daniel stared straight at the center of her swollen breasts.

Sara bit her lip. Unable to stand his scrutiny any longer, she crossed her arms. "Time's—"

"One hundred and seventeen pounds," he said in a rough voice, reaching for his water glass. "One nineteen after you've just gotten out of a shower and you're soaking wet."

He sounded as if that last idea appealed to him. How had this discussion gotten so intimate? "How on earth did you guess?" she choked out.

He gave a chuckle and shook his head. "You wouldn't like my answer."

"Why?"

"Because my expertise comes from hauling bags of feed and sizing up livestock."

"So," Sara said, knowing she should be insulted, but smothering laughter instead, "as a point of reference for guessing my weight, you used cows and horses."

Daniel grinned. "You're exaggerating. More like pigs and goats."

This time Sara laughed. She couldn't help it.

The waitress delivered the food, and during the course of the meal Sara had a tough time keeping up her guard. It was difficult to remain prim and proper when you were up to your elbows in barbecue sauce.

"Is your schedule busy in the winter?"

Daniel shrugged. "It's nothing like spring or summer, but there always seems to be enough to do. Old Mr. Johnson had a dead tree he wanted cut into firewood, so I took care of that yesterday. I'm in charge of the emergency services for Beulah County. I twist arms and try to get the mayor to spend more money."

Nothing he told her surprised her. People depended on Daniel, and he came through. "And now there's the wedding for your brother and Erin. They both seem very happy," Sara said.

Daniel nodded. "He worships the ground Erin walks on."

"What do you think of that?"

Daniel paused for a moment, thinking. "She's done something for him no one else has. He's different now. He even laughs more."

"You sound surprised," Sara said, wiping her fingers.

"I guess I am. Garth's always been the wild one. It's as if he's been looking for something for a long time, and he finally found it. I always worried that he wouldn't."

Sara smiled. "Do I hear the big brother talking?"

Daniel felt a twist of irony at the question. He hadn't always enjoyed the role of big brother. "Yeah," he admitted reluctantly. "What about you? Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"Not that I know of," Sara said dryly.

He frowned, thinking that was an odd response. "Does that mean you might have some, or you just don't know who they are?"

Sara debated sharing any of her background with Daniel. It wasn't something she was proud of. She rarely discussed her past. Then again, it would show the contrast in their upbringing. Maybe Daniel would draw the logical conclusion that they weren't suited, and his interest would wane. The thought brought relief and a certain, unwelcome uneasiness.

Pushing away the uneasiness, Sara went ahead. "I didn't have the same kind of family life you did—and still have."

Daniel shrugged. "Most people don't have six brothers and one sister."

"No. I mean, my mother was what we now call a single parent."

Continuing to study her, he took a sip of beer. "Like Erin," he said.

"Not quite." What an understatement. Erin Lindsey loved her son. She would lay down her life before she gave up her child. Sara hesitated, feeling her appetite wane. "My mother didn't have time to care for a child. She was busy with other things."

"Like?"

"Men."

Daniel was raising his glass to his mouth but stopped midmovement. There was a wealth of emotion in that one word—men. He noticed that she'd tensed up again, and he wondered who Sara blamed, her mother or the men. He saw the turbulence in her eyes and felt a corresponding ripple within him. "Bet that was tough."

Sara searched his features, expecting to see disdain or disapproval. She found neither. "It was when I lived with her." Unpleasant memories swam from the back of her mind. "And sometimes when I didn't."

"You lived with other relatives sometimes?"

She shook her head. The other relatives hadn't wanted anything to do with her. Bad breeding, they'd said. And, in some ways, she thought, feeling a twist in her stomach, they'd been right. She blinked away the thoughts. "Foster homes."

"What about your dad?"

Sara stared at the table. She wished she'd kept her mouth shut. Saying it out loud only made it worse. "I've never met him."

A hint of vulnerability showed in her voice. It grabbed at his gut and pulled. She wasn't whining or cursing, yet, despite her composure, a little hurt and shame came through. He wasn't immune to it. Daniel cleared his throat. "I'm sorry."

Surprised, Sara looked up, but instead of the censure she'd expected, she found empathy. His simple words touched a vulnerable place inside her, one she kept hidden. She didn't know what to say.

"It's disappointing when your parents don't turn out the way you think they should." He rubbed the condensation on his glass. "It's the kind of disappointment that can stick with you a long time even if you don't want it to."

He spoke as if he had some experience with the same kind of disappointment, she thought. It made him seem more human to her, more likable, and made her feel a tenuous connection with him. It also made her wonder what his disappointments were. She toyed with asking him until she saw the expression on his face change from intent to teasing.

As if he realized the serious tone of their discussion had gone on long enough, he whispered to her in a conspiratorial tone, "Speaking of things that stick with you, we'd better eat these ribs before they get cold. Carly will give me hell if I don't make sure you get fed. She's scared you're gonna realize your true potential and leave her flat."

Sara stared at him, and a smile unfurled on her lips. "Why in the world would she think I'm going to leave her?"

"She said you can run Matilda's Dream without her."

A flush of pleasure stole over her, overshadowing their previous discussion. "I have no intention of leaving—"

Daniel gave her plate a meaningful glance. "Then do me a favor and eat."

Sara saw through his obvious maneuver to bring a happier mood to the meal. She should have been immune to his exaggeration, but, Lord help her, it felt great to have a good man teasing her. She saw the tempered desire in his eyes and felt adrenaline rush through her. Sara shook her head in skepticism at her roller-coaster feelings and took a bite of rib. "If you were so concerned about feeding me, then why did you eat my onion loaf?"

With a completely straight face he said, "I won that onion loaf by guessing your weight. It was my duty to eat it."

Sara laughed. "Duty!"

"When you're the oldest of eight, you learn very quickly that some duties are more desirable than others."

"You must have been a trial for your parents."

"According to my mother, I was perfect."

Sara rolled her eyes and delicately licked one of her fingers. "Spoken like a first child."

Daniel watched, fascinated by the sensuality of the small movement. Throughout the meal he'd gotten the impression that occasionally Sara indulged herself, and the way she indulged herself with food was sexy. She didn't mind the messiness. As a matter of fact she seemed to revel in it.

She took another bite of ribs and slowly ran the slick, pink tip of her tongue over her upper lip.

Daniel's gut tightened.

Sara stopped. "Is something wrong?"

Yes, Daniel thought. Something was wrong. He wished they were alone so that he could taste that erotic mouth of hers and find out if she was as sweet and spicy as he suspected. He found himself wishing for a lot of things when he was around her. Sara made him feel…deprived. He cleared his throat. "You missed a little sauce on the left."

Sara lifted her napkin and wiped her mouth. "Here?"

He shook his head. “No.” Giving in to his need, he leaned forward and touched her mouth with his thumb.

Sara went completely still. His gaze, she noted, was fixed with mesmerizing intent on her mouth, as if he couldn’t have torn his attention from her if he’d wanted to. He rubbed gently and should have moved away then. Instead his thumb moved from one side of her mouth and back.

Sara held her breath.

Daniel lifted his gaze to meet hers and pressed his thumb into the center of her lips.

A kiss.

She felt it and instinctively pursed her mouth against him.

His eyes flared, and he pressed a little farther, his thumb invading the soft moistness of her inner lips.

Surprised by his unexpected boldness, Sara felt a sensual twisting deep inside her coiling tighter and tighter. Masculine hunger was there on his face, something she hadn’t expected from Daniel. What she’d expected even less was her own overwhelming fascination with him. Shocking, intimate images floated through her mind.

Sara closed her eyes against them. She moved to dampen her suddenly dry lips and instead tasted his flesh.

Daniel swore.

Mortified, Sara instantly pulled back, but the tension between them held her like a chain. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, staring and shaking her head. “I don’t know—”

“Hey, Daniel,” a male voice called, “we’ve been looking all over for you. I thought you were gonna eat lunch with Carly.”

Troy stopped at the table.

Sara jerked her gaze from Daniel and cleared her throat. She took a deep breath and looked up to see not only Troy but also Jarod. She forced a smile. “Hi.”

Troy and Jarod greeted her, then Troy slid beside Daniel, and Jarod sat beside her.

“I thought you two were doing maintenance on the machinery this morning,” Daniel said.

Troy shrugged. “We needed a part.” He shot Sara a coy glance. “We thought we’d join you and Carly for lunch.”

An uncomfortable silence followed, and Sara felt the same underlying uneasiness she always felt when she was with the Pendleton brothers. The problem was that since they had a shared history, they knew all the inside family jokes, the pecking order and what subjects were taboo. They knew, and she didn’t, which made her feel more like an outsider than ever.

Daniel nearly groaned. “Carly was busy, like you’re supposed to be.”

“We needed that part and…”

“Is the Christmas season keeping you and Carly busy with Matilda’s Dream?” Jarod asked Sara, pulling her attention away from Troy and Daniel.

She nodded. “Christmas and end-of-the-year reports.” Growing more uncomfortable with each passing moment, she glanced at her watch. “Oh my! Look at the time. I need to get back.”

“I can walk you,” Jarod offered.

Anger pulsed through Daniel. He nearly pounded his fist on the table. After all his careful planning he’d lost complete control of this situation. Troy was starting to jaw about being hungry, and heaven help him, it looked as if Jarod was moving in on Sara.

“I’ll walk her,” Daniel announced in a voice that brooked no argument.

“Oh, no.” Sara stood. “You can’t leave your brothers.”

“Why not?”

She blinked. “Well, they just got here, and…” She shrugged and managed a strained smile. “And now you can discuss whatever it is that brothers talk about. Thank you for lunch.” She waved a hand, encompassing all of them. “I’ll see you at the wedding.”

Troy and Jarod murmured their agreement.

Daniel called after Sara. “I’ll pick you up at two o’clock.”

He watched Sara move her head in a gesture that could have meant yes or no.

“You’re finally making your move,” Troy piped in with a smirk on his face.

At that moment Daniel would have traded his name to be an only child. Furious with his lack of privacy, he tried to lay some ground rules. First things first. He turned to Jarod. “Cut the moves on Sara.”

Jarod lifted his hands in surprise. “Hey, I was just trying to put her at ease.”

Daniel frowned. “Well, don’t try so hard. And you,” he said, turning to Troy. “If you ever horn in again when I’m with her, I swear I’ll—”

“Horn in!” Troy lowered his voice. “Does that mean you were getting anywhere with her?”

Daniel hesitated, remembering how she’d kissed his thumb. For a little slice of time her eyes had gone soft and hazy.

Then he recalled how quickly she’d left. If he were going to answer Troy, he supposed he’d have to say yes and no. He decided, though, that he wanted his relationship with Sara kept private. Because he felt a strong protectiveness toward her. And because there was no way he could articulate what he felt for her. It was overwhelming and disturbing.

He looked at Troy and Jarod, and for the first time in his life he made a demand that had nothing to do with the farm or the family and everything to do with himself. “Leave it alone. Just leave it alone.”

Chapter Three

Sara watched Garth take Erin in his arms for a long and thorough kiss. Several seconds passed, and Troy started making whooping noises. Another brother, Brick, let out a loud whistle. Pretty soon most of the wedding guests were applauding. The couple finally pulled apart. Erin's face was flushed with pleasure, Garth's expression was tinged with awe, and the look they exchanged was so intimate that Sara had to turn away.

She glanced at Daniel to find him looking at her. Her stomach dipped.

You don't belong here, Sara Jean.

I know. I know. But I can wish, can't I? Wishing won't hurt anyone.

You can wish all you want to, but you'll never be like these people. You're too much like—

Sara mentally cut off her mother's voice. She heard it only when she was feeling vulnerable, like today. The simple ceremony had made Sara feel a little weepy. It reminded her that she didn't share a close, loving relationship with anyone on this planet. The reminder hurt.

"Are you okay?" Carly asked, concern etched on her face.

Sara shook off her depressed mood and smiled. "Fine. Erin looks beautiful."

Carly sighed. "She does. But I'd probably look that radiant, too, if I were going to Martinique."

Overhearing that last comment, Carly's husband, Russ, came up from behind and pulled her against him. He tossed Sara a wink. "We can have our own little island in the sun tonight in the Jacuzzi."

Carly laughed. "Have you forgotten that we're looking after Luke while Erin and Garth are on their honeymoon?"

Russ shook his head. "He'll be so tired after all the activity today." He gave them both a broad grin, kissed Carly, then backed away to answer someone's greeting.

Carly rolled her eyes, but Sara could tell she was delighted with her husband.

"So," said Carly, pulling her attention from Russ. "How's everything progressing with Daniel? I hear he nearly beat up Jarod and Troy for interrupting your lunch the other day."

Sara blinked at the change in subject, then shook her head. "Daniel and I aren't progressing anywhere because we're not well suited for each other. I told you that before."

"That was before he decided to go after you."

Sara's pulse accelerated. "He'll change his mind."

Carly looked at Sara with sympathy. "How long have you been suffering from delusions? Get ready for the chase of your life." She made a tsking sound. "You're so nice and innocent. Just don't let him push you into doing anything you don't want to."

Russ reappeared and snagged Carly's wrist. "You're not meddling, are you?"

Carly innocently batted her eyes at him. "Not me." Then she ducked her head and whispered to Sara, "One more warning: when Daniel wants something, he can have the sensitivity of a Mack truck."

Frustrated, Sara shook her head. "But I—"

"Are you ready for the reception?" Daniel asked from beside her. He placed his hand on her back and watched her take a deep breath. There was turbulence in her green-gray eyes. He wondered what she and Carly had been talking about. He wondered a lot about Sara Kingston. Lately he'd been wondering what her lips would feel like pressed to his. And he decided that tonight he would find out.

"Thanks for the ride," Sara said, reaching for her key.

"No problem," Daniel said. She was going to try to leave him on the porch. He knew it. "Mind if I have a cup of coffee?"

Sara jerked her head up to look at him. He could hear his mother's voice scolding him: Pushy, pushy, pushy. Wait until you're invited. Tough. At this rate, if he waited for an invitation from Sara, he'd never get past the front door, let alone into her bed.

Her ever-present politeness warred with a desire to kick him out. He could read it on her face. “Of course,” Sara finally said, then pushed open the door. “Come on in.”

She started to take off her coat and Daniel helped her with it. He caught a whiff of her sweet and spicy perfume. “You smell great.”

“It’s new, and I probably shouldn’t have gotten it,” she said, remembering how the romantic fragrance had captivated her at the cosmetic counter just the other day. “I have all these bottles under my sink, but I love perfume and I just can’t seem to resist…” Her voice stalled when he touched her.

Under the guise of a casual gesture, Daniel lifted her hair behind her shoulder and played with a silky brown strand. “I’m glad you didn’t resist. Did you know your hair even smells like it?”

Sara swallowed hard. “Bath gel and shampoo came with it.”

Daniel felt his temperature rise. “So you smell like this all…” His imagination flashed a vivid picture of Sara, wet, scented and nude, in a bathtub.

“All over,” she finished in a slightly husky voice. Then she cleared her throat. “About that coffee.”

“Yeah.”

Sara looked at him expectantly. “I, uh, need my hair.”

Still reluctant to let go, he grinned and tangled his fingers deeper into her hair. “So do I.”

“Are you flirting with me?”

“I’m trying.” His grin grew. “Is it working?”

Too well. Her pulse racing, she tamped down the urge to rest her head in his big hand. Instead she tried to distract him. “I have some hot chocolate.”

“And marshmallows?”

A little boy when it came to food, she concluded. Darn if that didn’t make her like him more. “Yes.”

He loosened his fingers and leaned closer. “You didn’t answer my question.”

Still entangled in his gaze, Sara gave a quick shake of her head and backed away. “I’m not going to.”

For several moments he looked at her hungrily.

“Guess I’ll have to keep trying, Miss Sara.”

Distressed, she lifted a hand. “Please don’t.”

“Why?”

She bit her lip and knitted her fingers together. “We’ve already talked about this.”

Daniel nodded. “I know. First you said I should leave you alone because of Carly. Then you said you didn’t think you were good at male-female relationships.” He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the wall. “So what is it tonight?”

“You’re not making this easy for me.”

“And you’re not making it easy for me either.”

She refused to let his persistence wear her down. “Daniel, you’re a good man. And I’m not—” she groped for the proper words “—I’m not good for good men. I ruin them.”

He gave a burst of laughter. “You’re nuts,” he said. “You’re sexy as hell. But you’re nuts. You couldn’t ruin a peapod.”

She sucked in a harsh breath. “How about a senator?”

His laughter faltered. “What?”

She shook her head. There were some things she simply couldn’t discuss, even for the sake of Daniel Pendleton. “I don’t want to go into it, so just trust me. Two men, two good men, lost everything because of their relationships with me. I don’t want the same thing to happen to you.”

Daniel scratched his head. “Now, let me get this straight. You think you’re responsible for the downfall of these two men.” He waved his hand. “That it’s somehow related to you.”

“Definitely,” Sara said in a solemn voice.

"And," he continued, "you think that if you get involved with me, you'll ruin my life."

Sara nodded.

He rolled his eyes and tugged his tie loose. "I gotta tell you, Sara. That's the biggest bunch of bull I've heard in my life. And with Troy as my brother, I've heard a hell of a lot."

Sara stiffened. "I'm sorry if you don't believe it, but it's true." She turned and headed for the kitchen.

Daniel followed after her. "You really expect me to believe that you lure good men down the road to perdition? How did you do it, Sara? Did you put a magic potion in their hot chocolate? Did you sprinkle fairy dust on them when they slept? How did you do it?"

She gritted her teeth together, took the milk from the refrigerator and poured it into a pan. "It's a little more basic than that."

Completely baffled, he shook his head. "Then it must be one of the top three ways to a man's heart—money, food or—"

Sara whipped around, her eyes shooting off enough sparks to set the kitchen on fire. "Sex."

Daniel fell silent. He cleared his throat, never easing his gaze from hers. "You want to explain that?"

Sara sent up a silent prayer for deliverance from men with violet eyes, broad shoulders and too many questions. "I thought it was self-explanatory." The milk began to simmer, and she turned away to reach for the cocoa.

In an instant he was behind her, staying her arm and turning off the burner. "The chocolate can wait. You can't just say something like that and go on like you're discussing the weather."

Oh, Lord, he was going to make her say it. He was the kind of man to expect complete honesty, and something about him made her want to deliver what he expected. Maybe if she tried to explain it, she told herself, he would understand and stop this insanity.

Where were the words? Sighing, Sara stared at the clock on the stove. The second hand made jerky little movements that seemed to echo the beat of her heart. "They said I was good at it. The first man who—" she swallowed "—who taught me said I seemed to have a natural propensity for it. He told me," she continued with irony, "that I had a talent for making a man hot. Back then I was so stupid, I thought he was paying me a compliment." She took a deep breath. "My husband concurred."

She felt a ripping sensation inside her. Exposing herself this way left her raw and vulnerable. Covering it as best as she could with a tight smile, she turned. "So here I am with my little bag of feminine tricks and talent." It would have been more accurate to say that here she was with all her feminine need and unquenched desire, but she wouldn't say it.

She turned toward Daniel and made herself look at him, determined to do the right thing. "You tempt me, Daniel Pendleton. Yes," she said, seeing the sensual recognition in his gaze, "you make me think about what I'm missing. You make me think about what it's like to hold and be held. To spend a night so lost in pleasure that night turns to day and day turns to night." She bit her lip, appalled at all she'd revealed, horrified at what she'd admitted. She shook her head. "But you're a good man. And I'm not going to ruin any more good men. I'm not going to ruin you."

Several seconds passed in thoughtful silence. Daniel watched Sara and felt even more determined to have her. That she wanted to protect him was precious; ludicrous, but precious. That she thought he was an angel was a problem. "What if I'm not all that good?"

Tension eased from Sara at his response. After her desperate confession, she'd expected something more condemning. "If being responsible were a crime, you'd get life in prison for it."

"Don't rub it in." He pushed his hands into his pockets and turned away in frustration. "Do you have any idea what it's like being the oldest of eight? My father nearly lost it after my mother died. That was right around driving age for me. You know, the time when guys play on the football team, take the girls out on Saturday night, and see how far they'll let you go in the backseat. Well, if you're busy trying to cover your old man's butt, then there's no time for that stuff. Carly was little,

and when she wasn't crying, she was stuttering. Garth was always getting into trouble. I would have been raising a little hell myself, but—"

Sara began to understand. "But you were too busy raising a family." She sighed. "Did you ever get to choose, to do what you wanted?"

He slowly turned and met her gaze. "Not until now."

Sara's stomach tightened. "See," she said in a softly accusing tone. "I told you you're a good man."

Daniel shook his head. "I didn't want to do the right things. I was angry and frustrated. I resented all that responsibility."

She felt an overwhelming need to convince him of his worth. It disturbed her that he didn't seem to realize it. It made her wonder why his family had been so blind. "That's not the point. You did what you had to, anyway." She stepped forward, touching his arm when he looked skeptical. "You did your best. That's what separates the good men from—" she smiled "—the not-so-good men."

He took her hand and twined his fingers through hers. "That still leaves me with the same problem. I never got to sow my oats. Never got to go parking on a Saturday night. I'm not without experience," he confessed. "But I've always been discreet and respectable." A dangerous light came into his eyes. Tugging her closer, he lifted her hand to his cheek. "Even if it ruins him, Sara, every man needs to have one forbidden affair with a wild woman."

He moved her hand to his mouth and kissed it.

The warmth of his mouth kindled her nerve endings. Her heart beat unevenly. He darted his tongue out to taste the tender skin on the inside of her wrist, and Sara's breath was squeezed from her lungs.

"I can handle the risk, honey," he said in a low, husky voice. "Ruin me."

Chapter Four

"Oh, Daniel," Sara whispered in a shaky voice.

He watched the struggle play across her face. Her pupils dilated with arousal, and she bit her upper lip.

Her desire lit a fire in his gut, and he pulled her closer as he placed her hand behind his neck. Slowly he trailed his fingers down her other arm to her hand and lifted that one behind his neck also. All the while he looked deeply into her eyes. "You said I make you remember what it's like to hold and be held. Don't you want to do more than remember?"

Sara closed her eyes against the powerful attraction brewing between them. "This isn't fair. I told you—"

Her voice broke off when Daniel slid one of his hands to the small of her back and with his other hand tilted her chin. Her skin was soft and flushed beneath his touch. So tender, yet his body's reaction was strong and unmistakable. He rubbed his thumb over the velvet lushness of her bottom lip. Even the way her breath caught turned him on. "I've been wondering what it would be like to kiss you. Don't you ever wonder about me?"

Her eyes fluttered open, and she swallowed. "Of course I do," she murmured, her voice a husky reprimand.

Feeling the smallest rush of male triumph, he sifted his fingers through her silky hair and leaned closer until his lips were a whisper away from hers. He teased himself and her with the slight distance, and the wanting surged between them. "Don't you ever want to do more than wonder?"

Her breathing grew labored, but she didn't answer.

"No answer?" Too stubborn to say yes, he decided, but too aroused to pull away. His pulse bucked. God, she made him want her. "I want more than wondering."

He lowered his head and took her mouth. He absorbed the texture of Sara, her mouth soft and full against his, her body warm and feminine in his arms. Maybe it should have been enough, but it wasn't. She made him want more. He rubbed his tongue over her lips back and forth, until with a sigh that had his blood pressure zooming she opened.

She tasted like every forbidden delicacy he'd been denied. Sweet and dark like the richest of chocolate with the kick of premium champagne. For a moment he felt rough and awkward next to her delicate femininity. He wondered if he'd read her incorrectly. Maybe she didn't want him.

But then she was sliding her hands through his hair, caressing his mouth with hers, and she wasn't just warm anymore. She was hot.

Her tongue was a silken, teasing reminder of the pleasure exchanged between a woman and a man, and he had to curb his overwhelming instinct to thrust. His heart thudding like a jackhammer, he slowly pulled her against the ache she'd started. He hesitated, wondering if she'd back away.

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