BRONWYN JAMESON

ZANE: THE WILD ONE

Desire

Bronwyn Jameson

Zane: The Wild One

«HarperCollins»

Jameson B.

Zane: The Wild One / B. Jameson — «HarperCollins»,

Everything Julia Goodwin had ever wanted was right here in the quiet little town of Plenty.At least, that was what she thought, until wrong-side-of-the-tracks rebel Zane O'Sullivan came home - and rocked her peaceful world to its foundations. Yet this wasn't the same black-leather-and-denim bad boy who'd haunted a well-brought-up girl's dreams back in high school.This Zane O'Sullivan was very much a man, with a raw sensual power that tempted Julia's deepest desires - and an unsuspected vulnerability that touched her woman's heart. But what would become of their growing love when he learned about the child their out-of-control passion had brought into being?

© Jameson B.
© HarperCollins

Содержание

Zane O’Sullivan, Julia Thought, 6
Zane: The Wild One 7
BRONWYN JAMESON 8
Contents 9
One 10
Two 17
Three 24
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 28

Zane O'Sullivan, Julia Thought, Her Heart Pounding. In The Flesh.

He hunkered down to where her car had slid into the ditch. "Helluva place to park," he drawled, his tone as dry as the summer road.

That smoke-and-whiskey voice had always unsettled her—made her pulse beat a little quicker, her breath come a little shallower. A decade later, that hadn't changed.

But some things had changed. Defined by a close-fitting T-shirt, his chest was broader, deeper, stronger. His face looked leaner, his cheekbones more sharply chiseled, and a network of well-etched lines radiated beyond his sunglasses.

Those lines deepened, as if he'd narrowed his gaze. "You okay? You look a bit stunned."

He straightened to open her door, and she quickly looked away, but not quickly enough to avoid an eyeful of denim-encased male groin. Suddenly she felt more than stunned. She felt breathless, dizzy.

The heat, she told herself…

Dear Reader,

What could be more satisfying than the sinful yet guilt-free pleasure of enjoying six new passionate, powerful and provocative Silhouette Desire romances this month?

Get started with In Blackhawk's Bed, July's MAN OF THE MONTH and the latest title in the SECRETS! miniseries by Barbara McCauley. The Royal & the Runaway Bride by Kathryn Jensen—in which the heroine masquerades as a horse trainer and becomes a princess—is the seventh exciting installment in DYNASTIES: THE CONNELLYS, about an American family that discovers its royal roots.

A single mom melts the steely defenses of a brooding ranch hand in Cowboy's Special Woman by Sara Orwig, while a detective with a secret falls for an innocent beauty in The Secret Millionaire by Ryanne Corey. A CEO persuades a mail-room employee to be his temporary wife in the debut novel Cinderella & the Playboy by Laura Wright, praised by New York Times bestselling author Debbie Macomber as "a wonderful new voice in Silhouette Desire." And in Zane: The Wild One by Bronwyn Jameson, the mayor's daughter turns up the heat on the small town's bad boy made good.

So pamper the romantic in you by reading all six of these great new love stories from Silhouette Desire!

Enjoy!

Joan Marlow Golan
Senior Editor, Silhouette Desire

Zane: The Wild One
Bronwyn Jameson

BRONWYN JAMESON

spent much of her childhood with her head buried in a book. As a teenager, she discovered romance novels, and it was only a matter of time before she turned her love of reading them into a love of writing them. Bronwyn shares an idyllic piece of the Australian farming heartland with her husband and three sons, a thousand sheep, a dozen horses, assorted wildlife and one kelpie dog. She still chooses to spend her limited downtime with a good book. Bronwyn loves to hear from readers. Write to her at bronwyn@bronwynjameson.com.

For my boys—thanks for your support, your humor,
your insight into the male psyches and the coffee.
I love you all.

Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Epilogue

One

It wasn't like in the movies.

The action didn't cut to slow motion as her tires lost traction in the loose gravel, sending the car into a wildly slewing fishtail. The camera didn't zoom to closeup as she wrestled for control of the wheel. There was no sense of time standing still. No sudden clarity of thought, sound, motion. No if-onlys.

One second Julia Goodwin was proceeding at her usual sensible speed, midway through the twelve-mile drive from her home in Plenty to her sister's country property; the next she came upon a trio of magpies directly in her path. And seemingly the next second after that she was sitting there, steering wheel clutched in a death grip, going nowhere. In between there had undoubtedly been some swerving, slewing and wrestling, but not much thinking.

Finally she opened her eyes—to the sight of a kangaroo loping through the summer-dry grass that edged the unsealed road. The big grey stopped and lifted its head to scent the air.

"Now if you had been sitting on the road, big guy, I'd have had reason to take evasive action." As the animal bounded gracefully over a fence and disappeared from sight, she shook her head in self-reproach. During countless driving lessons, many along this same road, she'd been told never to swerve for wildlife. To slow down, hit the horn and let them do their own evading.

Except Julia would never risk hurting any living thing, birds included. So she had closed her eyes, braked hard and swerved, all of which had probably contributed to her current predicament… and being stuck in this particular roadside ditch was definitely a predicament.

Because she loved the view from the top of Quilty's Hill, she'd taken the back road to Chantal's, and it wasn't called "the back road" for nothing. Passing traffic was…well…there wasn't any.

Still, it appeared she had survived the sudden stop in one piece. Shifting gingerly in her seat, she wriggled her legs, moved her neck one way and then the other. Her head didn't fall off, and that had to be a plus. Finger by finger she unglued her hands from the wheel and, despite a bad case of the tremors, she managed to both straighten her sunglasses and release her seat belt.

It took longer to deal with the door latch and when she tried to stand, her legs collapsed from under her. Fine. The situation could be assessed as easily from ground level. In fact from this angle she could see exactly why she wasn't going anywhere.

The car had come to rest—in the loosest sense of the phrase—on the rim of a table drain. If she had been driving her father's Mercedes instead of her mother's hatchback, it would have resembled a beached whale. High and dry and immovable. The gurgling and hissing coming from under the hood might indicate radiator damage, and now she looked more closely the front tire appeared flattish.

But, it could have been much worse. Julia herself had escaped uninjured. For the moment.

Heaven knows what harm would befall her when she didn't show up for Chantal's dinner party. Her sister hated uneven numbers, not to mention how the whole shebang had been constructed around her presence. Because Julia needed a husband. Because Julia never went anywhere to meet the "right kind of man." Because no man or machine could stop Chantal when she was on a mission, and Mission: Marry Julia had assumed top priority since New Year's.

It wasn't that she didn't appreciate Chantal's efforts or her motivation. Purely and simply, her sister would do anything to make her happy, even if that meant acting in direct contradiction to her own beliefs. Marriage, according to Chantal, invited heartache. Career, on the other hand, provided respect, challenge and fulfillment.

Julia didn't agree. She had been married once, and if they hadn't followed Paul's career to Sydney, if she hadn't hated the isolated loneliness of big-city living—and if he hadn't gone and fallen in love with another woman—she would likely still be married.

For better or for worse.

Because despite her parents' lofty ambitions, despite her siblings's stellar success, despite all the vocational testing and you-can-do-so-much-more-with-your-life advice, Julia had never wanted anything except to be married, to make a home and a garden and the babies she knew would fill the empty corners of her soul.

Unfortunately the children she had yet to have weren't going to help her out of this fix. Fortunately her legs now felt as if they were up to supporting her, especially if she got rid of the three-inch heels borrowed from her housemate, Kree. And the stockings. And the slip that clung to her legs like seal-wrap.

That done, she made her way to the center of the road and looked around. There wasn't a lot to see. Enough roadside eucalypts to make her grateful the drain had stopped her progress, and a century-old fence that wouldn't have stopped a bicycle's progress. Behind her stretched acres of rolling grassland, punctuated with the scattered dots of grazing cattle and bisected by the curling ribbon of road she had just driven down. Ahead, uncleared scrub marked the start of the Tibbaroo Nature Reserve.

Drat. She couldn't have picked a more isolated spot. The nearest farmhouse was miles away, and already she could feel both sharp-edged gravel and the baked-in heat of a long summer day biting into her soles. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other as she pondered which would be perceived as the most stupid course of action. A: walking several miles in bare feet. B: walking the same distance in stilettos. Or C: waiting for help.

A low persistent buzz permeated her thoughts and she swatted at the lone fly circling her head. The fly decamped, but the buzz persisted. Julia groaned as she identified Option D as the correct answer to her question.

The most stupid course of action would be forgetting her mother's car phone.

She picked her way back to the car, slid into the driver's seat and rescued the squawking instrument.

"Julia? Where in heaven's name are you?" It sounded as if Chantal had worked up a full head of steam. "I know I said seven-thirty, but you're usually early, and I need you to fix this cursed sauce. I followed your recipe, but something's not work—"

"Actually," Julia managed to interject, "I've had an accident of sorts."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. I'm fine, but the car—"

"Oh, my God, you didn't mangle Mother's car?"

"No, it's not damaged. Much." She closed her eyes and crossed her fingers, although it wasn't really a lie. "But it's going to need towing."

Julia gave her location, and Chantal swung straight into organizational mode. That was, after all, her forte.

"With all this food on the go, I can't come and get you, but I'll send Dan as soon as he gets here."

"Dan?"

"He's a new dentist in Cliffton. He seems a little on the quiet side, so do try to get him talking. I'm sure you'll find plenty in common if you give him a chance."

He's a little dull, so you two will get along famously, Julia translated.

"Just sit tight and wait. Oh, and I'll call a tow truck."

"It's Friday night. Please, don't drag Bill out." But she was talking to dead air. Everything organized to her satisfaction, Chantal had hung up.

With her gaze fixed on the rearview mirror, Julia saw the tow truck crest Quilty's Hill, then zoom in and out of sight as it traversed the winding descent.

"Where's the fire?" she murmured, sitting up straighter and pushing her dark glasses to the top of her head.

Fast wasn't like old Bill. The laconic garage owner typified the pace of the small town that had been home for most of Julia's life. But old Bill owned the only tow truck in Plenty, drove the only tow truck in Plenty….

Except on those rare occasions when Zane O'Sullivan was in town.

By the time the truck rocked to a halt, Julia's heart was pounding. The pall of dust that had trailed the vehicle down the hill caught up with its quarry, circled, then settled in a thick brown shroud. Dry-mouthed, Julia heard the thunk of a closing door, the crunch of brittle herbage under heavy boots, and then he was right there, anchoring hands spread wide on the roof as he hunkered down to her open window.

Zane O'Sullivan. In the flesh.

"Helluva place to park your car," he drawled, his tone as dry as the summer road.

That smoke-and-whisky voice had always unsettled Julia—made her pulse beat a little quicker, her breath come a little shallower—but it usually didn't render her incapable of speech…but then, usually she only encountered it on the distant end of a phone line. In fact, this was the first time Kree's footloose brother had ever spoken to her face-to-face.

Back in high school she had found his shining good looks and tarnished bad attitude so contradictory, so intimidating, that she had literally fled from any chance encounter. More than a decade later, and some things hadn't changed. Up close, Zane O'Sullivan still unnerved her—although now that she had regained her equilibrium, she noticed that some things had changed after all.

Defined by a close-fitting white T-shirt, his chest was definitely broader, deeper, stronger. His hair was the same sun-tinged blend of honey and gold, still worn longer than regulation, still finger-combed back from his broad forehead. His face looked leaner, his cheekbones more sharply chiselled, and a network of well-etched lines radiated beyond his aviator shades.

Those squint lines deepened as if he had narrowed his gaze. "You okay? You look a bit stunned."

He straightened to open her door, and she quickly looked away, but not quickly enough to avoid an eyeful of denim-encased male groin. Suddenly she felt more than stunned. She felt breathless, dizzy. The heat, she reasoned, as she hastily slapped her own sunglasses into place.

As if they could dim such glaring good looks. A hundred pair and she would still be mesmerized. A picture formed in her giddy head—her, pulling on pair after pair of sunglasses, one on top of the other, in a vain attempt to dilute his male beauty—and she laughed out loud. The laughter evaporated when she realized how loony her behavior must seem to a bystander.

She turned in her seat to find the only spectator frowning down at her. One hand rested on the door frame; his long fingers drummed an impatient beat. He looked as though he wished he were somewhere else. Anywhere else. Good grief, she hadn't said a word in the several minutes since he'd arrived, hadn't answered his concerned question.

"I'm fine." She swung her head from side to side. "See? No visible signs of head injury."

He didn't look convinced. In fact, as she slid out from behind the wheel, he looked downright bemused. Best to get the towing sorted out before he decided she truly was crazy and made good his escape.

"I'm not sure how much damage I've done. See this tire? I expect it's ruined, and I hit the ditch pretty hard so I could have broken the steering and who knows what underneath. Oh, and it boiled. Do you think the radiator's damaged?"

"Could be." He didn't even glance at the car. "You sure you didn't bump your head on the steering wheel?"

"I might have a touch of the sun or delayed shock or something, but otherwise I'm in excellent shape."

He continued to study her, so fixedly that she wondered if some football-size bump had appeared on her head. But then she felt a tingling heat in the pit of her stomach and she knew he wasn't looking at bumps on her head.

He was checking out the bumps on her body.

She should have left the slip on. No—she shouldn't have let Kree hustle her into wearing this dress in the first place. On Kree it looked benign, but then Kree was a good three inches shorter than Julia's five-seven. And Kree didn't have hips…or much else in the way of bumps.

"On your way to a party?"

"Yes. At my sister's," she replied with forced brightness. "You remember Claire Heaslip? Well, Chantal leased her grandfather's block last year."

Too much information. Too much thoughtless information. As if he would have forgotten Claire Heaslip. Even if the rumors weren't altogether true.

"Do you usually go in bare feet?" he asked evenly, obviously choosing to ignore her comment.

"Hardly."

Her laughter mixed amusement with discomfort—discomfort caused by both the Claire Heaslip gaffe and her heated response to his gaze on her legs, on skin laid bare by the dress's abbreviated hemline.

"Chantal would have a stroke if I turned up barefoot. I took them off because I was contemplating walking." She retreated to the far side of the car and retrieved the shoes from the passenger seat, grimacing as she slipped them on. "These are not your ideal walking shoes."

No kidding, his silence seemed to say. To a man dressed functionally in jeans, T-shirt and boots, her cocktail ensemble probably looked way over the top. Which it suddenly felt. While she silently bemoaned her lack of judgement in trusting Kree's fashion advice, Zane went into work mode, studying the lay of the car, fetching the truck. Before he hooked it up, he glanced her way. "You want me to drop you at your sister's before I start here?"

"No. Chantal said she would send someone."

Not just anyone, but Dan the Dentist, handpicked as suitable husband material. She pictured him in a sober suit and tie, brown hair neatly parted and combed into place, and she imagined the evening ahead, as flat and colourless as that image.

She looked at Zane O'Sullivan and one word came to mind. Technicolor. Before she could think of all the reasons why she shouldn't, she took a deep breath and spoke quickly. "I've changed my mind. Could I hitch a ride back to town with you? Would you mind?"

He gave her a look, which, between those shades and the straight set of his mouth, she found impossible to read. "Doesn't matter if I mind or not. I'm not leaving you out here."

Ten minutes later Zane cursed his sense of chivalry. Enjoying the thought of what she could or could not possibly be wearing under that silky wisp of a dress was one thing. Thinking about taking it off her was another altogether. She was Principal Goodwin's daughter, Mayor Goodwin's daughter, for Pete's sake. Definitely not the kind of woman you imagined naked.

Not in the way he was contemplating. With those fey hazel eyes warm with wanting, all that dark glossy hair cloaking his pillow, and those generous curves covered only in smooth pale skin… and him.

Hoo, man.

Zane shook the heat from his vision, then attempted to apply all his attention to the road. But how could he concentrate with the hint of her perfume—something as softly fragrant as a spring dawn—drifting in and out of his senses? Not to mention how she kept peeping looks at him from behind her dark glasses. Another five minutes of this and he would likely break out in a sweat. Or do something dumb, like invite her for a drink. Or something truly moronic like skipping the drink and taking her straight to his room.

He almost snorted out loud. Julia Goodwin's expensive finery decorating the floor of his cheap hotel room? Keep dreaming, bud!

"I'm sorry I dragged you out," she said eventually in her softly voiced, carefully phrased way. "No doubt there are places you would rather be on a Friday night."

She had that right, but the one uppermost in his mind—his room, his bed—he kept to himself. “Yeah, but I doubt the Lion’ll run dry before I get back.”

“You were having a drink?”

“I was about to. Bill had already had several when he got your sister’s message.”

“So that’s why you’re here.” He felt her studying him, more openly this time. “Thank you.”

Zane shrugged. “It’s my job.”

“No, it’s Bill’s job. I know you help him out whenever you’re in town….”

Her voice trailed off, inviting him to answer her unasked question about what brought him to town. Why not? Talking to her was safer than fantasising about her. “I’ve got a week or so to kill, so I thought I’d give Bill a break and see how Kree’s doing.”

“She didn’t mention you were coming.”

“Last-minute decision.”

“Oh. Have you seen her yet?”

“I only got in this afternoon and figured she’d be busy. Besides, I’m never at my best in a hair shop.”

“Don’t let Kree catch you referring to her salon as a hair shop,” she said with a smile, which froze almost instantly. “Although I wish you had gone in, because now you’ve missed her. She’s gone away for the weekend with Tagg. Her boyfriend. He lives over in Cliffton.”

“Then I’ll see her when she gets back. How is she?”

“She’s Kree.” The smile returned. “Busy, full-on, happy.”

“You mean, manic?”

Her smile grew to a soft appreciative chuckle, and Zane found himself turning to catch the laughter on her face. It transformed her from pretty to stunning, and he found himself staring—again—and wondering how he never noticed that before, back when he lived in Plenty.

Probably because he’d never been close enough to see her laughing. Hell, he remembered times when she had crossed the street to avoid him, and if she ever had looked his way, it was with the kind of curious, wide-eyed fascination usually reserved for viewing aliens. Which pretty much summed up how this town had always made him feel.

Right now he felt her watching him with a different kind of fascination. She had gone very still, the laughter fading from her lips. Her focus seemed to shift to his mouth. His lips tingled with heat. Uh-uh, no way. She was the dinner-and-dating-and-home-to-meet-Daddy type, not the straight-into-bed type. And absolutely not the front-seat-of-the-truck type.

He dragged his eyes back to the road and his mind back from the gutter, pressed a touch harder on the accelerator and searched for a diversionary topic of conversation.

“You’re all dressed up to party.” He waved a hand in the general direction of her itty-bitty dress. “So why did you decide to go home, instead?”

“I didn’t really want to go in the first place.” She shifted her shoulders uneasily. “Do you think running my car off the road is a good enough excuse to cancel? I mean, it’s not as if I crashed, or hurt myself….”

“Why do you need an excuse? If you didn’t want to go, you should’ve said no.”

“Chantal doesn’t recognize the word.”

“Maybe she needs to hear it more often.”

A small frown puckered her brow, and Zane wondered how right he’d got that. Then he told himself it wasn’t his problem. That wasn’t why he had asked her about the party. He was making small talk, that was all. He absolutely did not want to know if, for example, she was letting down some suit-and-tie type by not turning up.

“Back when you were hooking up to the car, I rang Chantal to say I’d decided to go home. She didn’t sound happy. I suspect she might send someone to fetch me.”

“If you weren’t at home, that someone wouldn’t be able to fetch you.”

"Not home?" Her softly incredulous laugh brought his gaze back to her mouth, made him think of intimacies he had no business with. "In case it escaped your attention, there are not a lot of hidey-holes open on a Friday night in Plenty."

"There's the Lion. You could come down for a drink, shoot some pool," Zane suggested casually, not because he expected her to accept. Not because he wanted her to accept. For a long moment she stared at him, surprised, but obviously considering his invitation. He felt his body quicken. Then she shook her head and looked down at her hands, folded neatly in her lap.

"Thanks, but I think I'll have to pass this time."

This time. As if he was in the habit of asking her every other day. But as he downshifted to cross the railway line, he shrugged and cut her a look. "Your loss."

Julia looked out the window. They had reached the edge of town. In a couple of minutes she would step down from the truck, toss him a careless "See you later" and know that later might be another twelve years. She felt a deep, totally inappropriate sense of disappointment. Her loss indeed.

Of course, she could always change into some jeans and walk down to the Lion. She could saunter up alongside him and say, "Hey, Zane. You want to shoot some pool?"

Then she could watch the whole bar population either A: burst into spontaneous laughter, B: keel over with shock, or C: call for the men in white coats.

Julia Goodwin sauntering up to a public bar? That isn't going to happen, she concluded fatalistically as he turned the corner into Bower Street and pulled up alongside number fourteen. When he reached for his door, she leaned across to stop him. "There's no need to get out."

She felt him still, and when his gaze dropped to where her hand rested on his forearm, she was suddenly aware of more than his stillness. His skin felt warm—no, hot—and slightly rough, with its smattering of hair. It also felt incredibly hard, and she realized with a start how long it had been since she had touched a man's bare skin. And how much she missed that sensation of heat and strength, of leashed masculine power.

The moment stretched out, silent and thick with awareness, until she reclaimed her hand, dragging her fingers a little because she couldn't stop herself. Telltale heat rose from her neck to her ears, and she silently thanked Kree for making her leave her hair down. At least she had got that part right!

She cleared her throat, unable to look at him in case he had misinterpreted that touch as some sort of come-on. "I just wanted to say thank you, and sorry for interrupting your night, and I hope you catch up with Kree soon."

"I'll call her at work on Monday."

"Mornings are usually quietest, especially Monday. She might even be able to take a half day." She reached for the door. "See you later, then."

"What about your car?"

Julia blinked, and he hooked a thumb back over his shoulder.

Ah, that car! How could she have forgotten? "It's my mother's, actually. I don't have a car at the moment, so she loaned me hers while she's overseas. My parents are in Tuscany." And why am I telling him all this? She clutched her evening bag with unsteady fingers. "What did you need to know about the car?"

"D'you want Bill to fix whatever needs fixing, or just do up a quote?"

"Oh. Yes."

"Yes…what?" he asked slowly, and she felt that same intense scrutiny she had felt out by the roadside. Her ears burned with heat as she scrambled for an answer to the simple question.

"Yes, please." Good grief, could she have said anything more stupid? She bit her lip, then tried again. "Yes. Please have him fix whatever needs fixing. Bill does all our work—there's no need for a quote."

Quitting on that positively eloquent note seemed like a good plan, so she opened her door and slid down to the curb, but before she closed the door she forced herself to smile up at him. “I really can’t thank you enough for bringing me home.”

“You’ll get the bill.”

Julia shook her head. “I wanted to thank you, personally.”

“Buy me a drink sometime.”

She stared up at him, one part of her brain screaming, How about now? while another urged her to smile, offer something politely meaningless such as, Yes, we must do that sometime, and walk away.

Oh, but she didn’t want to listen to that safe, sensible, good-girl voice. For once she wanted to do something a little bit bad. Ordinarily one drink wouldn’t qualify as even vaguely bad, but she had a strong feeling—a hot, dizzying feeling—that a drink with Zane O’Sullivan wouldn’t be ordinary.

“I think I would like…” She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, moistened her lips, then realized she had lost his attention. He was frowning into his side mirror, while his fingers drummed against the wheel.

“Looks like you have a visitor.”

She stepped back just far enough to see the gleaming white Volvo that had pulled up behind them, and the gleamingly groomed man who stepped from the driver’s seat. He looked solid and respectable and, yes, dull.

She heard the tow truck kick over and felt such a jolt of panic, she had to stop herself from leaping at the window. Instead she stepped onto the running board and somehow above the thud of her heart she heard herself say, “I really would like to buy you that drink sometime.”

Perhaps he saw the nervous tension in her face. Or perhaps he was looking right by her at Dan the Dentist waiting patiently on the verge. With those impenetrable lenses, it was impossible to know. Whatever he saw, it caused one corner of his mouth to kick up wryly. It also caused him to shake his head and say, “Thanks, but I’m thinking that’s not such a great idea after all.”

Of course he was right.

She stepped down from the window and away from the truck, and as she watched it pull away, she felt a weighty gloom settle over her.

Drinks with Zane O’Sullivan might not be such a great idea, but that didn’t make a dinner party with Mr. Solid and Respectable sound any more palatable.

Two

In the end she didn't go to Chantal's dinner party. Instead she shared a considerably less formal supper, sitting at her kitchen table, with Dan. He wasn't as dull as she had imagined. In fact, he seemed nice, in a comfy, companionable way. When he sheepishly admitted that Chantal had browbeaten him into attending her party, Julia decided she could like him.

She certainly liked how her concentration remained fixed on the conversation, instead of straying to his lips. She enjoyed the complete absence of breathlessness and butterflies, and she positively loved how she could read every expression on his open face.

If she ever went for a drink with Dan she wouldn't consider it bad, and touching his arm would be simply that. Touching his arm. It wouldn't remind her how long it had been since a man's arms embraced her, or how many nights she lay awake wondering if she would ever be held that closely again.

If Dan reminded her of a mild autumn morning next to Zane O'Sullivan's midday summer heat, then so much the better. Summer had never been her favorite season.

After she waved Dan goodbye, she told herself she liked a man who fit her homely decor, as Dan surely did. As Zane wouldn't. He would fill her kitchen with his size and his maleness. He definitely would not look at home. Nor would he succumb to Chantal's velvet-steamroller tactics, as Dan had done, although that was a moot point.

His name would never grace one of Chantal's guest lists.

For a start, he dressed for work in rugged denim instead of fine Italian suit cloth, and second, he didn't have a prestigious address. In fact, if he even owned a home, Kree hadn't mentioned it. He lived wherever his work as a heavy-machinery mechanic took him—most recently the mines in remote West Australia—and he didn't stay anywhere long. His seven years in Plenty had probably been the longest he had lived in one place.

As she propped open her bedroom window and breathed the heady scent of moonlight and roses, Julia recalled how the O'Sullivan family arrived in town. What a stir they'd created in the conservative community—two rebellious preteens and their mother, old before her time and carrying more baggage than could ever fit in the beat-up van that died slap-bang in the middle of Main Street.

That was how they arrived, and they'd stayed because they couldn't afford to leave.

Julia remembered the hushed talk—ugly rumors of a shadowy strife-filled past—and she remembered how most of the township had ostracized them. A smaller part had adopted them as its charity du jour. Not an easy introduction to a new community, especially for adolescents, and they'd each handled it differently.

Kree had built a brash facade, stuck her snub nose high in the air and refused to accept that she couldn't belong. She battled to win not only acceptance but popularity, too, while her brother… well…Zane never won any popularity contests, because he'd refused to enter.

Some said he would have joined his father behind bars if Bill hadn't given him a job at the garage, first pumping gas after school and then full-time. But as soon as he completed his apprenticeship he'd left Plenty—and those Claire Heaslip rumors—behind.

It seemed as if he had been moving ever since.

Why he'd chosen that lifestyle was not her concern, Julia told herself as she settled into bed and punched her pillow into shape. She had no business thinking of Zane O'Sullivan at all. She should be thinking of Dan—nice, comfortable, settled Dan—who had left with a promise to call her during the week.

Unfortunately, with her eyes closed and the summer air embracing her in its sultry caress, the mild dentist didn't stand a chance. Instead she remembered the supple strength of a man's arm beneath

her fingers, the movement of snug white cotton over the casual shrug of broad shoulders, hair glinting with gold in the sun's dusky light.

And with startling clarity she recalled one simple scrap of conversation.

Zane had been hooking the truck to her car when he'd asked how it ended up in the drain. When she told him the sequence of events, magpies and all, he didn't shake his head critically or fix her with the scathing look she'd expected. He simply murmured, "Accidents happen," and carried on with his task.

Julia slipped from wakefulness into sleep with that neutral, nonjudgmental phrase in her mind and a small smile on her lips.

Six days later, Zane stood on the neatly mown verge outside 14 Bower Street, juggling her car keys from one hand to the other. Distracted first by the touch of her hand and then by the arrival of Volvo Man, he had barely glanced sideways at the place on Friday night. Today he saw the truth of Kree's excited exclamation when she had moved in last summer.

"You wouldn't recognize the old Plummer place!" she had practically screamed down the phone line.

A gross understatement, Zane decided.

Julia had transformed the rundown weatherboard cottage, painting it some soft shade of blue and framing it with a garden. He wasn't big on descriptive labels, but right after pretty and peaceful, he thought of welcoming. He could almost imagine the old house itself smiling gently as it opened its arms and beckoned, Come on in.

Houses with arms? Houses that beckoned?

"Time you started sleeping nights, O'Sullivan," he muttered as he turned to study the wider streetscape. It registered that number fourteen wasn't the only recent renovation in the low-rent street…although it was likely the only one resurrected personally by, and now inhabited by, a woman who belonged up on the hill.

He resisted the impulse to look that way. He hated the bitter, edgy feeling in his gut from just thinking about looking up there. It made him want to jump in his car—any car—and put pedal to metal. To keep on driving until Plenty was nothing but a hell of a bad memory.

But he didn't, and he wouldn't. Not in her car, anyway.

Although, juggling her keys from hand to hand, he still considered leaving. Suddenly his reason for being there seemed more like an excuse, and a transparent one at that. He should have left a message on her answering machine telling her to collect the car on her way to work. She walked by the garage at eight forty-five every morning, her body swaying enticingly beneath the black skirt and white blouse that were the staff uniform of the town's only department store. He tried not to notice the swaying, but he was only human.

Hell, he didn't even have to leave a message. Tomorrow he could call out to her, "Hey, Julia. Your car's ready."

Except he was here now, and so was she. Zane had seen her go by on her way home, and something about the way she held her head or swung her hips or, shoot, didn't even glance in his direction, had him deciding to return her car. Personally.

Plus, he needed to reassure himself about a couple of things. Such as the way he must have misread that curling caress of her fingers and the message in her eyes when she'd said she wanted to buy him that drink. Such as the way nothing about the impression she had left on his hormones matched his memory of Julia Goodwin, the all-'round good girl who used to cross the street to avoid him. Such as the fact that she already had Volvo Man ready and no doubt willing to take her up on the drinks offer.

Yeah, all he needed was a quick dose of reassurance and he would be on his way. No sweat.

He pocketed the keys, opened the tiny front gate and was ducking under a naturally sculpted archway of climbing roses when a dog appeared…although it took him an instant to recognize it as

a dog. The animal appeared as an unidentified black-and-white streak careering through a mass of flowers to his right; then it came into focus as a border collie just before it launched into a frenzied welcome of circling, barking, leaping and grinning.

Zane couldn't help grinning back, even as he tried to temper the dog's exuberance. Then a tingly sense of awareness skittered down his right side and he knew she was there, watching him. Slowly he straightened, turned and immediately found her. Standing in that wild riot of garden, her light sundress lifting with a subtle shift of the breeze, she looked like some ethereal beauty born of the flowers themselves.

For a long second he squeezed his eyes shut, and when he opened them, she'd moved, walking around the flower bed onto a path that traced a circuitous route to the front gate. As she walked toward him, Zane filled his empty lungs with fragrant air and told himself he'd been hallucinating.

Julia Goodwin was no otherworldly beauty. He smiled as the strange tightness in his chest eased. It was relief, he decided, nothing more. Relief because this Julia Goodwin looked exactly as she should. She bore no resemblance to Friday's siren in black silk.

Good Girl Julia stopped in front of him, her smile tentative, her eyes not quite meeting his. If there'd been a street to cross, she would likely have crossed it. "I'm sorry about McCoy's welcome. He gets a bit excited around men."

"Around men, huh?" Amusement quirked the corners of Zane's mouth. "Should we go there?"

For a second she looked puzzled; then the implication of her innocent remark took hold. "Oh, no, that's not what I meant. McCoy actually belongs to my brother, and every time a man comes through that gate, he goes crazy hoping it's Mitch."

Her brother's dog—that made sense.

He'd been thinking how McCoy didn't fit the picture. Women who wore filmy dresses and whose skin looked as soft as the velvety roses overhead had lap dogs called Muffy. Or cats. Not rowdy bundles of energy such as McCoy here.

He stroked a hand over the dog's silky head. "You have a lot of men coming through your gate?"

"Visiting Kree," she replied instantly, then looked stricken. "Not in that way, not since she's been going out with Tagg. It's just she's so popular with guys. Ugh!" She clamped a hand over her mouth and then slowly removed it. "Do you suppose I can get my foot any further in here?"

"You could try it without the sneaker."

"Mmm, barefoot would be easier." She laughed and shook her head, and Zane remembered the laughter and the bare feet and the heat from Friday night. Then, still laughing, she looked right into his eyes, and he only remembered the heat.

Instant, blazing, intense.

About a millisecond before he went up in smoke, she blinked and looked away. Then she stooped to pet the dog and started talking—started and didn't stop talking—about needing to keep the dog chained during the day because he'd found a spot in the fence he could jump over, about how much exercise he needed after such confinement and how she'd been about to take him down by the river.

"Some days I let him run free, other days we just walk." Her monologue concluded as she straightened and smoothed an imaginary crease from her dress, and Zane noticed the leash attached to the dog's collar.

With a twinge of irritation he also noticed how she avoided looking at him, even though he was blocking the exit she obviously intended taking. He planted his feet a little wider on the path and folded his arms across his chest.

Frowning, she checked her watch. "Kree's not home yet. Thursday is her late night."

"I know. I had lunch with her today." And every day since Monday, plus a couple of dinners. Seeing as he'd been meeting her at her shop, he pretty much had Kree's routine down pat.

"Oh. You're welcome to wait for her inside."

"You trust me in your house while you're gone?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Her gaze—warm, hazel and a little perplexed—came to rest on his. "You're Kree's brother."

Trust by association. Of course. Why had he thought it might be something personal? She didn't know him. She couldn't even hold his gaze for more than a second. And the way she kept shifting her weight from one sneaker to the other—hell, she looked as if she would be more comfortable in a snake pit.

He should tell her he wasn't here for Kree. He should hand over the keys, leave, go. Hadn't he found what he'd come here to find? The real Julia? The naive good girl?

Funny, but he didn't feel reassured…or much like leaving. Call him perverse, but if she needed to go walk her dog, if she wanted him to step aside and let her by, then she could tell him straight-out instead of pussyfooting around.

Settling one hip against the gatepost, he looked around as if studying his surroundings for the first time. "You've done a great job here."

She thanked him, politely but reservedly, as if she thought his words were empty rhetoric.

That only ticked him off more, and he found himself adding, "Yeah, I like it. But if old man Plummer were still alive, he'd come after you with his shotgun."

Her eyes narrowed a fraction. "What do you mean?"

"You cut down his hedge."

"It was overgrown, and it blocked the view."

"He treasured his privacy."

"Privacy!" She made an indignant huffing sound. "I needed a chainsaw and a blowtorch to get through the wretched thing."

"That hedge was something else."

"Old man Plummer was something else." But she couldn't help the small fond smile that came with memories of the irascible recluse. "And he was a lousy gardener. About the only thing I kept was the cedar tree out back."

"In the northern corner?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

"I hung a tire swing from it one summer." He grinned, remembering. "That's one great tree."

Julia shook her head. A funny mix of surprise and wonder and delight bubbled around inside her. Not to mention the effect of that grin. Mama mia. She shook her head again. "I won't ask how you got past the hedge and the shotgun."

"You don't want to know." Their gazes met, held. Heat, yes, but this time it was the solid companionable warmth of a shared memory, and she didn't need to look away, to escape. This time she smiled and said, "You want to come take a look at your tree?"

He looked surprised; then the corners of his mouth curled into that killer grin. "Yeah. I'd like that."

Julia turned away quickly. The way her heart started hammering away in her chest every time he grinned might just be noticeable to a man with such an intensely sharp gaze. That grin was one the first things she'd noticed when she'd come upon him in her garden.

One of the first, right after the immediate impact of his presence.

Today the T-shirt was black, the jeans faded by work and wash, and as he'd stooped to pat McCoy, both had molded the hard contours of his body in a way that screamed m-a-n. All that potent masculinity was thrown into perfect counterbalance by the gentle frame of her pastel-pink David Austen roses…the ones she'd planted to replace old man Plummer's infamous hedge.

"I didn't know you were so familiar with this place," she said over her shoulder.

"We lived around the block, on Docker Street."

"I remember."

"Yeah?"

"Kree lived there, too."

"I don't recall you visiting." They came to a halt on the open stretch of lawn behind the house, but she knew Zane wasn't looking at the tree. As she bent to free Mac, she felt the full force of his gaze on her.

"I wonder why that is?" he asked.

"Why do you think?"

"Scared of big brother?"

Lifting her chin, she met the intense stillness of his gaze. "Terrified. But that's not the reason. Kree didn't ever invite me."

A touch of bitterness sharpened his silver-grey gaze and hardened the line of his mouth. His tension seemed to reach out and enfold her, blotting the late evening sounds until all she could hear was the heavy pounding of her heart. She felt sure he would say something, something to challenge why she'd never visited her friend, something that included the word slumming.

But whatever burned so harshly in his eyes remained unsaid. He turned and walked away, stopping in front of the tree, hands on hips, to inspect the tire she had slung from the lowest branch.

Moving closer, he reached up and took a firm grip of the rope, as if to test its strength. The action called Julia's gaze to the width of his shoulders, to the richly tanned curve of his biceps, and she was back in that moment when she'd first seen him in her garden. Giddy, dry-mouthed, determined not to keep staring in case she hyperventilated.

Needing a distraction—badly—she threw a stick for Mac and watched him execute a spectacular catch. She sensed Zane's soft-footed approach, felt it in the heightened sensitivity of her skin. She rubbed her hands along her arms, but the tingling remained.

"How long is he staying?"

"Indefinitely." She tossed the stick again. "Mitch used to have a house with a yard and plenty of space, but when he got married, they moved into an apartment and he couldn't keep Mac."

"Isn't that meant to work the opposite way? Apartment first, house and yard second?"

"Oh, there's nothing usual about Mitch's marriage," Julia said without thinking. Chastened, she bit her lip. "That didn't come out right. They both travel an awful lot, so it wasn't practical to have a pet or a garden that would need care."

He didn't comment, but he looked around, taking in the rest of her yard—Mac's kennel, her well-tended herb and vegetable plot, the swing and sandpit over by the fence. She sensed a strange tension in him as he took it all in, as he turned to look at her. "Kree told me you'd been married. She didn't mention kids."

Kids? It took a second for his meaning to gel. The swing, the sandpit, the discarded toy dump truck. "Oh, no, I don't have children. These are for Joshua, for when he stays."

"Joshua?"

"Mitch and Annabel's son."

"They farm him out, too?"

He might not have been passing judgement—neither his casual tone nor his closed expression gave anything away—yet Julia's protective instincts shot to full alert. "It's only occasionally that they're both away at the same time, and I don't mind having him."

In fact, she loved having Joshua stay, loved indulging him with the simple things he missed out on, such as homemade swings and sandpits, and playing with a dog. Staying here was good for him. It wasn't farming out.

Feeling unduly aggrieved, she put her whole shoulder behind the next throw, then watched Mac disappear around the side of the house in frantic pursuit.

"Where is he getting out? Your fences look good."

"Around the front. It's simply not high enough."

With one of those noncommittal grunts peculiar to men, he ambled over to the side fence, studied it this way and that, then started pacing the distance between fence and house.

"It's three point six meters each side," she said, way too snappily. "And I know that by fencing it off I can enclose the backyard to keep him in. I'm saving to do it."

"What about the dog's owner? Shouldn't he be the one saving?"

"I don't think that's any concern of yours."

"You're right." He gave her a hard, sidelong look. "And it shouldn't be any concern of yours, either."

"It's my fence and my house, so that makes it my concern."

End of debate. End of yard tour. End of short nerve-racking interlude with Zane O'Sullivan.

She whistled to Mac, then started for the front yard.

"Hang on a second."

He put out his arm, presumably to prevent her passing, and she walked right into it, waist height. For the life of her, she couldn't back away. She couldn't move. All she could think was His arm, hard against my body.

The thought caused her mouth to turn dry. Or perhaps that was because he was standing so close and making no attempt to increase the distance. Her senses were flooded with his proximity, with the absolute stillness of their bodies. It seemed as if neither of them had taken a breath in a very long while.

Then, just when she thought she might explode from the pressure, the expectancy, the not knowing what would come next or what she wanted to come next, he moved his arm…not abruptly, but in a long, slow, brushing caress across her abdomen.

She knew the instant he detected the belly button ring. She could tell by the jerk of his head, by his swift intake of breath, by the sudden tension that stiffened his whole body.

And by the look of astonishment on his face.

In another place and time that look might have been comical, but not here and now. For he still stood way too close—so close she could feel the heat emanating from his big body, and where he had touched her, oh, there was more than heat.

There was fire.

She closed her eyes, imagined his broad, long-fingered hand spread across the bare skin of her belly, swore she could feel the touch of his thumb as it circled the delicate piece of jewelry, as it slid slowly lower. A responsive flush seemed to light her skin from the inside out.

"You have a piercing?"

Julia blinked her way out of the sensual heat haze and felt his gaze skim in a quicksilver motion from her face to her belly. She swallowed, moistened her arid mouth, although she hadn't a clue what to say other than a simple, "Yes."

Should she explain how she'd felt the day after she'd signed her divorce papers? Could she explain the surge of restlessness, of recklessness, of unreality? How she had decided that was the day to do something un-Julia-like, something to mark the start of her new life. Something like getting a tattoo.

Except once she walked through the door of Skin Pix, the old Julia wouldn't stay silent. She didn't want the statement of a multihued butterfly stamped into her skin. She wanted something a little less obvious.

And so she had walked out the door with a silver ring in her navel.

Of course the new Julia wasn't any different to the old one. She could never bring herself to wear clothes that bared her midriff and showed off the adornment, just as she could never explain to anyone else why she'd had it done, or why she kept wearing the unseen ring.

"It's just something I did on a whim." She shrugged self-consciously. "I had better get moving. Make yourself at home—Kree shouldn't be long."

"I'm not here to see Kree."

He was still standing too close, still blocking her path, still making her feel incredibly hot and bothered. Seeking relief, she looked down…just as he slid a hand into the front pocket of his jeans. Oh, dear Lord, she should not be looking there.

"I brought your car."

Her gaze sped guiltily back to where a set of car keys now dangled from his fingers. That was what she should have been noticing in the front of his jeans, instead of other, um, things.

"I guess that means I owe you two drinks," she said.

His pause was infinitesimal, just long enough for Julia to notice how the levity in her tone had done nothing to ease the heavily charged atmosphere. Then, in a slow, measured tone, he said, "I thought we agreed that wasn't a good idea."

"You said it wasn't a good idea."

"You had a man waiting at your gate."

"I didn't invite him." Her gaze held his without wavering—an amazing feat, considering the anticipatory quiver running from her toes to the tips of her ears. "And when he rang today and asked me out to dinner, I declined."

"So?"

Julia moistened her mouth, felt the lick of his gaze follow the movement. "So what if I want to buy you those drinks?"

"You know where to find me."

"The Lion?"

"Back bar." One corner of his mouth quirked. "But we both know Julia Goodwin wouldn't be seen dead in a dive like that."

And before she could even think of a reply, let alone voice it, he pressed the car keys into her hand and sauntered off.

Three

Julia wished she had been the one to deliver the clever exit line and saunter off. She wished he had been the one left standing nonplussed in her garden. Except that scenario wasn't ever likely to happen, seeing as it completely contravened nature. Mitch had snaffled all the family genes for saber-sharp one-liners, and Chantal had garnered most of the clever DNA.

Besides, walking away would have been impolite, and Julia was always polite.

That didn't stop her wishing…or trying to devise the perfect comeback. By the time she finished walking Mac, she had declared the latter an impossibility. How could she come up with anything sassy enough to top his reaction to her piercing?

She pictured him standing in the dappled garden light, those silvery eyes dazed, his expression dumbfounded, and her body almost buzzed with the unfamiliar blend of power and pleasure. Because nice, polite Julia Goodwin had shocked—nay, stunned—the baddest boy ever to swagger through the corridors of Plenty High. It was an intoxicating notion, and it made her feel strong in the most female of ways.

Strong enough to walk into the Lion, to sit down beside him, to order those drinks? Probably not. But that didn't stop her enjoying the fantasy. Not even the sight of Mrs. Hertzig, patiently waiting to ambush the next passerby, could dampen the moment.

"Hello, dear. Been out walking the dog, I see."

Julia's fantasy dissolved as her elderly neighbour leaned over her front fence, eager to natter.

"We've been all the way out to Maisie's and back," Julia supplied. When Mrs. H. didn't immediately pitch a question about her best-friend-slash-rival's garden, Julia knew there was something on her mind. And as Kree liked to point out, Mrs. H. never kept anything on her mind for long. She always aired it for public consumption.

"I couldn't help noticing you had company earlier." Her lips pursed on the word company, giving Julia enough time to think, Uh-oh. "If I'm not mistaken, it was that wild O'Sullivan boy."

Boy? Julia didn't think that tag quite fit her visitor, unless defined by the word bad.

"Back in town to visit with his sister, is he?"

"Yes, and—"

"He's a bad egg, that one. Do you think it's wise to have him in your yard, dear? I doubt your parents would approve. Your mother won't have forgotten that window he broke in her office."

"He's grown up since then," Julia pointed out, but Mrs. H. was in full flight.

Graffiti, vandalism, theft, arson—in her mind all Plenty's crime of the past twenty years could be laid at the feet of "That wild O'Sullivan boy." It was really too much, even for Mrs. H.

"Mrs. Hertzig? Mrs. Hertzig!" she tried a little more firmly. "Zane didn't even live in Plenty when Larbett's was broken into."

"He can drive, can't he?" And she was off again.

Julia frowned, disturbed by a side of Plenty gossip she had never considered. Then she heard the faint burr of a ringing phone.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Hertzig, but that sounds like my telephone. I'd best run and see if I can catch it."

She felt Mrs. H.'s affronted glare boring into her back as she trotted off but couldn't summon any guilt. Not even for denying her neighbour one of her few pleasures—someone to talk to, or at least to listen to her.

As Kree would likely be home by now, and if not the answering machine would pick up, there was no need to chase after the ringing phone. Except she did not want to hear any more stories about Zane's wild youth, especially those she knew had been stretched and embellished until they bore no resemblance to the truth.

As she stepped onto the veranda, the phone stopped mid-ring. She opened the front door and called, “If that’s for me, I’m home.”

Kree’s head—an extraordinary shade of strawberry-blonde this week—appeared from the living room doorway. “Chantal,” she mouthed.

Since Julia’s dinner party no-show, her sister had been very cool. She would turn even frostier when she found out Julia had passed on dating Dan.

“I’ll take Mac,” Kree offered as she handed the receiver over; then she winked cheekily. “Don’t say anything I wouldn’t say.”

Which left plenty of leeway. Julia settled into the nearest armchair and put the receiver to her ear. “Hello, sis. What’s new?”

She hadn’t moved when Kree returned sometime later.

“That dog is such a guy. You know what he—” She came to an abrupt halt when she saw Julia’s face. “Hey, what’s up? Is it your parents? Has there been an accident?”

“No. It’s nothing like that.” Julia’s attempt at a reassuring smile failed badly, so she focused on the pattern in her Axminster rug as she struggled to put the crux of the phone call into words. “You know Paul’s cousin-in-law who works at Chantal’s law firm?”

“Janet Harrington?”

“She told Chantal that Paul is having a baby.”

“Wow.” Kree raked both hands through her short spiky hair. “How did that happen!”

“In the usual fashion, I should expect.”

Kree didn’t laugh at her attempted humor, but then it wasn’t a particularly funny attempt. Instead her eyes clouded with concern as she peered into Julia’s face. “How do you feel about it?”

“I’m still working on that one. I mean, how should I feel? He’s not my husband anymore. He has a new wife and obviously they’ve decided to start a family.”

“Doesn’t mean you can’t feel something.”

“Okay, so maybe I feel a little… I don’t know…”

“Heck, Jules, you were married to the schmuck for six years and he didn’t give you a thing worth keeping. She’s married to him six minutes and she gets a baby. You’ve a right to feel cheated.”

Cheated. Did that describe how she felt? Did it explain the strange sense of hollowness, the emotional black hole where her reaction should reside? Perhaps she should feel cheated by her seeming lack of emotion. Something more palpable, like the sharp spike of jealousy or the bitter taste of regret, would make more sense.

A baby was the one thing she had wanted, desperately, from her marriage, but Paul had wanted to wait a few more years. Paul had insisted they wait. And now she was fast approaching thirty, with no prospect of ever experiencing the joy of carrying a baby, of childbirth and motherhood.

“What if I can’t have one, Kree? What if I never do?”

Her voice sounded as empty as she felt, but there must have been something in her eyes, a trace of pain or the hint of a plea, because Kree sank down onto the arm of her chair.

“Oh, honey, there’s no need to think like that, not when you’ve never even tried.”

“By the time I do try, my ovaries will be all shriveled up.”

“Probably.” But there was compassion in her smile, and in her spontaneous hug. “But, hey, why do you need a baby? You have me to look after, and God knows I can be pretty immature.”

Julia couldn’t help but smile.

“And if you think not having a baby’s tragic, imagine if you had had one with Paul Petulant. What if the kid was just like daddy? Can you picture a two-year-old version of your ex-husband? The tantrums?” Kree gave a melodramatic shudder. “Honestly, Jules, you did not want that man’s child!”

She squeezed a little tighter before letting go and springing to her feet. Sitting still was not in Kree’s nature. Nor was dwelling on an issue.

“Enough of the sappy stuff—I feel like a drink. You gonna join me?”

"I don't think so."

"Come on," she cajoled. "Let's mix up something exotic, and then we can discuss your sex life."

Julia rolled her eyes.

"Oh, that's right. You don't have a sex life, a small matter which will need remedying if you're ever going to have that baby you yearn for."

"I'm not about to go out and pick someone up just to get pregnant, if that's what you're implying. You know that's not what I want."

"Yeah, I know. All I'm saying is how do you expect to find this prince you so desperately want to marry and make babies with, when you spend half your life sitting around here? You need to get out more, have some fun, kiss a few frogs."

"I've been meeting plenty of frogs." I just haven't been kissing any of them.

"Yes, well, your sister does seem to know her fair share."

With the mood successfully lightened, Kree leaned down and tweaked Julia's ponytail. "If you won't try a new cocktail, how about trying a new colour?"

Julia started to shake her head.

"Oh, come on, Jules, this is exactly what you need. I could do you tomorrow after work. A decent cut, some red highlights—you'd be a new woman by nightfall."

It wasn't the first time Kree had begged to be let loose on Julia's hair, but it was the first time Julia had been tempted. A new woman by nightfall. She liked the sound of that.

Sensing capitulation, Kree danced around the chair, talking colours and styles. All excited animation, she dragged her fingers through her own hair, and the spikes stood up like the Opera House sails. Julia shook her head firmly. What was she thinking?

"I'm sorry, Kree, but I like my hair the way it is."

Kree studied her for a long, silent moment, her blue gaze uncharacteristically somber. "Yes, but do you like your life the way it is?"

"I don't know," Julia admitted honestly.

"Then I'll keep that appointment free."

Kree's question hammered at Julia that night and right through the next day at work. There were aspects of her life she treasured. Her home, for one, and her close relationship with her family. Her many friendships, her standing in the community.

But if she were truly content, she wouldn't have lain awake half the night mulling over other aspects of her life. She wouldn't be accepting blind dates in the hope of finding another husband. She wouldn't feel this yawning hollowness whenever she thought of her future without said husband and family. And she definitely wouldn't be dwelling on the fantasy of being a new woman by nightfall. The last time she'd started thinking that way, she'd ended up with her navel pierced.

And was that a bad thing? Did she want to wear the label of Good Girl forever? Or did she want the stimulating buzz that came from shocking the unshockable?

If only she could find answers as easily as she found questions. By the time the store closed and she started dragging her feet home, Julia was no closer to those answers. As she neared Bill's garage, her feet picked up their pace in time with her pulse, and it took a huge effort of willpower to prevent her gaze from raking the drive-through or peering into the yawning entrance to the workshop.

She could have saved herself the effort.

He wasn't in the garage; he was in the street outside, talking to the driver of a flashy red car. Her surprise at finding him there brought her to a dead stop in the middle of the footpath.

Time seemed to hit that same brick wall as she took in his casual posture, one hand splayed on the roof, the other tapping a beat on the driver's door. As usual, his hair picked up the glow of the sun and threw it back tenfold. As usual, her gaze caught on the hard outline of his arms, bared by a sleeveless black shirt. As usual, he looked so arresting, so vital, so male, that it took several of those long, slow-motion moments before anything else registered.

The anything else brought real time back with a sickening crash. The driver he seemed so cosy with was a woman…a woman who looked as fast and flashy as her car. A woman such as that wouldn't have compromised on the tattoo. She wouldn't hesitate about walking into a bar and buying a man a drink, especially a man who looked like Zane O'Sullivan.

Something fired deep in Julia's stomach, something she didn't wait to analyze but which cried New woman by nightfall as she turned on her heel, then kept up the chant all the way back to the main shopping center.

When she walked into Hair Today and selected a chair, Kree's eyes boggled. "Tell me I'm hallucinating."

"You are not to come anywhere near me with scissors," Julia replied sternly. "And if you insist on red, fine, but only highlights. If you make it as red as Alice Pratt's, then you will need to find another place to live."

Kree did insist on red, and Julia was glad. She studied her reflection in her bathroom mirror for about the twentieth time and shook her head in that deliberate measured way of hair product models. She was getting quite good at it, she decided as her blunt-cut layers swung in a wide arc before settling on her shoulders.

And she laughed out loud, at first because she couldn't help herself—the delight just uncoiled like an overwound spring set loose—and then in recollection of Kree revealing the colour. Paprika.

Julia had flown out of the chair, her eyes wide with horror. "That sounds like orange."

"No," Kree said as she eased her back down. "That sounds like hot."

Did she look hot? Julia narrowed her eyes to inspect her image more objectively. The woman staring back at her didn't look like Julia Goodwin. She looked like… Julia tried a pout. Oh, my, she thought with a wild fluttering of excitement in the pit of her stomach. She could almost pass for one of those models. She could pass for a woman who drove a red sports car.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, купив полную легальную версию на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.