

*Isn't It  
Romantic?*



*Ronda Thompson*

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LionHearted Publishing,<sup>®</sup> Inc.  
P.O. Box 618  
Zephyr Cove, NV 89448-0618  
888-546-6478

Send us email at [admin@LionHearted.com](mailto:admin@LionHearted.com)

Visit our web site [www.LionHearted.com](http://www.LionHearted.com)

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ISBN: 1-57343-027-7

Printed in the U.S.A.

To Mike, my hero.

A special thanks

To Susan Collier Akers  
for encouraging me to write this story.

To Kim Campbell  
for helping me cut the word length.

To Jennifer Archer and Charolette Goebel  
for their editing skills.

To my agent, Jean Price, and her  
submissions director, DeWanna Pace,  
for believing in me, and in my talent.



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# Chapter One



“My mom sells sex for a living.”

Katrine Summerville stumbled in the hallway and fell against the wall with a thud. The black pump she'd been trying to force on her foot dangled from a manicured nail, momentarily forgotten. Did Shelly just say what she thought she said?

“You have an impressive home,” a masculine voice responded. “She must be good at it.”

“Oh, she's talented all right. Mr. Martin says no one can hook better than my mom.”

An uncomfortable silence followed. The voice obviously found the subject of greater interest.

“Who is Mr. Martin?”

“Craig Martin is mom's boss... so to speak. He thinks her ability is natural. You know, God given?”

“That's certainly mind stimulating.”

To Katrine's ears, he sounded far from intrigued. Slipping the pump onto her foot, then smoothing a crepe creation over her hips, she emerged from

the downstairs hallway. Later, Shelly would receive a lecture concerning her lack of aplomb and one about discussing her career with strangers. *That child was eleven going on thirty!*

Her date sat facing the opposite direction, not allowing her conclusive evidence he appeared as disinterested as he sounded. A thick abundance of dark hair brushed his shoulders. *Thank God he has hair.*

In all her thirty years, Katrine Summerville hadn't once been forced to embrace the humiliation of a blind date. Well, he wasn't even that. The man came with a price tag. A phone call from a friend who owned the Dating Service guaranteed a perfect escort would arrive for this evening's event.

"Mr. Westmoreland?"

When he rose, Katrine immediately noticed his height. Her escort stood over six feet, closer to six two. His tux strained at the shoulders—broad, powerful shoulders, her literary mind added. Before her gaze had time to examine the rest of his backside, the man turned and the fake smile pasted on her mouth faltered.

"He's a hunk, isn't he, Mom? Tall, dark, broad at the shoulders and narrow at the hips. Tight butt, too. He's perfect, isn't he?"

A sudden slackness to Katrine's jaw muscle suggested her mouth might be hanging open. She clamped her lips tight and pulled her stare from her escort's amused expression. "Shelly, run

along,” Katrine instructed through clenched teeth. “Thelma’s in the kitchen. She said you wanted to bake cookies tonight.”

Heaving a sigh of disappointment, her daughter moved toward a set of swinging doors. “It was nice to meet you, Mr. Westmoreland,” she paused to dutifully reply.

“Your formality seems a little awkward after making mention of my, ah, attributes. Call me Trey.”

His smile, albeit a sarcastic one, visibly improved Shelly’s spirits. She smiled back at him. “Trey,” she tasted the name. “I guess it’s all right. I figured you for a Chance or a Devlin, something more romantic. It’s better than John. Mom likes Johns because my father was one. It’s common, you know?”

“I believe the term is slang, rather than common,” he said dryly. “It was... interesting to meet you, too, Shelly.”

While her daughter stood mesmerized by a man she hadn’t met until twenty minutes ago, Katrine wondered what in the world he must be thinking. She supposed an explanation was in order. Shelly read the novels Katrine wrote even though she forbade her. The child understood things no eleven-year-old should.

Still, Katrine loathed the idea of spending the drive ahead answering questions about her career. It was a job, it paid the rent and she hated dis-

cussing her work with people who weren't literary. Trey Westmoreland struck her as the type who only read sports magazines. Her gift of perception encouraged Katrine to believe he spent all his time working out and chasing women. He was too good looking, too perfectly put together, too right to be anything but wrong for her.

Shallow, she added, conceited; the perfect doll for a top-selling romance author to dangle on her arm at an awards banquet. Good God, the man was a paid escort. She'd be disappointed had Cynthia sent anything less than a barbarian.

"I'll get my coat," Katrine said coolly, not offering an explanation concerning her daughter's brashness. "I expect you in bed by ten." She turned toward Shelly still poised by the kitchen doors.

Shelly, blonde straight hair hanging past her shoulders, pert nose and full lips—a small replica of her mother, nodded. "I promise to be asleep before you get home." She grinned. "You two might want privacy. Trey is definitely a rake. His blood is probably on fire with barely suppressed desire at this very moment. He's eyeing your breasts lustfully and no doubt his manhood is stiff—"

"Young lady!" Katrine squawked. Her blood was suddenly on fire, not with desire, but with embarrassment. "I want you to apologize to Mr. Westmoreland. You and I will talk about this, *later.*"

Temporarily contrite, or Katrine suspected, embarrassed for being chastised in front of 'the hunk', Shelly lowered her eyes demurely.

"Sorry, Mr. Westmoreland, I mean, Trey. I hope you have a nice evening." She darted through swinging doors and disappeared.

"I—I don't know what to say." Katrine glanced up into a pair of thickly lashed blue eyes. "I've tried to keep my work hidden from Shelly, but—"

"Do you, ah, work here, at home?" Trey interrupted, helping her into a fake-fur jacket.

The warm pressure of his hands scattered her concentration for the briefest of seconds. His touch sent tiny shocks of pleasure racing up her spine. Impossible, she mentally chastised. This only happened in her imagination, to other people, characters of her creation, but never to her.

"Three years ago I had an addition built out back. I wanted to keep my profession separate from my private life. Besides, it was hard to concentrate in the house. You know, with Shelly underfoot?"

"I can see where that would cause problems." His condescending tone contradicted the frown shaping his lips. "You don't look like the type who does what you do for a living."

As she retrieved a beaded purse, Katrine interpreted the remark the same as she'd done countless times in the past. She supposed Cynthia told him about her profession. Most people assumed

romance writers were blue-haired old ladies or oversexed, frustrated housewives. “At the risk of sounding clichéd, don’t judge a book by its cover.”

Her answer prompted a lift of his brow and brought a slight smile to his lips. Katrine swallowed loudly. If she didn’t fit the stereotype of a romance writer, Trey Westmoreland looked exactly as she envisioned a paid escort would. A thought struck her. Did he accept money for more than the service of a date?

“I guess we should go.” Her voice sounded oddly breathless.

“Probably a smart idea.” A flicker of heat ignited within the coolness of his gaze. “Before I ask to see where you do your work. You’ve made me curious about a profession I haven’t given much thought. I suppose because you look remarkably innocent.”

His suggestive undertones were confusing. Why would he want to see her office? What did innocence have to do with her writing? Suddenly, she understood. “While I’ll admit there’s a certain stigma attached to my profession, you shouldn’t read too much into what’s fact and what’s fiction. My work is based strictly on fantasy. I offer escapism. A release from tension and everyday stress. Our professions might be the same in that aspect,” she finished meaningfully.

He frowned while guiding her to the door.

“Although most are allowed the pleasure of escape in what I do, I consider my profession more technical. To be honest, I stopped enjoying it a long time ago.”

*A man who didn't like sex?* Katrine paused outside to key in her security code, mulling over his admission. Did the gigolo really consider sexual pleasure a technical undertaking? “Well,” she sighed shakily. “I guess a person can get burned out on just about anything.”

“Cynthia said she'd handle the normal fees. I assume any other arrangements are done in private?”

“Assume?” She glanced up, surprised. “Don't you know?” She thought he blushed.

“Actually, this is the first time I've done this. I mean, not had a date, but *this sort of* date. It was a desperate measure. I didn't have a choice.”

*Just her luck, an inexperienced gigolo.* So much for using this date as research. Not that Katrine would have gone so far as to do what only a desperate, lonely woman would do—an interview would have satisfied her. The problem with being heralded the steamiest woman on paper was, she had little experience to back up her supposed expertise. How could she when her husband, the only man she had ever loved, died in a car crash six months after their marriage?

Katrine had been barely eighteen and two months pregnant. She and John were both virgins

when they married. Six months together hadn't given them much time to learn about each other, much less their bodies. In short, she could hardly count herself worldly. To compensate her readers, Katrine simply took what little she knew on the subject of sex and greatly exaggerated.

"The standard fee will suffice," she bit out. "There won't be any need for private compensation."

"No, there won't," he agreed defensively. "I'm not that desperate."



Later, speeding down I-35, Katrine contemplated his destitution. He drove a red Jag. She wondered if the agency provided the car, but he seemed so comfortable behind the wheel, she discarded the notion. What measures forced Trey into the position of male for hire? He looked to be in his early thirties, possessed the body of an athlete and could have modeled for *GQ*, in her opinion.

"What made you turn to an escort service?" she questioned.

"It seemed the easiest choice." Trey maneuvered the Jag off the freeway. "I'm not interested in commitments. Ask a woman out a couple of times and she starts assuming things. I decided this might work for me. Companionship with no

strings attached.”

No, just a price tag, Katrine thought. His conceit set her teeth on edge. Not that she didn't imagine a man with his face had women more than eager to jump into bed with him, but to expect to be paid, to prey upon the loneliness of women! It was abhorrent.

“How about you?” he asked before she could further interrogate him. “Why did you decide to go into your profession?”

She sighed. Katrine supposed this was inevitable. People were always curious about the life of an author. “After Shelly's father died, I had to do something. Up until that time, I'd always done it to relax or for my own personal pleasure, then I realized I didn't know how to do anything else.”

“Shelly... you don't suffer any conscience for her sake?”

Since they were no longer on the freeway, Trey's face blended with the shadows, but his voice relayed a note of unmistakable censure. The matter wasn't his business, still, Katrine provided an explanation. “Actually, I didn't realize how much my career affected her until tonight. Tomorrow, I'll have a long talk with her about reality.”

Whatever his response, it drowned within a loud knocking sound from the engine. “Great.” He steered the Jag to a side road.

“What’s wrong?” Katrine asked.

“It sounds like the pistons,” he answered irritably. “What a place to have car trouble.”

After she peered through the tinted glass, Katrine agreed. They were on a dark, deserted street. To her relief, he fumbled beneath the console and extracted a cellular phone. Switching off the ignition, Trey called AAA and ordered a wrecker and cab.

“Sorry.” He turned to her after placing the phone under the console. “We’ll be late.”

Remembering the length of awards ceremonies past, and the fact she wasn’t up for hers until the end, Katrine didn’t find their circumstance distressing. Let her arrive late with such a gorgeous man. Perhaps someone would actually believe she lived a life comparable to one of her heroines. Her own story wasn’t in any way romantic. There were no happily-ever-afters in real life.

“Should we lock the doors?” she asked nervously. Trey’s scent did strange things to her. His body heat warmed her across the small, silent space separating them.

“Wise move.” He pressed the door locks. “We can listen to music if you’d like. It won’t matter if we run the battery down, anyway.”

“That would be nice.” She watched him from beneath her lashes. Did Trey’s arrogant reference to sex being a technical undertaking suggest he considered himself an expert at stroking the

flames of a woman's passion? It was silly to even imagine he could. Her heroines lost their minds over a kiss, shivered at a warm touch, melted with desire under a heated stare and felt their thighs quake at the deep huskiness of a voice. Katrine called it fiction.

Once, five years ago, she'd foolishly gotten involved in a relationship. Sex with Carl Thomas proved less exciting than it had with John. Carl actually admitted to being disappointed she wasn't as hot as her writing. The relationship ended badly and Katrine hadn't gotten involved with another man since. Put simply, Katrine Summerville didn't believe in romance.

"What kind of music do you like?"

"Country."

The sleeve of his jacket slid across her thighs as Trey reached for the glove compartment. He paused, glancing up. "You're kidding, right?"

"No, I'm not," she answered shortly. "I'm Texas born and raised."

"When in Rome." He shrugged, slamming the glove compartment. "I've been in Dallas for six years and never once felt the urge to cry in my beer."

"I didn't think your drawl was authentic."

"Philly," he answered before she asked. "Tell me when I find the right station. Wait, I hear a twang, this must be it."

Katrine laughed. "They don't call it twang

anymore. I liked it even when they did. The music inspires me.”

“How so?”

An unfamiliar sensation uncurled in the pit of her stomach. Trey’s arm rested on the back of her seat. Given his height, his knees were almost brushing hers. Katrine found it suddenly difficult to swallow. What had he asked? A slow ballad began playing on the radio and she remembered. “Most country songs are only short love stories. They stimulate me. I mean my creative—”

“Speaking of stimulation,” he cut her off, leaning toward her. “Shelly is remarkably perceptive. I’ve been wondering from the first moment I saw you if you’d taste as good as you look.”

His lips against hers created a jolt Katrine felt certain wasn’t a figment of her imagination. She began to protest his forwardness, then changed her mind, admitting to a certain curiosity over what Trey Westmoreland thought he possessed that was so wonderful. *Would this cost extra?*

While he kissed her, Katrine savored each feeling he stirred for future reference. His lips were firm, warm and definitely experienced, still, the uncontrollable urge to rip his clothes off hadn’t overcome her. When he pulled away, she sighed with disappointment.

“I’m getting a crick in my neck,” Trey complained. “Let’s be more creative.”

She found herself pulled halfway into his lap

and pressed intimately against a broad chest, then his mouth was on hers again, hungrier than before. As his tongue inched between her lips, an involuntary moan left her throat. Odd, she thought. To her knowledge, a simple kiss had never elicited such a response from her. But then, she couldn't really count his talent as an elementary accomplishment. When his tongue moved inside her mouth with slow, steady strokes, Katrine's thighs went up in flames.

"Wait." She ended the kiss. "This wasn't part of the package."

"Ever the business woman," he said huskily, allowing her to scramble from his embrace. "I don't usually act this irrational. What's your name, anyway?"

Horror struck. She'd been lusting for a man who didn't remember her name. Now that she thought about it, Katrine couldn't recall introducing herself. Cynthia told her his name, she assumed he received the same consideration. "Katrine Summerville," she growled.

Stark brightness lit the Jag's interior, outlining the tense line of his jaw. "It sounds sort of Rebecca-of-Sunnybrook-Farmish. I expected something like Candi, Brandi or Bambi. There's the wrecker and the cab. Good thing I regained my senses. It might have been embarrassing."

"That's my real name!" Katrine's pen name was Kat Summers; damn if she'd bring that up at

the moment. “And I promise, there wouldn’t have been anything to be embarrassed over.”

“Maybe not for you.” His teeth flashed white in the glare of headlights as he pushed the lock release button. “It’s been a few years since I’ve been caught in the front seat of a car with my pants down.”

His assuming attitude added further degradation to an already humiliating circumstance. Angry over not only his conceit, but by her brazen behavior, Katrine shoved the door wide and climbed out, marching to the cab with long, unfeminine strides. A hand closed over hers as she placed her fingers on the door handle.

“Allow me,” Trey said. “Just a suggestion, but I hope for the banquet we might act like we actually know each other. As if the night hasn’t been paid for.”

“Are you ashamed of yourself?”

“Only a little confused by my behavior tonight. You’re definitely not my type.”

When he turned and approached the wrecker, Katrine assured herself he wasn’t her type, either. Not that she knew what sort of man interested her, but he certainly wasn’t it. He fell into the outlaw category, dangerous to a woman’s morality and peace of mind. Trouble.

“You want to get in and close the door?” the cabby questioned. “You’re letting out all the warm air.”

Shivering, aware of the cold only after having it brought to her attention, Katrine obeyed. The banquet should be well under way. If fate smiled down on her, she'd arrive in time to accept her award and put a fast end to the evening. Damn, she forgot. This year a new segment had been added.

Non-fiction, sports writing, reporting and outstanding work in the field of features and columns. Katrine inwardly groaned. The banquet promised to be boring and time consuming. A frigid blast reminded her of an added annoyance.

"Fairmont Hotel," Trey instructed.

The cab lurched forward. Katrine stared out the frosted window at the bleak winter night, still in shock over her out-of-character behavior. Her 'escort' hadn't donned a coat. Probably afraid to wrinkle his perfectly starched shirt, or... perhaps he had hot blood. She shifted against the seat, uneasy over the wicked thoughts running through her head.

"Cold?" He pulled her closer. "There seems to be a draft around the doors."

Dry air from the heater vents fanned her face. The warmth creeping into her bones at Trey's nearness might easily be rationalized as a result of the other. Both were man made.

"A-About the ceremony," she stuttered. "You're right, we should pretend to know each other."

"I've already explained about this being my first time. I'm curious to know why you want the

charade and curious about something else, as well.” His lips brushed her ear before he whispered, “Is sex better when the passion is paid for? When the pleasure’s predicted? When there’s no room for inhibition and no strings attached? Is it the simplicity of the concept that makes it so appealing? Lust, pure and simple... and paid for.”

His mouth inched closer to her lips with every question. Perspiration broke out between Katrine’s breasts. Visions flashed inside her mind. Scenes of steamy sex with Trey Westmoreland, imaginings of pleasure without the worry of where it might lead—what she might say to him in the morning. A business arrangement and nothing more. It couldn’t appeal to Katrine, could it?

Assurances she wasn’t the type who’d want sex without commitment refused to leave her lips in the form of a protest. Hesitation proved costly. Once again, his mouth fastened on hers. Desire immediately coursed through her veins.

Until tonight, Katrine had been a third party to lust. Her heroines lost their wills to the insistent throbbing in their lower regions, and felt their breasts swell with an aching need to be fondled. Her heroines, at least, had morals and an ability to tell the hero no before true love made surrender acceptable.

A suitable heroine, she was not. Katrine’s fingers stole up his neck to tangle themselves in his hair. She wanted only a taste—a nibble of passion

to help her understand the concept behind her writing.

She got more than she bargained for. Trey savored her lips, teasing and tormenting until he had her squirming against the seat. When the cold vinyl beneath her gave way to the warmth of soft, fine wool, she regained enough faculties to realize she'd crawled into his lap and now straddled him. His lap sported something that shocked Katrine right back into the twentieth century.

"We can't do this," she broke from him to whisper.

"I'm certain, as you can plainly feel beneath that nice round bottom of yours, we can."

He silenced the weak protest gathering on her tongue with the intrusion of his. This is wrong, Katrine tried to reason. Terribly, indecently, deliciously, wrong. She moaned as Trey pushed the jacket from her shoulders and slid the straps of her dress down.

"You taste as sweet as you look," he said huskily, trailing a hot path from her neck to the valley of her breasts. "You're also a pro at making a man desperate. Name your price, and maybe I'll regain my senses."

"Do what?" Katrine's spine jerked ramrod straight. "My price? You're the one with a price tag!"

His head lifted abruptly. The overhead light blinked on as the cab door opened.

“Didn’t think I’d get you here in time,” the man whispered, his face a bright red. “Lucky the two of you are at a hotel.”

“Oh my God,” Katrine croaked. She tried to disentangle herself from Trey’s lap, but the pointed heel of her shoe lodged itself in the front seat’s back. A ripping noise followed.

“My shoe’s caught!” she shouted in panic.

“What did you mean by that?” he demanded.

“It’s caught. You know? As in stuck—”

“No,” he interrupted irritably. “About me being the one with a price tag?”

Katrine felt a more important matter should be addressed. She glanced toward the hotel lobby and groaned. Sure enough, a crowd had gathered. Those milling about were the smokers, the gossips, people totally bored by the ceremony who used any excuse to escape the tedious banquet hall. Elise Pennington, a woman Katrine recognized from awards ceremonies past, a woman who happened to work for one of the local gossip ‘rags’, actually had her nose pressed against the window. The reporter began fumbling in her purse and Katrine went into hysterics.

“Don’t just sit there! Help me get my shoe loose! Pull up the straps of my dress. She’s looking for her camera!”

Trey’s eyes widened, his head turned and he cursed rather loudly. He lunged for the cab door, tumbling Katrine to the seat beneath him in the

process. A bright flash, the sound of her shoe tearing free, and several colorful oaths from the gigolo's too-tempting lips preceded darkness.

## Chapter Two



The banquet room was a welcome sight. Tastefully decorated and dimly lit; the hum of conversation emitted a feeling of comfort Katrine had yet to experience since a paid escort darkened her door.

After entering the lobby, she'd bravely marched past the gaping mouths of those involved in one way or another with her profession, hoping to appear as if nothing out of the ordinary had just transpired. Clay Barns, director of the ceremony planning committee, greeted her and quickly escorted them to a table. Katrine had every intention of ignoring her 'date' for the remainder of the evening. What had he meant by 'name your price'? She started to turn and demand an explanation, but the sound of a loud voice booming around the room refocused her attention.

Jerry Caldwell, an editor for one of the area's top newspapers, stood at the podium on stage, hosting the event. Katrine resented the choice.

Before this year, the award ceremony strictly paid homage to the fiction genre. As far as she was concerned, journalism didn't have anything to do with true literary art. Anyone could write the facts or express opinion. It didn't require talent.

“Due to a time problem, I'm afraid those honored for the remaining categories must share the lime-light,” Caldwell announced. “I'll present two awards at once and help end what's become a long evening. Someone's got to keep the presses rolling.”

Jerry's last comment generated the fake laughter Katrine imagined he anticipated. The editor wasn't one of her favorite people. Not that she disliked him so much, but rather, one of his prized possessions—a certain columnist who wrote a slam article on romance writers three years ago, her in particular.

Enraged over the columnist's callous remarks concerning the genre, Katrine contacted her attorney. Only a smooth-talking lawyer on the paper's behalf kept the incident from the media. The columnist paid through the teeth and Katrine received compensation for his over-rated opinion.

“I know this is boring you, but at least pretend to be interested.”

When she glanced at her companion, Katrine found his gaze fastened on her mouth. She shifted uncomfortably in her chair. He smiled.

“You're the one who should be feigning an

interest,” she countered lowly.

“Oh, I’m interested.” His gaze returned to her lips. “Very interested.”

He leaned closer. Their breaths almost mingled before the sound of her name being announced broke the spell.

“So with pleasure, I present the prestigious Silver Heart to Kat Summers and the coveted Golden Lion to T. West.”

*T. West?* Katrine stiffened, narrowing her eyes in search of a man she’d never had the misfortune to meet, but whose name brought anger boiling to the surface. “Bastard,” she mumbled just as she heard her escort growl, “Bitch.”

Her startled gaze locked with Trey’s. Slowly, he rose from his chair. Katrine did the same. A hush fell over the noisy crowd. The spotlight found them.

“Kat Summers as in Katrine Summerville,” he accused.

“T. West as in Trey Westmoreland,” she spat.

“I thought you were a whore.”

“I thought you were a gigolo!”

“Cynthia Lane is a friend of mine,” he defended.

“She’s my *best* friend!”

“I’ll kill her!” both promised in unison.

“T. West and Kat Summers, come on down.” Jerry attempted a poor imitation of a game show host.

When Trey rudely walked away, Katrine had

little choice but to follow him. She held her head high, despite the humiliation she felt over consorting with the enemy. How degrading that she'd been crawling all over his lap only minutes ago. T. West who claimed romance novels gave women a warped expectation of love—T. West who'd viciously demeaned her talent and cost her a loss of projected sales for the novel he reviewed.

After reading the review, Katrine had called her editor and asked if they could sue the columnist. In a private arrangement, the paper agreed to compensate her losses and T. West hadn't reviewed her since, an oddity that soon became a curiosity among the tight-knit group of authors in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

If the paper managed to keep the episode hush-hush, Cynthia Lane knew the truth. Katrine made no secret of her dislike for the columnist, even if Cynthia considered him a friend. Dammit, she'd found the perfect opportunity to set them up.

"Don't they make a handsome couple?" Jerry gushed, placing his beefy arms around the award winners.

A splatter of applause followed. Trey glared and Katrine growled. The editor quickly released them.

"Are you a couple?" Elise Pennington asked, tapping her camera as if it held a treasure.

Quiet expectancy blanketed the room. "No," Katrine answered, a bit too loudly.

Elise lifted a brow. “You looked like a couple... earlier,” the woman’s voice trailed suggestively.

“Research,” Trey supplied. “Ms. Summers and I were discussing the over-rated element of romance lacking in relationships between men and women of the twentieth century.”

“Westmoreland,” Caldwell warned under his breath. “We can’t afford this.”

When Trey stared straight ahead, a muscle beginning to twitch in his jaw, Katrine suspected Jerry was responsible for her generous settlement, and certainly not the columnist.

“Even an opinion can be expensive in this day and age,” she said softly. “If I were you, I’d do what I do, listen to my editor.”

“Craig Martin,” Trey said with a laugh. “I should have recognized the name. He’s your editor, not your pimp. Your daughter had me going. Do you think it’s fair to give Shelly the same shallow expectations of love you give your readers? You’ve obviously taught her to judge a man by the tightness of his butt and the size of his—”

“How dare you!” Katrine interrupted. Slandering her writing abilities was one thing, attacking her ability to mother was another. “Only a shallow man would assume to know what I have or haven’t given my daughter. Shelly is very well adjusted.”

“Accept your awards and move on,” Jerry said after clamping his hand over the microphone.

“Don’t speak to her, Westmoreland. Not another word.”

Trey ignored his superior. “What you write is sexist against men,” he argued quietly.

“Then it’s about time something was,” she hissed under her breath. “And in case you don’t live in the real world, let me tell you something. Women deal with sexism on a daily basis. What do babes in bikinis have to do with beer? What sport does the swimsuit issue of Sports Illustrated promote? Men have butchered romance and the media has helped them do it. The message being sent is a disheartening one. If a woman isn’t built, and beautiful, she doesn’t deserve to be loved. I give women the romance they can’t find in today’s society, and I don’t care what they look like, or what they do for a living!”

Jerry removed his hand from the microphone long enough to shout, “How about a round of applause for our winners!”

Applause did not follow, Katrine noted. She imagined if not all occupants of the room could hear what transpired on stage, most could tell by her and T. West’s expressions, that all was not well.

“Are you implying that looks aren’t important to you?” Trey asked, lifting a brow.

“Not particularly,” she clipped.

“So, you didn’t tell Cynthia to send someone tall, dark and handsome?”

“Of course not,” she lied.

He laughed in response. "I'll at least be honest. Since I assumed Cynthia's agency employed either out-of-work models or prostitutes working under a legitimate guise, I asked for a slinky blonde with nothing between her ears and legs all the way up to her ass."

"And you call me sexist," she accused. "I'm sorry you didn't get what you requested."

His gaze travelled her slowly. "That's a matter of *opinion*."

Before she could stop herself, Katrine slapped him. The collective gasp of the audience merged with her own. Horrified, she stared at the ugly, red imprint of her hand against his cheek. *What had she done?* Katrine Summerville didn't let passion rule her senses or anger cloud her judgement. My God, she'd reacted like one of her feisty heroines. Mortified, she snatched her award and ran off the stage.

Outside, the night swirled around her, freezing the teardrop perched on the edge of her cheek. Katrine breathed a sigh of relief when a cab pulled up, hurriedly wrenching open the door. She couldn't understand how one man could so easily crack her control and put her on the defense.

She had climbed on her soapbox over something she no more believed in than did T. West. For a moment, she wanted to believe in unconditional love, in happily-ever-after. She wanted to, but life had stolen the ability from her years ago.

Now, Katrine dreamed for others, but never for herself.



Red taillights were swallowed by the mist. A chill cut through Trey's tuxedo and ruffled his dark hair. He stood before the hotel clutching his award in a white-knuckled grip, silently cursing the woman who sped away. Kat Summers—a thorn in his side since he wrote the review on her. She made him look like an idiot three years ago, and she'd done it again tonight. You deserved it, his conscience warned. At least this evening, he reluctantly agreed.

He couldn't conjure a single excuse for his behavior with her. A groan of more than embarrassment escaped him as sleet began to fall from the sky. Trey searched for any excuse that might explain his overactive hormones and his unnecessary insults. None occurred. None but one, and he hated to even acknowledge it. Chemistry, the cursed thought surfaced. Illogical, irrational, undeniable attraction. Lust at first sight. All the makings of a torrid romance novel. "Dammit," he swore, stomping his feet to keep his blood from freezing.

"You waiting on a cab or trying to catch frost-bite?"

Glancing up, he was surprised to find a cab

sitting in front of him. Trey bent, squinting through the half-open window at the shadowy figure inside. "I've got a couple of stops to make. Is that all right?"

"Hey, if you've got the money, I've got the time."

Irony twisted his mouth into a semblance of a smile. It was something he might have wished to hear from a certain pair of mind-altering lips earlier. A fresh wave of humiliation washed over him as he got inside the cab. She'd cast a spell over him. There was no way he'd have even considered paying for sex, not in this day and age, not ever, he corrected. Not until tonight, his disgusted conscience spoke up.

"Where to?" the cabby asked.

"The nearest book store," he answered, distractedly brushing bits of sleet from his lapel. Earlier, he meant to pick up a novel for next week's review, but a last minute scramble to find a date took longer than he anticipated. The price of asking a woman out once or twice and failing to contact her again left him in a bind. Four of the women he phoned had actually gotten married since he last dialed their numbers. Cynthia Lane and her dating service were a last resort. A short vacation to hell, he mentally added.

"What kind of bookstore you looking for?"

Trey glanced toward the driver. The man needed a shave and wore a shapeless cowboy hat perched on his head. "How many kinds are there?"

The cabby shrugged. "Two. You prefer floors your feet stick to, or not?"

"Not," Trey assured him.

"Good, I can pick up something for my ol' lady."

"Good," he mimicked dryly. "You can turn off the meter while you browse."

"All right, but if I get back to the car before you, it starts ticking again." The man eyed Trey's award. "You a writer?"

"A journalist."

"Oh." The cabby frowned. "I thought you might be somebody."

"I'm T. West," Trey ground out.

No recognition lit the cabby's eyes. He turned, smiling broadly. "I'm Charlie Grimes. Pleased to meet you. Every year I work the awards ceremony. Nadine, that's my wife," he informed. "She reads a lot. Well, most all the time now. She's gonna have a baby soon and the doc said if she stayed off her feet, her ankles wouldn't swell up so bad. Nadine's home anxiously awaiting my return, hoping I might have picked up someone famous this year. Guess she'll be disappointed."

"Guess so," Trey said dryly. "A few minutes earlier, and you could have driven Kat Summers."

"Kat Summers!" Charlie exploded in disbelief. "She's my favorite! I mean, Nadine's favorite," he quickly amended. "My wife'll be down in the mouth when she hears I almost gave Kat Summers a ride. Hey, she wasn't that leggy

blonde standing outside the hotel a few minutes before you came out, was she?”

“Unless you want your face slapped, I wouldn’t describe her with those particular words, at least not in her presence. But yes, that was Kat Summers.”

A low whistle slithered from the space between Charlie’s teeth. “Figured her for some guy’s plaything when she rushed out of the hotel. Hot damn, and she’s talented, too?”

“A matter of opinion,” Trey grumbled. Kat Summers did what any grandmother in America could do as far as he was concerned. She wove incredulous tales of adventure and expected the reader to identify with shallow, physically flawless characters. The stories were always predictable—they always lived happily-ever-after.

“Bullshit,” he mumbled.

“Wind’s coming from the stockyards,” Charlie agreed, drawing air into his lungs in a huge gulp. Slowly, he released his breath. “Smell that money.”

Trey eyed the cabby darkly and refused to either comply or comment on his misinterpretation. His thoughts returned to Katrine Summerville. Her novels were pure fantasy. The hero certainly never came home to find his heroine’s things missing and a note taped to the dresser mirror. That was reality. His reality.

Once upon a time, Trey might have believed in everlasting love. Once upon a time, he dreamed of

writing the great American novel, but that was before Linda Tate stole his dreams. That was before his crash course in divorce.

Their story had not ended happily. In his quest to please Linda by following in the footsteps of her newspaper tycoon father, Trey lost his dreams and eventually the woman he tried to pacify. He worked long hours at the paper, trying to measure up to her expectations. If he wasn't exhausted from meeting a deadline, or Linda wasn't engrossed in a romance novel, they made love. For six years they pretended contentment with each other, then Trey came home to the note. Linda wanted a divorce. She'd met another man. A rock-and-roll singer for Christ's sake!

His wife had completely blind-sided him. Her note said he'd become too boring, too structured, and lacked imagination or spontaneity. In short, Linda molded him into what she thought she wanted, then decided she wanted something else—another man—another chance to fulfill her unrealistic expectations of love. His wife hadn't needed security, she longed for unbridled passion, brooding stares and whatever other mush she'd been filling her head with while he slaved for her. Romance had ruined their marriage, or at least her view of what she imagined true love to be. Trey hadn't fought the divorce. How could he compete with fantasy?

Disillusioned and suffering the sting of her

rejection, he'd quit her father's paper and accepted an offer in Dallas as a book review columnist. Trey decided if he couldn't write his own novel, he'd review the efforts of those who could, or in some cases, thought they could.

Romance novelists being among the latter. Although he admitted the story sometimes started out believable enough—a woman attracted to the wrong man and vice versa, soon formula took over. Through a series of ridiculous trials and tribulations, the hero suddenly becomes everything the heroine wants him to be, and of course, this helps them to live happily-ever-after.

“Here we are,” the cabby said, pulling the cab up to the curb.

Good, Trey thought. He wasn't wasting another thought on Katrine Summerville, or his illogical attraction to her. Talk about the wrong woman. Trey placed his award on the seat and exited the cab. The door locks clicked and Charlie raced ahead, cursing the cold.

Trey's steps were unhurried. He loved the cold. Hot blood, he guessed, for he seldom wore a coat. After he entered the establishment, he realized people obviously seldom wore a tuxedo to a bookstore. He received several curious glances while striding to the new release section. As he plucked a copy of *Robert Ludlum's* latest from the shelf, a conversation on the next row captured his attention.

“B—But I drove all the way over here for that book,” a woman stammered. “I’m not leaving without it!”

“Then I guess you ain’t leaving. Listen, Lady, I promised my wife I’d get this book for her the first opportunity I got. Sorry.”

Charlie’s apology didn’t sound too sincere in Trey’s opinion. He walked around the aisle.

“No, you listen, Mister! I’m a woman alone. I risked being sexually assaulted or worse by driving over here this time of night. If you were a gentleman, you’d let me have the last copy.”

“I’m no gentleman,” Charlie assured her. “Not if it means facing a one-hundred-eighty pound pregnant woman with swollen ankles empty handed. These days, if Nadine ain’t happy, ain’t no one happy, understand?”

“Problem, Charlie?” Trey glanced between the cabby and the endangered woman. She was a healthy specimen he doubted any pervert in his right mind would mess with, and to add further discouragement, she sported a head full of curlers.

“This woman’s mad because my hands are quicker than hers,” Charlie explained. “I snatched the book first. It belongs to me.”

“The smart—polite,” Trey corrected, “thing to do would be to surrender the novel.”

The cabby snorted in response. “Well, you ain’t got to go home to Nadine tonight, so why don’t you stay out of this, Mr. T. West.”

“T. West.” The curler woman gasped. “The columnist?”

He cast a dark look in Charlie’s direction and nodded. The loose folds of skin around the woman’s jaws began to quiver. When she removed the newspaper from beneath her beefy arm, he began to search his pockets for a pen. It was silly, but on occasion, only when someone realized Trey Westmoreland was in reality, T. West, he’d been asked to autograph his column. He wasn’t prepared when the bulk of the paper swatted him on the head.

“How dare you show your face on this aisle!” she shouted. “I used to love your column until you attacked Kat Summers! No self-respecting romance reader would give you the time of day after that!”

Ducking another swat, Trey stumbled backwards and knocked over an empty cardboard display case. Charlie made a mad dash for the pay out counter.

“Come on!” he shouted. “I didn’t know Nadine had a twin!”

With one eye trained on the threat guarding her sacred romance aisle, Trey slid the novel he held inside his jacket and bent to right the display case. Kat Summer’s name loomed in large letters before his eyes. Her name and a cover depicting a steamy picture of a hunk with muscles and a woman with cleavage. His vision blurred, and for a moment, the couple more than strongly resembled him and

Katrine Summerville.

He blinked. "I'm losing my mind."

"He's stealing a book!" the curler woman shouted.

Seemingly from nowhere, a clerk appeared. "Open your jacket, please," he instructed.

People seeped from the woodwork. Embarrassed, Trey complied. "This is all a misunderstanding," he said calmly. "I'm T. West, the columnist, and I don't have to steal books; the paper reimburses me once I provide them with a receipt."

"Meter's running!" Charlie's shout echoed around the silent bookstore. A buzzer announced his departure.

"Could I see some identification?" the clerk snootily responded.

Breathing a small sigh of relief, Trey retrieved his wallet and presented a driver's license. "Now, if I could just pay for the book and get the hell out of here, I'd appreciate it."

"Ah, this is not proper identification."

Trey glanced down and felt heat explode in his cheeks. He snatched a condom from the clerk's fingers, replacing the article with his license. "Now, as I was saying, if I could—"

"Hold on a minute." The clerk raised a hand. "This says you're Trey Westmoreland, not T. West."

Accusing silence followed. Trey mentally cursed his petulance for privacy. Surprisingly, a woman came to his defense.

“They’re one and the same,” a female employee provided. “My boy works in the mail room at the paper. I’ve seen that man at the restaurant down the street and my boy said his real name is Trey Westmoreland.”

“Thank you,” Trey said through clenched teeth. “I’ll drop by the mail room and say hello to your son tomorrow.”

“Don’t go near my Jimmy,” the woman warned. “Any man who’d viciously rip out the heart of romance isn’t fit to speak to my son.”

“Amen,” the curler woman agreed.

“Maybe we should get you checked out so you can go,” the clerk suggested nervously.

As the she-wolves began to gather around him, their eyes glittering and their teeth bared, a thirst for blood clearly stamped on their faces, Trey quickly followed the clerk to the pay out counter. The transaction seemed to take forever, but finally, he escaped.

“This has been a night in hell,” he grumbled, settling into the cab.

Charlie had his nose buried in a book. He marked his place with one finger and glanced up. “What the heck was all that about?”

Trey sighed tiredly. “Don’t you read my column, Charlie?”

The cabby frowned. “A newspaper column? Heck no. When I read, I do it strictly for enjoyment.”

“Well, if you don’t want to waste your time and money on a poor selection, you should research the choices. I have a knack for knowing what most people want and what they don’t. Which reminds me, I need to stop by the paper and check on things for my editor before you take me home.”

“Fine by me.” Charlie handed him the book. “Keep my place.”

Once the cabby shifted the car into gear, Trey glanced down. His gaze focused on a likeness of himself holding a half-naked Katrine Summerville in his arms. He swore loudly. “Is this what you took on a crazed woman in curlers over? Is this what got me beaten up and nearly accused of shoplifting?”

“You were shoplifting?” Charlie whispered, obviously shocked.

“Of course not,” Trey defended. He rubbed his forehead. “I really don’t want to talk about it right now. Just be quiet and drive.”

Charlie managed to remain silent for a good two seconds. “If you don’t feel like talking, maybe you’d switch on the overhead and read to me. That Kat Summers sure knows how to get a person hooked right from the beginning.”

Shelly’s sweet voice sounded in Trey’s head. *No one can hook like my mom.* How could an innocent misunderstanding lead to such a complete disaster? Annoyed all over again, he reached up and switched on the light. His finger rested between

page one and two. *“The wind whistled an eerie tune through the moors—”*

“I read that part,” Charlie interrupted. “Start at the top of the next page.”

*“Sabrina unconsciously moistened her dry lips as his hands strayed to the fastenings of his breeches... and this is page two?”* Trey asked, lifting a dark brow.

“It’s a dream,” Charlie explained. “If Kat starts right out with the hot stuff, it’s usually a dream or a flashback.”

“I thought you bought this for your wife.”

“A man’s got to read something while he’s in the can,” Charlie reasoned. “Go on.”

Trey unconsciously moistened his dry lips. *“Sabrina knew she shouldn’t be here, not like this, not with him. Rolf was her intended’s brother. Still, she couldn’t find the will to leave, to glance away from the mesmerizing tune his fingers played against the compliant fabric of his clothes. Slowly, he slid the coarse wool breeches down his muscled thighs—why don’t these men ever have flabby thighs, or skinny thighs, or—”*

“You got muscled thighs?” Charlie asked irritably.

“I guess so.”

“I don’t, and it doesn’t bother me none. Keep reading.”

His passenger obeyed. Trey read until his throat ached, until his eyes stung, until he realized

he was on chapter nineteen and he and Charlie were sitting in front of the paper with the meter running. "Are you charging me for this?"

The cabby looked insulted. "Hey, you could have stopped whenever you wanted."

A burst of anger caused Trey's already heated temperature to rise a notch. He cursed Katrine Summerville while trying to see through the fogged up windows. She had to but walk into his life, and suddenly, he couldn't seem to get a grip on reality. He'd read her silly book because he felt powerless to stop, as helpless as he'd been to resist her full, ripe lips. She was trouble for him since he first saw her name in print.

One night with her and he'd been publicly humiliated, not once, but twice, and now he owed a cabby a generous amount for reading a novel written by an author he'd sworn to never review again!

Charlie pointed to the meter and whistled. "Hope you have a credit card with you."

Trey's expression wasn't in the least amused while digging for his wallet. "I want a receipt. Jerry Caldwell can pick up the tab for my reading time..." An idea suddenly occurred to him. He could substitute tomorrow's column with a different one. He glanced down at the book in his lap and smiled. Katrine would pay, too. Fitting that her latest novel was entitled *Passion's Price*.

## Chapter Three



The smell of caffeine roused Katrine from dreams she couldn't recall. The knot of discomfort in her stomach, the labored sound of her breath, and the pillow clutched to her chest suggested a lack of memory might be for the best. She hadn't been dreaming of him, Katrine assured herself. If Trey Westmoreland intruded into her sleep, a shrill scream of rage would have shattered the quiet of morning.

Had she really slapped him and marched off-stage without so much as a backward glance? Had she really let passion rule her head in the arms of the infamous T. West? A man who once said she wrote mush?

"Coffee's ready, Mom!" Shelly's shout floated upstairs.

Thankful for the intrusion into her disquieting thoughts, a tender smile touched Katrine's mouth. She winced while rubbing fingers across a puffiness not present prior to last evening. The cause

of her swollen lips hadn't bothered to follow her. Katrine wondered if Trey felt as humiliated this morning as she, then refocused her attention on the reason she smiled to begin with. Shelly, the gift God sent when so much had been taken from her.

Devastated by John's death, Katrine had at first resented the life growing inside her. Eighteen and alone, she worried how she would properly care for a child. More disturbingly, how she could set herself up for the pain of loving again?

Without the support of parents or family members, she survived on John's small insurance policy and nurtured the only thing she truly had left of him. When Shelly came, Katrine realized she'd loved the baby all along. Someone finally needed her, and unlike the mother who had abandoned her at the age of five, this someone would never leave.

"Mom, get it in gear. You have company."

Her heart slammed traitorously against her chest. Trey Westmoreland wouldn't come crawling to beg forgiveness for his rude behavior, would he? Doubtful, she reasoned, but washed her face, combed her hair and brushed her teeth before slipping into a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, just in case.

Any disappointment she felt upon finding Cynthia Lane hunched over a paper with Shelly at the kitchen table quickly turned to anger. "You!" Katrine pointed a finger at the woman who'd been placed on two people's hit list.

“Calm down.” Cynthia turned the paper face down on the table. “I had your best interest at heart. It seemed so silly. He needed a date, you needed a date. You’re both talented writers with great careers. You’re both gorgeous. You’re both... going to kill me, aren’t you?”

“I’d prefer to deal with you in Apache fashion. A slow agonizing death, but I’ll settle for a rope.”

“Mom, why are you being so mean to Cynthia?” Shelly asked. “You liked him, didn’t you?”

For the sake of her innocent daughter, Katrine brought her temper to a simmer. Not so innocent, she remembered. “Shelly, did you know about this?”

“No,” Shelly answered, and the pout on her lips bespoke it as truth. “But I would have been all for it. It was nice to see you have a date for a change. Especially with a handsome, put-together—”

“Speaking of which,” Katrine interrupted. “Your comments both shocked and embarrassed me. Why would you say such outrageous things? And to a perfect stranger?”

Shelly sighed. “He was perfect, wasn’t he? I didn’t lie about anything. I heard you tell Mr. Martin just the other day that your sex scenes sold your novels. Trey did have the kind of body you write about in your books, and he was lusting for you. Any idiot could see that.”

Katrine opened her mouth to further scold her daughter, then remembered the presence of a third

party. "Stay put," she warned Cynthia before snatching Shelly's hand. "Come with me, Young Lady."

As they entered the den, Katrine glanced approvingly around the living area. Scattered about were authentic relics of a bygone era. Wooden spoons, cast iron skillets, pots and copper kettles. A Navajo blanket lay spread across the terra cotta tile surrounding a stucco fireplace.

Antiques were her link to other worlds; the past where romance once existed, having died out with the Indians; the buffalo; the measure of a man and the strength of a woman. The twentieth century generated a population of weaklings. A spoiled, self-indulgent, throwaway, if-it's-too-hard-forget-it, society. Was it any wonder true love found few to bless?

"Don't be mad at Cynthia." Shelly turned a pleading look on her mother. "She's practically the only friend you have and besides, she just wants what I want, for you to be happy."

The child, so much like her mother in appearance, possessed a weapon Katrine had trouble battling. She'd inherited her father's big, brown eyes.

"I am happy." Katrine steered Shelly to the sofa. "I have you and a prosperous career, what else could I want?"

"A man," her daughter informed. "I don't want you to be alone."

Seating herself on a leather sofa, Katrine

pulled Shelly down beside her. “A man isn’t a necessity to make a woman’s life complete. You’ve been reading my novels. I told you they’re too old for you. It isn’t real life.”

“It was real to Janie Reardon,” Shelly worried. “Her dad wanted a divorce and her mom went crazy.”

“We talked about that, remember?” Katrine took Shelly’s hand. “Mrs. Reardon just needs some time away from Janie to adjust. Once she gets her problems settled, she’ll be back.”

“Janie’s afraid she won’t ever come back.” Shelly said. “Janie must not be enough to make her happy. I’m afraid for you. What if I’m not always enough? You won’t go away will you, Mom?”

Katrine felt a pang of guilt her own fear of abandonment had spread to her daughter. She tried to overcome the insecurities planted inside her from an early age, but knew they held her prisoner, grew stronger as time passed, put down roots.

“Shelly, you’re the most important person in the world to me. And you’re too young to worry over these serious matters or to make comments like the ones you made to Mr. Westmoreland last night. You’re growing up too fast as it is. Stay my little girl a while longer. I’m not going anywhere, and the love I write about is only fantasy. Like a fairy tale.”

Obviously skeptical, Shelly settled deeper into

the leather sofa and drew the sleeve of her robe across her nose. "I'm never growing up," she decided bravely. "I'll stay here with you forever so you won't be alone. Unless, of course, you marry Trey, then I'll be free to have a life of my own."

Slanting her gaze toward Shelly, Katrine tried to decipher if her daughter offered honest self-sacrifice or attempted childish manipulation. "I'll remind you of that promise when you turn sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, and as I hear the wedding march being played. As for Mr. Westmoreland, it's pretty safe to assume he won't be responsible for your future flight for independence. I can't stand... I didn't like him very much," she amended.

"I saw the paper Cynthia was reading, and in the picture, you seemed to like him a lot."

"The paper?" Katrine puzzled.

"She has a regular newspaper, and one of those you see in the check-out line at the grocery store stuck inside. I saw her staring at it, but don't get mad. She tried to hide it real fast."

A sinking feeling started in the pit of Katrine's stomach. *Texas Trash*, put out by an independent Dallas producer, prided itself on featuring gossip about its own first-and-foremost. The 'rag' only stooped to three-headed babies or alien sightings if the Dallas area proved too discreet in its offer of tidbits. Elise Pennington had obviously managed to get a snapshot of her and Trey. She rubbed her forehead. "How bad is it?"

“I couldn’t see the picture very well, but the title was printed in big, black letters. It said, *Best-Selling Author and Well-Known Columnist Delve Deep For Research.*”

“Oh my word!” Katrine jumped up from the sofa and started to pace. “This could damage my reputation. I’m sure my readers remember the slam T. West did on me three years ago. They’ll think I’m consorting with the enemy.”

“He’s not the enemy,” Shelly argued. “He’s the one.”

“The one?”

“Mr. Right. Marriage. Remember?”

“Honey, I’m not even attracted to that arrogant, close-minded columnist. Marriage with him is the last thing on my mind.”

Uncurling her body from the sofa, Shelly marched to her mother’s side. “It’s just like in your books. Lust comes first, then love. Give it time, Mom.” She comforted Katrine with a pat before turning toward the stairs. “I’m going to my room where you’re getting ready to send me anyway. Don’t yell at Cynthia. She knows you like him, too. I’m not convinced you’ll be all right once I’ve grown up. You might not believe in romance, but I do.”

“Shelly,” Katrine warned, then threw her hands up in frustration. The child had not only grown too worldly for her years, but she was evidently a hopeless romantic, as well. At least Shelly didn’t

have a warped expectation of what a woman should be looking for in a man as Trey suggested, Katrine soothed herself. Or did she?

“Why him?” She halted her mature daughter’s progress. “Why should Trey Westmoreland be the one?”

Glancing heavenward, as if her mother lacked the intellect of an eleven-year-old, Shelly said, “Because he’s perfect. You know, tall, dark and handsome? I knew the moment I opened the door he was right for the part.”

A groan left Katrine’s lips. “Shelly, beauty is only skin deep. I don’t want you believing a handsome face, or a beautiful one for that matter, reflects a person’s character. It’s discriminatory and shallow. The important part of a person develops from the inside out. Remember that.”

Her advice drew Shelly’s brows together. “Gosh, I hope Trey’s insides are as nice as his outsides. I’ll be awfully disappointed if they aren’t.”

As her daughter climbed the stairs, Katrine worried that Shelly was setting herself up for a future fall. She seemed to believe Trey Westmoreland would resurface in their lives. “He won’t,” Katrine vowed, then suddenly remembered her guest. Cynthia. *This was her fault!*

“Start talking.” Katrine pushed the doors leading to the kitchen wide.

Cynthia Lane glanced up from her paper and lifted a dark brow. “Do I have ten minutes to get

the hell out of Dodge before you draw down on me?”

Ignoring the reminder Cynthia thought the swinging doors leading to Katrine’s kitchen resembled a saloon entrance, she crossed the mosaic tile to pour a cup of coffee.

“You’re not going anywhere until you answer some questions. Why did you fix me up with Trey Westmoreland? I’ve told you countless times I had no desire to meet him. I don’t care if he is one of Harold’s friends; I thought I made it clear unless a date with him included a cauldron of boiling water, a Colt 45, or the right to castrate him, I wasn’t interested.”

“The three c’s,” Cynthia countered slyly. “Instead, you got a cab, a camera and from what appearances suggest, an attempt at copul—”

“Let me see that picture.” Katrine splashed coffee over the floor when she stormed to the table. “It couldn’t be that bad.”

“No.” Cynthia shoved the ‘rag’ toward her. “I’d say it looks pretty good from where I’m sitting. All right, levelheaded Katrine Summerville, pull an excuse from that creative mind of yours to explain this picture. Make it a good one, especially since you can’t stand... didn’t like him very much.”

Katrine stilled her inclination to scold Cynthia for eavesdropping and glanced down at Trey’s annoyed features. A dry sensation settled in her

throat. She tried to swallow, then gasped with relief. Although the picture identified the columnist clearly, only a thick mass of blonde hair could be seen beneath him.”

“Well?” Cynthia questioned.

“You can’t tell it’s me.” Katrine seated herself because her knees were weak. “This cheap rag wouldn’t dare mention my name without a clear shot of my face.”

Her friend’s gaze lowered to the newspaper. “They didn’t actually name you, but—”

“But what?” Katrine demanded.

“They mentioned T. West.”

“Oh.” She understood. “You’re right, I suppose it was obvious to everyone at the banquet we were together. Well, that isn’t as bad as my readers catching wind of it. They’d feel betrayed.”

“Your local readers are going to put two and two together and arrive at the correct conclusion over breakfast this morning.”

“I’m not the only romance writer who attended the awards ceremony last night.”

Cynthia tapped the newspaper as if it held a clue. “You’re the only romance writer T. West reviewed in his column this morning.”

A blonde brow lifted. “I didn’t think he had the nerve,” Katrine said, oddly pleased by the prospect of appearing in his column. Surely, he’d learned his lesson about slandering her talents.

“He’s got courage all right,” Cynthia agreed

uncomfortably. “Trey isn’t short on that, or I imagine anything else, except maybe tact. After his review caused so much trouble three years ago, his editor told him to steer clear of you and the genre. Since all hell is getting ready to break loose anyway, I’d like to know what happened in that cab Trey thought was worth risking his job over?”

The sinking feeling started again. “What did he say?”

Cynthia gathered the newspaper to her ample chest. “First things first. What happened between you two in that cab?”

“Temporary insanity,” Katrine muttered darkly. She sighed. “All right, Trey thought I was hooker, and, well, I suspected he might be a gigolo.”

A burst of raunchy laughter filled the room. “Oh, I see,” Cynthia managed between chuckles. “Because of me, you both naturally assumed—”

“It had nothing to do with you,” Katrine assured her. “Your past didn’t even enter my mind. There was just something about him... something that made me think of sex.”

Another giggle spilled from Cynthia’s lips. “I think that’s called chemistry, Katrine. It’s perfectly natural.”

“Not for me, it isn’t,” she muttered. “I’m so ashamed of myself. I acted like a floozy. No wonder he thought my name should be Bambi!”

Again, the brunette burst into laughter. She

glanced down at the paper and sobered. "His is going to be Mud."

"Let me see that." Katrine held out her hand.

Reluctantly, Cynthia handed over the newspaper.

A few sentences later, Katrine's cheeks started to burn. A little farther and she began to tremble. Finally, she slammed the paper down on the table.

"That... that," she struggled for a worthy description, but couldn't find one dirty enough. He's going to pay for this," she promised, beginning to pace. "T. West only thought I caused him grief the last time he messed with me. I'm going to—to—"



"Serve your family jewels to you in a paper cup, Westmoreland!" Jerry Caldwell shouted. "That's what she's going to do." He snapped open the newspaper clutched in his trembling hands. "If steamy sex appeals to you, Kat Summers takes a back seat to no one. She's hot, and this columnist means that literally. Thanks for the ride, Kat. For me, PASSION'S PRICE was worth the hundred bucks I spent for a night with you'." Jerry Caldwell slammed the paper down on Trey's desk. "You've really put your neck on the chopping block this time."

Rubbing his temples where a headache persisted, Trey wished Jerry would go ahead and lower the

ax. He felt like hell and looked ridiculous sitting behind his desk in a wrinkled tux. After he settled the fare with Charlie in front of the newspaper, Trey had gone to work on his review. He sighed, then glanced up into Jerry's red face. "I don't know what you're so upset over, Caldwell. I thought my review was very complimentary."

"Complimentary my ass," Jerry grumbled. "Any person old enough to put sentences together will read that, then look at this," he held up a copy of *Texas Trash*, "and realize it isn't her writing skill you were referring to! The phones have been ringing all morning. Everyone wants to know what's going on between T. West and Kat Summers. Including me!" The wind left Jerry's sails as he crumpled into a leather wingback chair. He lifted the front page of *Texas Trash* and eyed Trey expectantly.

"It began as a case of mistaken identity," Trey offered. "We didn't know each other's pen names until we arrived at the award ceremony. Cynthia Lane set us up."

His editor lowered the gossip rag. "Cynthia Lane? The restaurant-owner-down-the-street's wife?"

Trey nodded. "Harold's restaurant does a good business so he decided to invest in a new venture. Cynthia's running the escort service."

"Yeah, right." Jerry snorted. "Probably lining up some of her old running buddies so they can

operate legit. I can't believe a man would marry a woman who used to hook for a living."

"Harold knew what he was getting," Trey countered coolly. "If it doesn't bother him, I don't see why it should bother anyone else. Fact is, I consider Cynthia a true friend. She judges a man by what he is, not by what she'd like him to be."

"I wonder," Jerry speculated, "what the sweet-faced Katrine Summerville and an ex-prostitute have to talk about when they get together. I heard Katrine used Cynthia for research a few years ago. Seems she was working on a novel where one of her secondary characters worked in a brothel. They met at Harold's for coffee. Guess that's how they became friends, and how Cynthia and Harold met."

'Used her' echoed around Trey's head. Maybe the gossip rag hit the nail right on the head. "Just how far would a writer go to expand her horizons?" he asked himself aloud.

"How far *did* she go?" Jerry questioned, wiggling his eyebrows suggestively.

Jerry's leer brought Trey from his personal musings. He cast a dark look the editor's direction. "I didn't kiss and tell at the age of sixteen. I don't see any reason to start doing it now. It's none of your business."

Color suffused Jerry's face. His grin did a reversal. "You've made it *everyone's* business. Your suggestive remarks concerning back seats,

along with the cover on this excuse for a paper, planted a seed of speculation in the minds of her readers and ours. I told you to steer clear of Kat Summers.”

Leather creaked as Trey rose, moving to stand beside a window. “Avoiding her would have been easier if I knew what she looked like. Why doesn’t she put her picture on the back of her books the same as most authors?”

“She values her privacy, that’s why. Most columnists place a picture of themselves in the corner of their column, too, but not T. West. You wanted to squeeze the melons in the grocery store without being recognized, remember?”

“This wouldn’t have happened had you allowed me to attend the private proceedings with her and the lawyers three years ago. I should have been there.”

“Why, so you could insult her again and up the settlement?”

Trey wheeled on him, past the limits of his patience. “I gave an opinion. Freedom of the press, freedom of speech. I told you then, and I’m telling you now, she couldn’t have done a damn thing to us had you let her take us to court.”

“That’s beside the point,” Jerry argued. “Kat Summers is a local girl who’s done well for herself. She has thousands of adoring fans right here in the city. When you wrote that review on her three years ago, we lost a large portion of our

female readership. Taking her to court would have only made matters worse. I want you to write a retraction in this Sunday's edition."

"No way." Trey moved toward his superior. "She publicly humiliated me last night. I'm not eating any more crow for Katrine Summerville and that's that."

"Mark my words, that isn't the end of it." Jerry had the sense to step backwards, but he fixed Trey with an unwavering stare. "You might have gotten away with this had *Texas Trash* not printed the picture. Now, I'm afraid if you don't print a retraction, she'll go for our throats."

"Let her." Trey shrugged as if unconcerned. "I've given authors with more clout than her a bad review, and they didn't try to sue us. Do you know why? Because a good author is secure in his or her talent. Deep down, Kat Summers must know all she does is prey on lonely women. She puts ideas in their heads—sends them out looking for something that doesn't exist. I'm damn sure not going to applaud her efforts, and from what I have read, she's truly talented at writing sabotage."

Jerry eyed him suspiciously. "Is this personal, Westmoreland? Have you got it in for Katrine Summerville because some babe from your past dealt your masculinity a blow? Maybe this babe said you weren't hero material, or maybe she didn't find you romantic. Is that what all this is about?"

A soft rap on the door saved Trey from providing an answer. Steve Boston, assistant editor, stuck his head inside the office.

“We’ve got trouble, Boss. Craig Martin’s on the horn. He wants to talk to you.”

“Her editor?” Jerry frowned. “I expected a call from her lawyer. This could be worse. Stay put, Westmoreland. We’ll finish this conversation after I see just how much trouble Kat Summers isn’t going to cause us.”

After the door closed, Trey returned to the window. He glanced down at the busy streets, a brooding expression settling over his features. “It wasn’t some *babe*, Caldwell. It was the woman who promised me forever and went back on the deal.”



Katrine stared at the phone, willing it to ring. It had been four hours since she’d called her editor and demanded he insist on a retraction. Cynthia had slithered away while shock still claimed Katrine, but the shock of Trey’s blatant review would not soon fade. She was seething.

On a personal level, she’d found his suggestive remarks only embarrassing. *Texas Trash* saw to it that their relationship was no longer private. Katrine didn’t want her readers believing she would have anything to do with T. West. Perhaps

she'd been somewhat frantic when she called Craig. She could have sworn he covered the phone and laughed.

"This isn't funny," she grumbled, turning her gaze toward the computer screen. Trying to write had proven impossible. Katrine couldn't think of anything but Trey's review, his face plastered on the cover of the local gossip rag, and the circumstances that brought it all to pass. The feel of his hands on her, his lips....

"Mom? Are you okay in there? I brought lunch. You forgot again." Shelly entered, a tray balanced in one hand as she fumbled to close the door with the other. "I have a hot bowl of Thelma's homemade soup, a roll, and a tall glass of milk. Doesn't that sound yummy?"

Katrine curled her lip. "I hate milk."

"It's good for you." Shelly settled the tray on her mother's desk. She frowned while gathering a total of five coffee mugs. "You shouldn't drink so much caffeine. It keeps you awake at night and makes you edgy during the day."

"I'm not edgy!" Katrine snapped. "I... have writer's block," she explained in a gentler tone. "Thanks for bringing me lunch."

"You haven't heard from him, huh?"

The question confused Katrine. Shelly didn't know about her frantic call to Craig Martin. "How did you know I contacted my editor?"

"Editor?" Shelly asked. "I meant Trey. He hasn't

called, has he? That's why you're bummed."

"No, Mr. Westmoreland hasn't called and I'm not in the least bummed about *that*." Katrine thought to end the conversation by ladling a steaming spoonful into her mouth.

"Didn't figure him for a one-night stand. Maybe you were too easy, Mom."

"Shelly," Katrine choked. "I... we didn't, how do you know about one-night stands or being easy?"

Her daughter placed hands on her hips, presenting a confusing picture as to which person in the room was the adult. "Sex is everywhere, Mom. eleven-year-olds know a lot more than they did when you were a kid. There's no reason to get bent about it. Considering the statistics on teen pregnancy, and now the AIDS issue, I've decided to stay a virgin until I get married. If I get married," she quickly added.

"Y-You have?" Katrine stammered. "I mean, yes, that's a very mature attitude. You should wait. And for the record, Mr. Westmoreland and I didn't—well, you know."

"Oh." Shelly gathered up the tray. "That explains the edginess. You're sexually frustrated."

As her daughter eased her way out, Katrine stared blankly at the empty doorway. *What would Shelly know about sexual frustration?* The child didn't even have hormones yet! What exactly was sexual frustration anyway? A tight feeling in your gut? The inability to concentrate on anything but

blue eyes, broad shoulders, dark hair...

A jingling noise scattered her thoughts. Katrine forced herself to wait until the third ring before lifting the receiver. She answered with a calmness contradicting her shaking hands.

When a New York accent sounded in her ears, she ignored her immediate disappointment. She hadn't really expected it to be anyone but Craig. Certainly not a columnist who'd finally gone too far with his opinion. As always, it took her a few minutes to adjust to Craig's fast-paced dialogue. She wasn't certain, but she thought he said something about making an agreement with the paper that would be more profitable than a retraction. Something he believed would satisfy her readers as well as get her free press. Finally, his suggestion penetrated her understanding. Surely she hadn't heard him right.

"You want me to do what?"

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# Ronda Thompson

Ronda is Oklahoma born, Texas reared and lives with her husband, two children, three dogs and one cat. A country girl at heart, horses were her first true love and she rode in rodeos during her late teens. Ronda comes by her storytelling abilities naturally—everyone knows cowboys, or girls, like nothing better than spinning yarns, and stretching them to the limit.

Believing the best stories are stolen from real life, Ronda has a warehouse full of experiences to pilfer from. She's been a bank teller, a mortgage loan processor, a grocery store checker, a dog groomer, a title company escrow officer, a book-keeper, a city construction worker—yes, that's right. She has an old commercial driver's license picture where her face is splashed with concrete—Ronda jitterbugged that morning—no, it wasn't a dance contest.

She views her past inability to stick with conventional, and even not-so-conventional jobs, as a warm-up for what she was truly meant to do—write. An avid reader of romance for years, Ronda began writing her own. What does her husband think of her new career? She says he's very supportive, but after reading *Isn't It Romantic?*, he wants to know who she's been doing the laundry with.



# Ronda Thompson

Ronda Thompson has a gift for comedy that will keep you laughing long after you've closed the book.      Bells & Beaux

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Under The Cover Book Reviews

They’ve never met, but Katrine Summerville and Trey Westmoreland are sworn enemies. Katrine, a romance writer who, after being abandoned at the age of five, widowed and pregnant at eighteen, doesn’t believe in happily-ever-after.

Trey is a hard-nosed newspaper review columnist who believes that romance novels give women a warped expectation of love.

A case of mistaken identity, a night of ill-fated attraction, and their steamy moment captured on film catapults them into four weeks of nationally publicized Hell.