

# His Good Girl

By

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# Prologue

*Kevin*

"Just one for dinner tonight, sir, or are you waiting for someone?" the waitress asked.

I gave her a brief smile. She'd been hovering for the last five minutes, and I knew she was anxious for me to either order something or leave, so another customer could take my place. "Does it show?" I asked her with an easy grin.

Her response was a tight-lipped grimace, thrown at me seconds before she began to walk away.

I didn't let it bother me—I was always the first to arrive for a date. I'd been sitting at the table for about twenty minutes now, checking my watch religiously as I kept my eyes glued to the door. It's amazing how time can slow down when you're waiting. I caught myself tapping the menu on the table—a nervous habit of mine. Not wanting to come off as desperate, I dropped the menu and clasped my hands together, continuing to wait as my leg jiggled underneath the table.

I was pretty sure that my nervousness could be spotted by any stranger across the street, and no amount of pretending was going to change that. But how was a guy who hadn't been on a date in ten years supposed to act? I couldn't remember dating protocol—and it had to have changed in the last decade, anyway. My sister told me that it had changed drastically, but I was never quite sure if she'd been, in her own way, trying to be helpful or just messing with my head. Either way, I didn't have the faintest idea of what to do. Should I be calling her by now? Maybe it was normal to show up fashionably late for a first date, or maybe she'd walked by the window, taken one look at me, and turned right back around. Oh, God. I swallowed hard, trying to push the thought away, but once it had occurred to me, it was hard to forget.

The last girl I'd asked out on a date had been my college sweetheart. We'd then gone on quite a few more dates before I'd asked her to marry me. In a surprising turn of events, she'd actually said yes. In that moment, I'd been the happiest man alive, and assumed that we'd spend the rest of our lives together. Never had it crossed my mind that, only three years after we'd exchanged our vows, I would find myself on a date once more, wondering how I was ever going

to manage to impress another woman. I'd always considered myself damn lucky that Karen seemed to find my dorky quirks endearing. Or, at least she *had*.

I checked my watch one more time and marveled that not even three minutes had passed since I'd last looked. Maybe the waiting would have been easier if my subconscious wasn't shouting at me to make a run for it. I wiped my palms on my pant leg and hoped that, when my date arrived, she wouldn't notice the telltale signs of agitated nerves. Or, even better, maybe she'd walk in sporting a few of her own.

What on earth could be taking her so long? I flagged my waitress down with two raised fingers and ordered a Coke. Maybe the caffeine would help take the edge off. Even though I knew for a fact that a double Scotch on the rocks would be more likely to do the trick, it seemed rude to order without her. Besides, with my luck, she'd show up just as I was draining the glass.

I definitely wasn't short on was nerves. Not only was this my first date since I'd fallen for the woman who would go on to be my wife, it was also going to be with a woman I'd never met before. Well, not unless you counted exchanging private messages, which I certainly didn't. I'd joined Findasoulmate.com at my mother's incessant urging—in part to silence the nagging and in part because I had to admit I was lonely. After completing my online profile, I'd been shown the profiles of a number of girls and had selected Sarah in an eenie-meeneey-miney-mo type fashion. I'd then re-read her short bio time and again before finally summoning up the courage to message her. According to her, she loved dogs—the animal, I assumed, though it very well could have been her choice in men—slapstick comedy, and Chinese. She'd seemed like a nice, normal girl, which was all I was looking for.

I'd sent her a message introducing myself, but hadn't really expected to hear back. Even so, I'd checked my inbox every twenty-six seconds for the next hour, and scanned my online profile in between, trying to find something that might scare off nice, normal girls. To my surprise, she had not only responded, but she'd seemed to like what she'd read about me, too. We'd chatted back and forth for the last week before I'd finally manned up and asked her out. She didn't seem like the kind of person to just stand someone up without any form of contact, but then again, you can't really see a thing like that through a computer screen, can you?

I was kicking myself for not having had the foresight to suggest that we exchange pictures before our date, which only added to the unease I was feeling. What if she thought I was hideous? Karen had always told me that I was cute—not that it had been enough to keep her

around. What if my date felt the same way? There were plenty of fish in the sea, after all, and most of them had better abs. Personally, I'd always thought my short black hair, black-rimmed glasses and serious brown eyes made me look more like Clark Kent than Superman. There is more to me than meets the eye, but in my experience, girls rarely took the time to find that out for themselves.

When the door swung open, letting in a blast of cold air and noise from the street, I swiveled my head to look, just as I had the last dozen times. The girl who sauntered in had me salivating in an instant. Her legs were eye-catching: they were long, tanned, and went on for days. My eyes wandered up as my heart pounded as fierce as a drum in my chest. She had gently curving hips, a narrow waist, and a willowy frame. When my gaze ventured to her face, I opened my lips and let out a sigh. She had cute, elfin features, framed by a cascade of golden blonde hair. From where I sat, she was a vision.

I realized I was staring and looked away, only to have my eyes drawn back a few moments later. I wasn't alone—a quick perusal of my fellow diners showed that every man in the restaurant was shooting her the same furtive glances, agog at the supermodel in the midst of us mere mortals.

There was *no* way she was my date. I knew this without having to ask—although it was tempting, as it would have provided an excuse to talk to her, even if for just a moment—because a woman who looked like that would have no need to turn to the Internet for a date. She could have her pick of the room at this very moment.

I had to stop ogling her. I looked for my waitress, annoyed that the very moment I needed her, she was nowhere to be found. Then I heard a throat being delicately cleared behind me. When I turned back around, I saw that Ms. Beautiful had somehow found her way to my table. My first thought was that she was going to ask me where the restroom was.

Her lips curved in a bewitching, shy smile, revealing a mouth full of perfect, white teeth. "Excuse me, I didn't mean to interrupt you," she said.

"N-no," I stammered, even more dazzled by her up close. "I mean, it's no problem." God, I was staring again, wasn't I? She was probably used to it. At least, she didn't seem to mind.

"I was just wondering, I'm uh, supposed to meet someone here," she went on.

My heart stopped dead in my chest. How I managed to keep breathing was a mystery. It just wasn't possible. "Me, too," I said.

She smiled again, her green eyes dancing. "Are you Roger?"

*Damn.* I would have given anything to have been able to say yes. I wished with every fiber in my being that I was 'Roger', but instead was forced to reluctantly shake my head.

"Too bad," she said, in a soft, deliciously delicate voice. "I'm Cara, by the way."

I swallowed, trying to think of something intelligent and witty to say. The best I could come up with was, "My name's Kevin."

"That's a nice name. Hey, you wouldn't mind if I sit with you, would you? I think I've been stood up."

I swallowed again, hard this time, already kicking myself for what I was going to say next. "I'd love to, but the thing is, I'm waiting for a date, too."

"Ah," she drew the word out, making it sound so full of hidden eroticism that I wanted to flip the table and run away with her right then and there. "Well, tell you what. Give it five more minutes, and if your date doesn't show up, what do you say to having a glass of wine with me?"

"I'd say that you've got yourself a deal." After the words were out of my mouth I marveled that I'd managed to speak at all.

Cara tinkled a bell of a laugh before walking toward the bar. I wasn't the only one watching her leave. After that, my eyes were practically glued to my watch. And I'm not saying I was praying that my date had indeed stood me up, but if not, it was purely because I was too busy watching the seconds tick by.

# Chapter One

My mother had recently sent me a card for my birthday that depicted a white porch swing with the saying: 'A Southern woman is strong, independent, doesn't take crap from anybody, and still looks pretty as a picture on a hot summer's day.' I'd shaken my head as I read it, knowing that not even one of those things described me, and wishing with all my heart that it did. Sure enough, when I opened the card, she'd written, '*Maybe not, but I love you anyway!*' in her hurried, large scrawl. Unlike my mama, who considered po' boy sandwiches and sugary sweet tea her birthright, I considered my heritage a fact, not a way of life. I was more sugar than hot sauce, reserved rather than outspoken. Family reunions always left me feeling lost and more than a little out of place as I sat in the midst of loudly bellowed opinions and hooted laughter.

My mother had always rued her luck at having a daughter, her only child, who'd grown up to be the exact opposite of how she'd been raised. Mama, of course, fit the stereotype through and through. I didn't even like the men I was supposed to. A Mississippi man was full of rough-and-tumble, a football-watching, beer-drinking man who knew church on Sundays and Mama's pot roast were two certainties in life, and liked it that way.

Was it so wrong that I wanted something different, something more for myself? Mama certainly seemed to think so, and she couldn't for the life of her understand it. I'd downright shocked ten years out of her when I'd moved to the city, which was bad enough—on top of the fact that it was an hour and a half away. I'd known before I did it that she would be put out, angry all the way down to her pretty pink toenails, but I'd also known it was something I had to do.

I'd known for a long time that I wanted a rich, full life and that I wouldn't find it in a backwards, one-horse town. And the moment I walked into the restaurant and laid eyes on Kevin, my blood had begun to hum. My skin had started to tingle and a voice inside of me had whispered that *he* would be my 'something different'.

From that very first glass of wine, we hit it off. Considering the fact that we were strangers, there wasn't an awkward moment between us—he was warm and funny and



interesting. He was also one of those rare people who make you feel like you've known them your entire life within the first five minutes of meeting. Despite my usual shyness, he somehow managed to make me feel at ease instantly. And it didn't hurt that I felt my heart do a funny little flip every time I looked at him. I'd felt it that first time I'd spotted him sitting in the restaurant, and it only grew stronger as we talked. He had the most amazing brown eyes. They looked like pools of chocolate and crinkled when he smiled, which was often. He had dark brown hair to match, and a long, lean frame that I found irresistibly sexy. In fact, there wasn't a single thing I didn't find sexy on Kevin—from the hair curling on his forehead to even the five o'clock shadow darkening his neck. Normally, I didn't like facial hair on the men I dated, but he was the exception.

Even though I wasn't normally big on alcohol—I'd seen one too many barbecues turn ugly thanks to a bottle of moonshine—I found myself ordering a second glass of wine just to have a reason to stay. Kevin must have felt the same way because he placed an order for chicken flatbread, which we picked at as we sipped our drinks and talked the night away. I was so entranced that I stayed glued to my chair until the waitress told us, in a voice that was only slightly surly, that they were closing. I'd looked at my watch in shock, and sure enough; three hours had flown by. Looking around the restaurant, I saw that we were the last people to leave, and had somehow managed to keep talking and laughing together even as the crew had begun putting up chairs and mopping the floor.

Kevin had insisted on walking me to my car, despite my protests that he didn't have to. He'd even offered me his jacket to ward off the fall chill that was in the air, but I'd shaken my head. I doubted I'd be able to hand it back over when the time came, and anyway, my car was only parked a few feet away.

"Can I see you again?" he'd asked when we'd reached the car, the eagerness in his eyes enough to warm me.

I nodded, unable to offer anything besides a giddy smile, and I'd pinched myself the entire way home. If this was a dream, just call me Sleeping Beauty, because I didn't want to wake up.

Kevin was everything I'd ever wanted in a man: mega-cute, funny, smart and a gentleman to boot. It almost seemed too good to be true, a fact that I knew my mama would have exploited right away. Not that I was asking her—what was the point, when I already knew what she'd say?

No, I was determined not to let anyone spoil this for me, least of all someone ninety minutes and over a hundred miles away, who wouldn't be able to see how perfect he was for me over a telephone line. Kevin and I had made plans for the following evening, and though I normally loved my job as an OB nurse, that day I just couldn't concentrate.

"Cara, did you check room seven?"

"Hmm?" I looked up from the notepad I'd been doodling on as my coworker's voice broke into my thoughts.

"Room seven," she prompted, in a way that told me that this wasn't the first time she'd repeated herself.

"Oh, um..." I flushed to the roots of my hairline beneath her scrutinizing gaze. "No, Doris. I'm sorry. I'll go right now."

I began to turn around, ready to hurry toward room seven, when she caught my arm. "Hey, are you feeling all right? I haven't known you ever to be so distracted. Is something the matter?"

"No," I assured her, unable to stop my smile as I thought about my upcoming date. Nothing was wrong, except that my pulse was racing with hopeful anticipation.

"Are you sure?" she pressed, narrowing her eyes as she looked at me. "You look flushed."

"I'm sure," I said, and even though a giggle slid out with the words, she let me go and I went about my work. I can't say that I didn't get lost in my thoughts again, but I tried extra hard to stay focused.

Time seemed to all but drag by until I was able to clock out and leave. Usually I was a very cautious driver, but I was just too excited to pay attention to speed limit signs, and my little Accent flew down the highway. When I finally got home, I raced to my bedroom, my heart as light as my feet as I threw open the closet.

If my life had been a cartoon, I was sure that moths and dust bunnies would have flown at me just then. My closet might as well have been empty for all the potential date outfits I could find. I needed something sexy but demure, something that would knock his socks off, but still maintain a hint of mystery. Why the hell were *those* dresses never on sale?

With a sigh, I dug in with both hands, tossing dress after dress, every skirt and blouse, off their hangers and onto the bed. Not a single thing caught my eye. My mother always used to tell

me that I didn't have an eye for flair—I'd ignored her every single time, so why were those words floating back to me right now?

"It's not fair," I moaned aloud. I'd finally met my Prince Charming—at least, I *hoped* he was—and now I was like freakin' Cinderella before the ball, without the slightest hope of making an impression. I allowed myself another moment or two to wallow in self-pity before pulling myself together. I wasn't going to let one little thing like this get me down! And if Kevin was the type of man who would judge me for what I wore, then he wasn't really the one for me anyway, right? Sure would have been nice to have a pair of high, chunky heels just to cover my bases, though. Men love heels.

With renewed determination, I began to pluck clothing from the bed on which I'd strewn the entire contents of my closet, and tried on outfit after outfit. I buttoned up a light blue blouse with French cuffs and turned to the mirror, critically assessing my reflection. Tugging on the long lavender skirt I'd put on, I turned slightly to see how it flattered my figure. It looked okay, though I would have preferred something with a little more *oomph*—my mama would have said it needed more 'hussy shine'.

I turned helplessly back to the clothes on the bed, trying to see if there was some sexy yet casual gem I'd overlooked, when I heard the doorbell ring. My heart jumped into my throat as I froze. It couldn't be...not already. Could it? Sure enough, when I checked my alarm clock it was 6:59.

"Oh, no," I groaned, giving my mirror one more desperate glance. Didn't he know that you were supposed to be at least thirty minutes late to a first date? How had I'd managed to pick out the only man who actually paid attention to his watch?

Sure, I could let him wait, but the idea that he might decide to leave was one I couldn't stomach. There was nothing else to do but run my hands through my frizzy blonde hair and race out of the room. I knew my eyes were bright and my cheeks flushed when I threw open the door. In short, I looked like a girl who had no business going on a date in the first place. But from the moment my eyes met Kevin's, the second I saw the way his face light up with a smile when he saw me, all my insecurities and frustrations melted away.

"Cara." My name had never sounded sweeter than it did on his lips. "You look beautiful."

I could feel my cheeks warm at the compliment. I didn't protest his generous assessment, the way most girls would have, because I wanted to believe he meant it. As I looked into his sweet, smiling face, I wanted nothing more.

"Can I come in, or are you ready to go?" he went on.

"Oh." I flushed warmer still, embarrassed to realize that I seemed to have forgotten all my manners. "Yes, come in. I just need to get my shoes and purse."

Kevin walked in and closed the door behind him, taking a look around. "Nice place."

"It's small." I smiled, almost apologetically. "But then, I don't need much, since it's just me. I'll be right back." I ran into my bedroom long enough to slip into my black ballet flats and dab some perfume behind my ears before joining him in the living room once more.

"Are you all set?" he said.

There was no missing the way his eyes were drinking me in, and I couldn't help but smile. "Yes, thank you."

From the very beginning, Kevin was the epitome of a gentleman. He walked me to the car and held my door open, waiting until I was safely inside before making his way over to the driver's side.

"Where are we going?" I asked, as he turned the key in the ignition and the engine rumbled to life.

"It's a surprise."

I turned to him, smiling, and his warm brown eyes twinkled back at me. "What kind of surprise?" I said.

"You *do* know the definition of the word, don't you?"

"Call me curious."

"Let me guess: you were the girl who unwrapped all her Christmas presents and taped them back together before the big day, weren't you?" he said.

I threw my head back and laughed, delighted by the easy banter between us. "As it happens, my mama isn't really into Christmas presents."

"Really?"

"Spiked eggnog, yes. Pictures with Santa and stockings hung by the fire? Not so much."

"You poor thing," he said, reaching over and lightly brushing a finger over my cheek. "Don't worry, if you want I'd be happy to take you to see Santa Claus."

I couldn't help but giggle at his outrageous teasing. I had never before felt so comfortable around someone I'd known for just over twenty-four hours, but the chemistry between us felt natural and came easily. "Come on, give me a hint."

"No hints," he asserted, putting his other hand back on the steering wheel.

"Please?" I batted my eyelashes and pouted demurely.

"Absolutely not. And no more pouting, young lady, if you know what's good for you."

I giggled again, and when I snuck a glance at Kevin, I saw that his lips were twitching as well. There was something about the way he'd called me young lady; his voice had been teasing, but held a note of promise that made my pulse skip, even as I wondered what exactly he could be promising.

It didn't take us long to reach our destination. Kevin quickly found a place to park, reminding me to wait for him as he walked around to open my door. When I stepped out, I cast a dubious look at the building in front of us. It certainly didn't look like any restaurant or club I'd ever been to—not that I'd been to many of those, anyway.

"It doesn't look like much," he said as he offered me his arm. "But I promise, the food will change your life."

I gave him a tentative smile, took his arm, and walked into the slanted, hastily-painted wooden building. While the exterior looked very unkempt and disordered, the inside was vibrant and full of life. Live jazz music met my ears the minute we stepped through the door, along with the warm buzz of animated conversation and laughter. It would have been impossible to miss the delicious aromas that filled the air, and my stomach rumbled expectantly.

Just then, I caught Kevin grinning at me and was thankful that the music was loud enough that he didn't hear it. His hand found mine and my fingers tingled at the unexpected contact. I couldn't help but notice how our fingers laced together perfectly, sending a shiver of excitement through my body that undoubtedly showed in the smile I gave him.

He leaned in close, speaking softly in my ear so as to be heard over the music and conversation that surrounded us. "Let's find a table."

I nodded my agreement and allowed myself to be led to a nearby table for two that offered a good view of the musicians on stage. When Kevin helped me out of my coat and pulled out my chair, I felt like every woman was looking my way with envy. If they weren't, it was only

because they didn't realize how very Cinderella-like I felt at that moment. And the best part was that I didn't have a curfew.

We'd barely taken our seats when a waiter came up and asked if we knew what we wanted. I looked down blankly at the table, wondering where the menu was. Kevin must have seen my expression, because he laughed.

"The specials of the evening are on the website," he explained when I looked back up at him. "I looked it up before we came. Do you mind?"

I was so perplexed by the idea of a menu that wasn't laminated and waiting on the table that I shook my head.

"Tell your chef we'll both try the house specialty, with mashed potatoes and steamed broccoli," Kevin went on. "How do you like your steak?"

"Um... medium-well, I guess," I replied.

"And to drink, sir?" the waiter asked, as though a man ordering for his date wasn't akin to taking a trip in a time machine.

"Would you like a glass of wine, Cara? They have a red here that goes very nicely with the steak."

"Of course," I answered, smiling weakly. It was all a little much to take in. I wasn't used to a man ordering dinner for me—or who was paying for it, either, for that matter; though that remained to be seen.

Kevin nodded to the waiter and as soon as he'd gone, he leaned across the table and took my hand. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

"Hmm." His smile was still warm and bright, but I could tell from his tone that he didn't believe me. "I realize that we haven't known each other long, Cara, but if something is bothering you, I want you to trust me enough to tell me. It's the only way we can really get to know each other." When I still couldn't find my tongue long enough to answer, his fingers pressed down gently on my own. "Did you want something else? I can call him back. You can change it."

"No, it's not that," I said at last, looking down at the table, "it's just... different," I went on, right at the moment Kevin said, "Old-fashioned." I looked up then, meeting his eyes, and we both laughed.

"I understand. And in the future, if you don't want me to order for you, you just need to tell me, okay?"

It wasn't that I hadn't liked it, but since I didn't know quite how to explain myself, or even exactly what I was feeling, I settled for answering with, "Okay."

"Would you like to dance?"

"Oh, I don't know," I protested with a little laugh. "I'm not a great dancer."

Kevin rose to his feet and extended his hand. "How about you let me be the judge of that?"

I shook my head, half-laughing as I blushed, but before I could protest further, I caught sight of his easy, confident smile and found myself nodding. *What's wrong with me?* my mind shouted at me as I allowed myself to be pulled to my feet. I sidled up next to him and, right before we began to make our way to the dance floor, I felt his hand come down once, sharply, on the center of my ass. With a startled gasp, I turned toward him, waiting expectantly, but he'd already begun walking toward the other dancers and pulling me along as though nothing had happened.

My ass tingled where his hand had briefly connected with it, telling me that something definitely *had* happened. I blushed hotly, not sure what to do. Should I say something? As soon as the thought entered my head, I dismissed it, my cheeks burning hotter than my bottom. *What was it about him?* How was he so gentlemanly, so courteous and considerate, and so much fun at the same time? I never would have let another man swat me and live to tell the tale, yet I found myself letting Kevin pull me into his arms for a slow dance after he'd done that very thing. Maybe it wasn't him, it was me.

"Be a good girl," he whispered, his brown eyes dancing as he looked down at me and held me in his arms.

I was always a good girl. I didn't know how to be anything else, really, and anyone who knew me would have told him as much. And yet, something about the way he was looking at me with such frank desire and tenderness made me wonder what it would be like to be bad.

We'd only been on the dance floor for a few moments when the music picked up to a livelier beat and Kevin pulled away. I immediately missed the loss of our easy closeness, of his comforting warmth, but I couldn't help but smile at the way he began to dance. He was good. Most of the guys I'd dated could stumble through slow dances, which to them meant swaying

back and forth and getting their grubby hands on whatever parts of me they could, but Kevin could *dance*. I tossed my head back and laughed out loud—the man was just *full* of surprises, wasn't he—before I moved closer and began to match the rhythm of his moves.

As I looked into Kevin's eyes, the scattered pairs of dancers around us seemed to melt away, along with the restaurant, and even the band itself. I forgot all about how one swat from him had turned my insides to jelly, forgot about the stinging heat in my cheeks. The whole world seemed to stop spinning for that dance. The only thing that mattered was this moment, the chemistry flowing between us, and the way he made me feel.

God help me, as I looked at his handsome face, at the smile that made me melt, I knew I was at least a little bit in love with him already. It was stupid, of course—beyond stupid. I hardly knew him, but as weird as it was, I felt like I did. I felt like I could trust him, and wanted to spend as much time as possible getting to know him. I could only hope that he wanted the same thing.

When the dance ended, Kevin pulled me to him for a long, lingering hug which I gratefully gave myself over to. When he let me go, tugging me back to our table by the hand, I saw that our food was arriving. I could tell even without having yet tasted it that the steak would be melt-in-your-mouth delicious. Once more, Kevin pulled my chair out and waited for me to sit. Most men I knew would have already been cutting into the hot, tender meat and shoving it into their mouths without giving me a second thought.

"It smells great," I enthused as Kevin sat down across from me.

"Why, thank you." Hearing a voice behind me, I turned to see a tall black man in a chef's uniform grinning at the pair of us. "I wondered when you'd finally get around to stopping by," he said, directing his words to Kevin.

Kevin half-rose to extend his hand, which the chef took. "Cara, allow me to introduce you to a friend of mine, Gus."

"Gustav," he countered swiftly. "I keep telling him to drop the ridiculous nickname."

"It's a pleasure to meet you. How do you two know each other?" I asked.

"Culinary school," Gustav answered, as Kevin took his seat again.

"Culinary school?" I echoed, arching an eyebrow at my date.

"Oh, man. Please don't tell me you've been waiting to spring that one on her," Gus said.

"First date," Kevin replied, winking at me. "I was easing my way into it."



"So, you're a cook?" I said.

"Ha, he wishes!" Gustav answered before Kevin could reply. "That rinky-dink concession stand he works at hardly counts as a restaurant!"

I looked at Kevin, wide-eyed, but he took the barb with easy grace and a grin on his handsome face.

"Don't mind him," he said, seeing my expression. "He's all talk."

"Try the steak, honey." Gustav winked at me, and I noticed what pretty brown eyes he had. "Then we'll see if that's *all* I am."

"Oh, please do," Kevin urged. "If she likes your microwaved meals she'll *love* my cooking."

I squirmed a little in my seat as I felt both sets of eyes on me.

"No pressure," Gustav mock-whispered with another wink.

I couldn't help but giggle as I began to cut into my steak. I speared a piece on the end of my fork and brought it up to my nose. It really did smell incredible. And from the moment I put it into my mouth and the delicious, savory flavor coated my tongue, I could tell that it tasted even better than it smelled. A little moan of ecstasy escaped my lips. Kevin and Gustav were laughing at me, but I was too distracted by the blissful taste to notice or care.

"Ah, just like in class," the chef said, slapping Kevin on the back. "Always taking a back seat to me. You know, you could get used to it... *or* you could come work for me."

"I'm sorry," Kevin said smoothly, "I refuse to work for a man who has to wear a hairnet under his chef's hat. Get rid of the fro', bro, then we'll talk."

The two of them laughed, but I was too focused on my meal to pay either of them much attention. The steak practically melted in my mouth, and the potatoes were easily the best I'd ever tasted; fluffy, creamy and swimming in butter. If Kevin was even half as good a cook as Gus, I didn't know for how much longer I'd be able to maintain my size six figure.

"I've got to get back. Catch ya later, bro," Gus said.

"Oh, please." Kevin snorted as he stood once more. "Those ponies back there know how to operate a can opener."

Gustav grinned and offered a raised fist, which Kevin bumped. "Nice to meet you, Cara."

I managed to swallow my mashed potatoes in time to reply, "You too! Thank you for the meal, it's wonderful."

"Well, if you ever get bored with my man here, you know where to find me," he teased before making his departure.

"So, is it good?" Kevin asked playfully, spreading his napkin over his lap.

"Mmm-hmm," I agreed, nodding with my mouth full.

"You know, Cara," he leaned across the table conspiratorially, "I've always been attracted to a woman with a good appetite."

For some reason, his teasing made me think of Mammy from *Gone with the Wind*: "You can always tell a lady by the way she eat in front of folks like a bird." The same sentiment had been echoed by my own mother countless times, and as I thought of what she would say if she saw me like this, chowing down as though I was starving, in *public* no less, I could practically hear her berating me even from a hundred miles away.

"What?" Kevin asked as I dropped my fork. "Was it something I said?"

"No," I denied quickly. "I just think I'm getting full."

He looked from my plate back to me, dubiously. "Okay. If you're sure."

"I am. So, you're a chef, huh?" I asked, trying to distract myself from my growling stomach as I pushed the plate away. "Why didn't you mention it before?"

"Well, we've only seen each other once so far," he said and laughed. "I figured I'd leave a little mystery." He picked up his knife and fork and began to cut into his steak. "And what about you, Cara? What do you do?"

"Oh, I'm a nurse."

"Really?" He whistled. "That's impressive. No wonder you're so sweet. You must really like to help people."

The compliment made me drop my eyes, though I couldn't help but return his smile. "Yes, I do. It's very rewarding work, actually."

"What kind of nurse are you?"

"I'm an OB nurse. I work with pregnant women, mostly."

"Ah. That must be stressful."

"A little." I shrugged. "But what you have to remember is that these women are doing a wonderful thing, bringing another life into the world, and all they need sometimes is someone to hold their hand and let them know that everything is going to be all right."

"I'll bet you're very good at that."

"Oh, as good as anyone, I suppose," I said.

"No, I don't think that's true," he said thoughtfully. "You seem to me to be a very caring person, Cara. Give yourself some credit."

I could feel the intensity of his eyes on me and looked up once more to meet his gaze. "So, how long have you been a chef?"

Kevin's brow furrowed slightly as he looked at me, then he set down his utensils so as to give me his full attention. For some reason, the way he was staring at me made my pulse pick up. "Why do you always do that?" he said.

"Do what?"

"Downplay your contribution."

"I don't do that," I scoffed.

"You do," he insisted quietly. "Someone compliments you, and you either ignore it or deny it."

I squirmed under his scrutiny. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not asking you to be sorry, honey. I'm just trying to understand you. When I look at you, I see a beautiful, loving, considerate person. It seems to me, even from the few conversations we've had, that you don't see yourself the same way."

The picture he was painting was a nice one, and who wouldn't want to believe that? But still, just because he had an opinion based on—by his own admission—a couple of dates, that didn't make the picture true. Even so, I found I didn't want to keep talking about it. I wanted things to go back to being fun and easy, the way they had been before the conversation had begun. "How's *your* steak?" I asked.

At first, I wasn't sure he was going to let it slide so easily. His eyes locked onto mine and I forced myself to smile despite how uncomfortable the conversation was making me. "It's wonderful," he said at last, and I allowed myself to exhale. "Here."

I watched him cut another bite and when he held his fork out to me, I leaned forward and let him slide it into my mouth. "Mmm," I murmured appreciatively. I'd never eaten a medium-rare steak this juicy before.

"I know that you're full..." I detected the slightest hint of reprimand in his voice but to my relief, when I looked up, I saw that Kevin's eyes were dancing at me. "But I hope you at least have room for dessert."

"Depends on what they have," I retorted, and when he laughed I felt myself relax completely. It seemed as though things were back to normal, at least for the moment, and I couldn't have been more grateful.