
KELLY'S HAVEN

Hometown Love - Book Four

MEGAN MCCOY



Published by Blushing Books
An Imprint of
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.
A Virginia Corporation
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

©2020
All rights reserved.

No part of the book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. The trademark Blushing Books is pending in the US Patent and Trademark Office.

Megan McCoy
Kelly's Haven

EBook ISBN: 978-1-64563-190-3

v1

Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

Chapter 1

Ryan Carter sat back and watched the twins, Carly and Brent, bounce in their bouncer chairs. What was their purpose exactly? They were chairs, that moved. It made no sense to him, but they weren't his kids or his bouncer chairs and it seemed to make them content, which was much better than the screaming they had been doing ten minutes ago. Kids were loud. Even little Sam, who was older and couldn't be strapped in a chair, well, probably not legally anyway, was loud. He liked kids, he told himself. Just at a distance. Except for his kid, of course, who had always been perfect in every way. Had she ever even cried? He didn't think so.

Opening the beer Mac handed him, he leaned back in a lawn chair. Today felt like a perfect Macintyre day. Warm, gentle breeze, birds were singing, the sun was shining and Kelly was coming to visit her nephew or cousin or whatever she called him. Technically, he was her cousin, he thought, but she called him her nephew. Women, always complicating things. Life couldn't be much better. He hadn't seen her in over two years. They'd hooked up when Mac and Jessie were looking for any of little

Sam's biological dad's family. Kelly was it. She was his dad's cousin, though they'd been raised together for a few years and she considered him her brother. She and Sam Senior were raised by her mother, who died when they were young and then she went to her grandmother, and he went into a foster home. Her grandmother had passed away a couple years after that and she ended up in the system, too and had lost track of Sam Senior. Happily, for Jessie and Mac, even though she seemed to be Sam's only living relative on his dad's side, she didn't want custody or to fight for custody of Sam, but asked for the occasional visit, which they were happy to provide for her. She had been there, with him, at Sam's adoption hearing and had seemed very happy about it. He now legally, and every other way, belonged to Mac, his mom's twin brother, and Mac's wife, Jessie.

Kelly was heading here for the weekend and he looked forward to seeing her again. Apparently, she had a big announcement and he figured she was engaged or something. That was fine. Of course. He had no claim on her. A weekend hookup a few years ago meant nothing, in the long term of things. She had niggled at the back of his brain, but they had only seen each other once more, after that weekend, and that was at the adoption hearing and she'd come to it and disappeared, not even staying for the party after, claiming work. He'd be happy for another hook up, if she wasn't dragging a boyfriend or husband along with her.

Looking around the back yard, he wondered if he would ever want what other men seemed to crave. A wife, a house, rug rats. None of those things appealed to him. He'd had them once, and looked what happened there. Never again.

He liked his life, just fine, but did like dropping in on their comforts occasionally, and drinking their beer. Mac aced the grill and he adored chatting with Hawk who knew everything about most things. Tori and Joseph were coming, and while he didn't

know Joseph well, Tori grew up down the block from him and they were close. He'd waited at the bus stop with her almost every morning for thirteen years and they shared classes and played outside with the neighborhood group, which included Mac, Jessie, Emmy, Bronwyn, Marnie, Brent, his little brother Luke, and Carly, too. She felt like his little sister, and he hoped Joseph was good enough for her.

"Hey, all!" Tori came in, like a breath of fresh air, as always. She was too adorable with her little freckles on her nose and her always mussed hair. She came over and hugged him. "Hey, Ryan, didn't know you'd be here! Mac, can I hold a baby?"

"Did you have your vaccinations?" he teased.

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, sir, all safe and everything."

"Help yourself and if you want to come over at two this morning and hold one again, you are welcome to it."

"Yes, they are six months old and not sleeping through the night, and we are just fine!" Jessie said from behind them. "Fine, I tell you. Fine!"

"I'm glad you are just fine." Tori laughed and scooped up a baby while Joseph stood to the side, watching her. He liked that look in the man's eyes. His little sister would be well taken care of, he could tell.

"Who all is coming today?" Tori asked while not taking her eyes off little Carly.

"Besides us, Sam's aunt Kelly, Hannah and Hawk, and Bronwyn and Hunter. Emmy might come later, but she has an open house, and Marnie might have gone to her mom's again," Jessie said. "I'm a little worried about her. She's down there a lot lately. I hope her mom is okay."

Ryan sat back and looked around the yard as people trickled in. He opened another beer and waited for Kelly to show up, wondering what was going on and if he would still feel the magic they shared or if it even mattered anymore. He didn't poach, so

if she had someone, that would be that. He smiled, though, thinking of their weekend together so many years ago. He needed not to do that, because if she showed up alone, they'd be upstairs in one of the guest rooms before she would realize she was naked.

Hannah and Hawk arrived and there was more baby cooing going on, but not long after, there she was. Looking just as fantastic as he remembered. Tall, long deep, dark red hair, slim and sexy. And alone. Yeah. Maybe he would have a good weekend after all.

KELLY O'BRIAN HAD SMILED as she drove into town. She had a bag full of presents for her nephew/cousin and she decided to just call him her nephew and be done with it, just like she'd always thought of Sam as her brother, and his new siblings and she loved that he would grow up in the kind of home she nor his dad ever had after her mom died. Kids weren't in her future, she knew, but she enjoyed seeing Sam and knowing he was safe and well-loved and growing up in a busy, loving household. She made a point of seeing him every few months, but that was about to change.

Getting out of her car, she took a deep breath and walked to the back yard where she smelled a grill and heard people talking. Carrying her bags of presents, she laughed to herself. Was she the Disney aunt, like the divorced Disney dad who was only around for fun times and not for homework and chores and discipline? That was okay. He wasn't her kid and the twins were no relation at all, but she wasn't going to deny herself buying baby things because of that. They were Sam's family and she couldn't believe how much that meant to her that he had siblings in his life, and would forever.

Jessie had called her before the twins were born and told her about their new will. If something happened to her and Mac both, the three siblings wouldn't be separated but would all go to Tori and Joseph, and she wanted to make sure she was all right with that. The last thing they wanted was for Sam to be ripped away from them. Kelly assured her there was no worry about that. She loved Sam, but knew she was in no position to care for a child, ever. However, she wanted to be in his life. Keep an eye on him and make sure that what happened to her and his dad never happened to him.

Taking a deep breath, she turned the corner of the house and plastered a big smile on her face. See, fun aunt! There were half a dozen people on the deck and lots of laughter, a couple babies but she didn't see Sam. Maybe it was nap time? Did he still take naps? She didn't know. "Hi!" she said, and kept smiling as Jessie swooped in for a hug. She loved Jess, Kelly thought she was the best mom she'd ever met.

"Thanks for having me over!" she said. "I brought a few things for the kids."

"Oh, you didn't have to do that," Jessie said while peeking in the bags, "but thank you! Sam should be waking up in a few minutes and I'll let him go through them. Come on over."

Kelly felt a little self-conscious with everyone staring at her, but kept her best retail worker smile on as she waved at everyone. Obviously, they knew who she was and she worried for a second or two that they were all judging her for not taking Sam. Or maybe they didn't care one way or the other or were happy for Jessie and Mac, she didn't know. Who knew? Did it matter? Sort of. These people were important to Jessie and Mac, and so she'd be seeing them in the future.

Ryan was over there, but she chose not to look at him. The last thing she needed was a relationship or what he thought passed for one. She'd had all the men she could take for a while.

Her last relationship had taught her that. They had been together six months, and then he ghosted her one day. Yeah, fun times. How hard could it be to say goodbye? Apparently, the new girl he was with, she'd heard about later, told him he couldn't say goodbye. Wimp. She had no use for wimpy men. Besides, she and Ryan never had a relationship, just one very hot weekend.

Luckily, Jessie took her over to Mac, manning the grill and handed her a beer. "Here you go, we're glad you're here. You are staying tonight, right? I made up the guest room for you."

She nodded. "If that is still okay. I want to spend some time with Sam, maybe take him to a park or something tomorrow before I leave."

"No worries," Mac told her. "He loves the park."

"Thank you," Kelly said, always grateful they never seemed afraid she would take off with him and that they seemed grateful to have her in his life. On their terms, of course, but that was fine. If he lived with Sam and Carly, she probably wouldn't even know him or know he was alive. That truth hurts, but she hadn't seen her brother since he was nine, thanks to foster care. She hadn't known he'd gotten married and didn't know that he'd been killed overseas while serving in the military. Her baby brother was nothing more than a memory, now, but lived on through Sam.

However, she had something to tell them all and she didn't know how to do it and what they would think about it.

But she would do that later. Right now, she'd just enjoy the afternoon and meeting all of Jessie and Mac's friends. A little while later, a small dark-haired woman bounced in, she had the wildest curls she'd ever seen and it just made her smile to look at her. Apparently, by the chorus of voices, that was Emmy. There were so many people here, her head swirled a little and she wondered what it would be like to have so many friends who felt like family? She'd always been a loner, and while she had dates sometimes, she really had never had a long relationship. The

weekend with Ryan was normal for her. She'd thought she was ready for one, but the last man had decided he wasn't and didn't give her a choice in the matter. Way to man up. She wouldn't make that mistake again. Men.

Finally, after she'd been there an hour and they were almost ready to eat, he came over to her. "Hi, Kelly," he said. "How have you been?"

"Good, Ryan, how about you?" She tried to calm her racing heart. He meant nothing to her, and she knew she meant nothing to him. He was a one and done. They'd had a good weekend and that was all it was. She'd had several good weekends since, of course, and she didn't want to see them again, either. He was her past, not her future.

"I've missed you," he said, his blue eyes looking at her. Through her and she shivered a little thinking about their weekend.

"Really? Yeah, all those calls I missed from you prove that," she said, lightly, tossing her braid back that had fallen on her shoulder.

"Phone works both ways," he said.

"You are right, it does," she said and walked away trying not to shake. How dare he? Why did she have such a physical reaction to him? She'd had to leave Sam's adoption hearing early, without going to the after party, because of her hunger for him. It was ridiculous and she wasn't going to have it. She was introduced to Gwen, who was a cop and had apparently helped Hannah when she had been attacked awhile back, she shuddered thinking about that. There was someone named Brent and his brother, Luke. Her head began to swim. So many people.

Happily, the food was ready and she sat down with her paper plate in a chair close to the grill, to be close to Mac who felt like a buffer for her. Safe.

"So what's going on, Kelly?" he asked her. "Or do you want to wait to talk until everyone is gone?"

“Yeah, let’s do that,” she said, biting down on the most amazing burger she’d had in a while.

“Aunt Kelly!” Here came Sam barreling toward her a hundred miles an hour and she managed to put her plate down on the ground before he hit her full force, making the chair fall back, with both of them landing on the ground. Kelly laughed as everyone rushed over to make sure Sam, and probably, maybe, she was okay. Mac scooped up Sam, and Ryan was there to reach out his hand and pull her up.

“You okay?” he asked, eyes probing.

“I am,” she said. “If the worst thing that ever happens to me, is that Sam is glad to see me, I’m good.” She turned away from him and held her arms out to Sam in his dad’s arms and he went to her happily. “I have a present for you,” she told him.

“For me? Not the babies?” he asked. “Babies need presents.”

“So do you. One for you and one for Brent and one for Carly,” she told him.

“Where?” He tried to wiggle out of her arms so she put him down. “I get to open. They don’t know how.” Did most not quite three-year-olds have his vocabulary or was he just exceptional?

“Your mom has them,” she said as Jessie walked up with the bags she brought. What would her life, and her brother, Sam’s life been like if they’d grown up like this? It didn’t matter, they hadn’t and no wishing would ever let them. Nothing could change the past, she was just so glad little Sam had a life that she and her Sam never had. The past didn’t change, but the future could. Little Sam was getting a great start in life, and she was allowed in his life to watch over him. What could be better than that?

Ryan came over again and she smiled at him while watching Sam open and squeal over her gifts. She had nothing against him. They’d had a couple really good days together. Her issue was her and her reaction to him. She had no intention of ever getting involved with anyone. Her upbringing and her only,

what passed for, long term relationships, made her cynical. Men were good for one thing and it sure wasn't being a partner and if she ever thought differently, they proved her wrong. Ryan didn't say anything, but just stood beside her while they watched Sam and Jessie open the presents she brought. Like every little kid, Sam was overly excited about them all, and she smiled watching him with his family. Amazing. He was one lucky little kid.

Ryan put his hand on her arm and she involuntarily jerked. Then taking a deep breath, she looked at him. "Sorry."

"Didn't mean to startle you," he said easily. "My fault."

She shook her head and hoped she didn't blush. "I was just watching Sam and didn't expect..."

"Someone to touch you?" he said, way too perceptive for her comfort.

Yeah. Exactly.

"Isn't he cute?" she asked.

"He is, for a kid, I guess," Ryan said.

"Not a fan of them?"

"Not really. But yeah, Jessie and Mac's are okay as far as kids go." She turned slightly and watched him watch Sam who was presenting the presents to the babies, as if they'd care. She barely remembered her brother at that age, but he probably looked a lot like Sam.

"Kelly, Ryan, ready for another burger?" Mac asked from the grill.

"Sure," she said, brightly. Soon, she found herself at a long picnic table per Sam's demand, surrounded by chattering people. It felt like work, with all the people talking at and around her all the time. She focused on watching Sam, who finally climbed up on her lap. Okay, she didn't mind that.

"Hey, buddy," she said, hugging him.

"You are my aunt," he told her.

"I am! How did you know that?" she asked, looking into his

adorable little face. She didn't see much Sam in there. He must look like his mom.

"Mommy told me," he said and reached over and took a grape off her plate. Could he eat grapes? Didn't kids choke on grapes? Luckily, he managed to chew and swallow it and not die, but she moved her plate away from him anyway. No way could she ever be totally in charge of one of these, but he felt so good in her arms and on her lap.

He took off just a few minutes later to go play, and Ryan, who sat beside her, said, "Do you want to go out for a drink or something later?"

No. No she did not.

"I have to talk to Jessie and Mac about something," she said. "But that was a nice offer. Then I'm heading back after I spend some time with Sam in the morning, but maybe I will see you next time I come to town." That was going to be sooner than he thought, but she didn't need to tell him that.

It was hard enough to tell Jessie and Mac when they were alone a few hours later. Why did she feel guilty? It was ridiculous. She and Jessie had carried her things to a downstairs room and chatted pleasantly, but she could tell that Jessie was getting stressed about why she was there and what she wanted, and for some reason, she just dreaded telling them.

They sat down in the kitchen and she saw Jessie sat very close to Mac as if she were worried. She had no power over Sam. Why were they worried? Legally and in every way, he belonged to them. She had signed away any rights she might have had. All she wanted was to see him sometimes, watch him grow up. Be the Disney aunt.

"I am so sorry I stressed you both out. I sure didn't mean to," she told them, holding her water bottle. "I just wanted to tell you before you found out and worried, that my company has bought a store here in town and I'm going to be the manager."

"So you are moving to town?" Jessie asked.

"I am," she said. "But don't worry. I'm here for you and Sam if you need me, but realistically, I work about seventy hours a week and it will be more while we are getting the store set up. I just didn't want you worrying about... well, about anything."

They both stared at her as if she were riding a broomstick and they wanted to land a house on her. Why? She was no threat to them or her family. "I love Sam, I really do, but I don't want to raise him. Please don't worry. I'm not out to break up your family. There is no way I could give him the kind of family home you are giving him. His dad and I didn't have that, and I know how it feels to be bounced around from home to home. I'd never do that to the little guy."

Did they believe her? She didn't know. So she kept talking. "I just want to be his favorite aunt. Plus I'll be a good aunt to the twins, too, if that's okay, and if you have six more, well, then... I will do my best."

At that they both chuckled and Mac said, "We haven't slept in months. I don't think you have to worry about six more."

She frowned and said, "Well, I'm not an expert but I don't think sleeping is how they happen."

Jessie giggled. "Okay, so nothing will change, you will just be closer."

"Right. Jessie, I wouldn't have signed the papers if I ever meant to challenge them. Really. Don't worry, okay? I love being able to drop in, and then leave, and you know, sleep at night."

The entire atmosphere in the room changed.

"It will be good having you closer," Mac said. "Thank you for explaining it before we found out another way."

"Did you ask to come here or did they just coincidentally transfer you?" Jessie said, obviously still suspicious.

"Both," Kelly said. "I was given a choice of three stores they were opening this year and I picked this one. It is a good opportunity for me and really, I don't mind being closer to you and Sam. Honestly, I could be here a year or I could be here five. I

get transferred often, I've worked in eight different stores in the last twelve years, and if another opportunity comes up, then I don't know what will happen."

"Macintyre magic," Jessie said.

Kelly cocked her head, looking at her.

"She means people who come here, love it here and no one wants to leave," Mac said, kissing the top of Jessie's head. "Right, baby?"

"I got you to come back," Jessie looked up at him and said. "Why would anyone want to live anywhere else?"

Kelly knew that she would live in other places, and would enjoy it. She loved moving around with her job. Living here in Macintyre for a year or two would be wonderful. She could be a fixture in Sam's life for a while and hopefully make a long-lasting relationship, that would hold when she moved again.

"I know you two are ready for bed," she said. "I want to go drive by the store and see where it's going to be. I'll be back in an hour or so."

They both nodded, and she grabbed her keys, hoping she'd put them at ease and Mac handed her a piece of paper with the lock code on it. "Thanks," she said. "Don't worry, I promise, I'm no threat to you."

She went out the door to her car, got in and sat there and sighed, then texted Ryan despite all her best efforts and intentions, *Want to meet me?*

He immediately sent her an address and ten minutes later, she pulled up to a small Mexican cafe, with a full parking lot. *Here*, she texted him.

Come in, he texted back.

What was she doing? Meeting a friend for some food or a drink or something? Yes, that was all.

Okay.

She headed in, hoping for, what? She didn't know. She just knew she felt stressed out of her mind and hopefully doing some-

thing different would help. No way could she sleep right now, and Jessie and Mac seemed to need to go to bed. She was used to getting out of work at eleven and often turning around and going in at five. Loving her job didn't begin to describe it. She had started to work for the company when she was sixteen and couldn't imagine ever leaving it. She'd worked herself up to store manager and had worked every single job in the store. She loved her stores. Sure, she got frustrated sometimes, but that went with the territory. Overall, the stores were her happy place.

Right now, though, she needed something more. What? She didn't know. Calling Ryan probably wasn't the smartest thing she'd ever done, but she'd done it and now she was heading in to see him. Would she end up in his bed tonight? Who knew? Moving to town meant she'd run into him sometimes. Plus the man was hot. He made her knees weak when she looked at him. He had this air about him that made her not able to forget him. Attitude? Confidence? She didn't know what it was but she knew she liked it. A lot. One weekend a few years ago and she'd never forgotten him. The man handled her the way no man had before, or after. However, she knew to him, she'd only been a weekend fling and the distance was, had been... well, formidable. But now? Now it was different.

She'd rented a tiny one-bedroom apartment in a small apartment complex on the side of town close to her new store, and it seemed nice enough. She didn't really care; she'd probably only be there a few years at the most before she got moved again. It wasn't like she was home very much anyway. It was mostly a place to store her clothes and pack her lunch. Her usual work hours were ten hours a day and she often worked more, because she was on salary and couldn't get in trouble for it, plus what did she have to come home to? Work made her happy. She couldn't wait to get her new store up and running, it wasn't the first time she'd opened a store, of course, and it was always fun. She loved the people from corporate coming in to help and seeing familiar

faces again. The new people she hired, fresh and full of energy and optimism, yet knowing half or more would quit in the first few weeks.

“Hey, Kelly,” Ryan said with a wave from a small booth and she told the woman who greeted her that she was here to meet him, then headed his way.

“Fancy seeing you here,” he said, standing up and smiling at her. “I ordered you a beer.”

“Thanks,” she said. She could sip a beer and gaze upon the handsome man. Life was hard, wasn’t it?

“When are you heading back?” he asked her.

“Tomorrow.” Did he think her plans had changed since she told him earlier? Well, she told him she couldn’t go out tonight, so it was a reasonable question. “I’m taking Sam to breakfast and then the park, then heading out after.”

“Little nephew bonding time?” he asked.

“Yeah, it will be nice to be closer to him,” she said without thinking.

“Closer?” He raised his dark eyebrows and she almost shivered.

“Oh, I just told Jessie and Mac, but I’m being transferred to Macintyre. That new shopping complex they are building on the edge of town? My company is opening a new store there, and I’ve been asked to manage it. I had a choice of a couple others, but thought it would be fun to be closer to Sam for a few years. Thank you,” she told the girl who brought them both a big mug of icy beer.

“Well, that is interesting,” Ryan said. “Jessie not worried about...” he hesitated.

“About me swooping in and stealing her kid?” Kelly shook her head. “I think we got past that a few years ago. Mac and Jessie adopted him legally, and I signed away any rights I could have had. I just want to be the visiting aunt. I work too much. I don’t even have a dog or a cat, much less the time to spend with

a kid," she said. "He's happy and obviously well cared for, and is head over heels about Jessie, Mac and the two little ones. I have no desire to cause anyone heartache." She sipped her beer and looked over at him. Still as handsome as ever. "So catch me up on your life," she said.

He smiled at her and her stomach leaped. Nice. She missed that, working all the time. It felt fun just to be the girl and not the boss for a change.

"I'm actually working in Mac's office now. He's doing a lot of finance work for people and I'm one of the case managers, financial advisor kind of thing."

"Isn't he a lawyer?" she asked.

"He does finance law," he said as if that explained anything. Whatever. He worked in an office, that was good enough, because, well, employed. She had enough of men who didn't work over the years. A lot of the people who worked for her part time, worked elsewhere too. Admiring hard work wasn't wrong.

"I thought you lived in Chicago," she said.

"I did, but..." he hesitated. "Things changed and there wasn't any reason to stay there, so I moved home. Mac offered me a job, so it worked out." Had it? Yes, it seemed it had for him. That was good.

Ryan looked over at her when their beers were about half gone and asked, "Want to go back to my place for a few hours?"

Yeah, that was exactly what she wanted to do. "How did you guess?" she asked.

He laughed, and leaned over to her. "I'm a really good guesser. Come on, I'll drive. I'll drop you off at your car in the morning. I'll tell Remmi it will be here overnight so you won't have to worry."

"Let me text Jess and tell her not to worry about me," she said. "She'll be up for feedings later."

"Rug rats." He shook his head. "Three under three is not my idea of a good time."

“Gotta agree with you there,” she said, heart pounding. Yeah. This was going to be a good night.

Walking in Jessie’s door at five the next morning, she found Jess in the family room, rocking one of the babies. “Morning, Sunshine,” she teased. “Did you have a good night?”

“I did, I really did,” Kelly said, sitting down on the couch. “Looking forward to taking Sam out to breakfast. Does he have a favorite park he likes to go to?”

“Yes, the one over on Grand,” Jessie said. “I’ll give you the address so you can GPS it.”

“Thanks, I’ll have him back by eleven, and then I’ll have to head out.” She leaned her head back on the couch and realized she needed to re-braid her hair. It was probably sticking up everywhere.

“When are you moving or do you know yet?” Jessie asked.

“I rented an apartment already,” Kelly said, “and I’m going to start hiring in about two weeks, so I’ll be in and out starting about then. I’m training the manager taking over for me at my store now.”

“It will be nice to have you in town,” Jessie said. “You are the only connection Sam has to his dad’s side of the family.”

Kelly felt a little uncomfortable. “Well, I won’t be around much. My usual work times are ten or twelve hours a day and when a store opens, it is a lot more. Once the store is open and running, they will be moving me somewhere else in a year or two.” Last thing she wanted was for Jessie to think she was going to be intruding on their lives. She had her own life and loved it.

“Oh, I know, but you can come over for dinner sometimes and he can just get to know you better, so as he grows up, there would have always been an Aunt Kelly in his life,” Jessie said, and picked up the baby to burp it. Kelly couldn’t tell which one it was, not that it really mattered to her. They were cute enough for babies, but she wasn’t wild about them.

“Sam will be up in an hour or so if you want to go clean up,” Jessie said, “And the coffee is done, if you want that.”

Coffee. Yes. Going into the kitchen, she poured herself a cup and went to the small guest room that she had been supposed to sleep in last night. At least Jess wouldn't have to change the sheets, she grinned. Saved her some time! Wasn't she thoughtful? Why yes, yes, she was.

She'd already showered at – with – Ryan, so was good there, but needed to change clothes and re-do her hair. He loved her hair and had unbraided it, and brushed it before they played, then turned her over and paddled her with the hairbrush. No one had done that before and while it hadn't hurt, too much, she enjoyed it way more than she should have. It was fun and she loved the entire experience. Ryan was fun. Little bit bossy, but she wasn't having a relationship with him, long term. However, it would be fun to have someone to hang around with and play with while she was here on what passed for her downtime. Confident, assertive and strong, she loved that he took charge in bed and she could just let go for once, and follow someone else. While she loved her job, being in charge could be exhausting some days. It had been fantastic to just follow his lead for a while. More than fantastic, she grinned, and winced a little at the aches he caused. Nice.

She changed into jeans and a light shirt, suitable for a casual breakfast, the park and then ice cream on the way home. Should she ask Jess if that was okay? Nah, better to beg forgiveness than ask permission, she thought, brushing out her hair and re-braiding it swiftly. People worried about her managerial style when they saw her red hair, thinking she flew off the handle easily. For the life of her she could never figure out how hair color gave you the inability to control yourself. But a lot of people thought that. Besides, as her mother always told her, her hair wasn't really red, it was a rich auburn. Emmy's auburn curls were much darker than her hair, but still, same concept and no

one who looked at Emmy could think that she had a bad temper. Nothing she was going to do about it, anyway, just let it grow and pull it back in a braid so she could work. Making a face at herself in the mirror, she packed all her stuff to put in the car before she took Sam out.

She carried it to the living room where Mac now sat with coffee watching the news, holding a baby, the same one? The other one? “Good morning, Sam up yet?” she asked him.

“He is, Jessie is getting him dressed. He’s potty trained, but you need to ask him sometimes if he needs to go, especially if he’s playing hard,” Mac said. “He forgets.”

“No worries,” she said, and then noticed he was eyeing her bag and changed her mind. Putting it by the door, she said, lightly, “Okay if I leave this here until I bring Sam back?” Even though they never said anything, she always felt as if she were half walking on eggshells. How many times did she have to say she didn’t want custody of Sam and even if she did, she’d signed away her rights. She realized it was hard for them to let him go with her and honestly, she couldn’t wait until he grew up a few years and they could be buddies. Little kids weren’t her thing, but she liked the teenagers she worked with, a lot, they were always fun and entertaining. She wanted a good, solid relationship with him by the time he got to that age. Hopefully the next year or two would give them a building block.

“Hi, Aunt Kelly! Pancakes and park and no babies allowed!” He flew into her arms and she laughed.

“Yes, we are going to have pancakes and go to the park! Go tell your dad bye and let’s go.”

“I’m walking you out,” Mac said. “Why don’t you take my car? It already has his car seat in it.”

“You sure?” she asked.

“Yeah, he has to be in a car seat and those things are awful to get in and out.”

“Okay.” She shrugged. Why not. “Appreciate it, Mac. See you in a couple hours.”

“Have fun. Be a good boy, Sam. Don’t eat too many pancakes.”

She settled into the front seat of Mac’s car after he showed her how to strap Sam in, and winced as she sat. Dang Ryan. Or bless him, or something.