

RISE AND SHINE

KELLY

“You’re not leaving the house like that, young lady.”

I turned at the sound of Jake’s voice to see his broad grin directed at me. “Oh, shush.” I ran my hands down the sides of my pencil skirt for the twentieth time since I’d walked from my bedroom.

“Do I look okay?”

“You’re a knockout, Mom.” He squeezed my shoulder on his way past me as he headed for the door. I stopped him and forced him stand still while I did my mom thing and looked him over. My boy had turned out damn nice if I did say so myself. Tall, dark and handsome. And I’d bet my last paycheck that he had more than a few female admirers. Not that he talked to me about women—or that it bothered me. Much.

I was beyond pleased that Mark and Fiona had worked things out and found a way to be happy together. Now I just needed Jake to do the same. I was sure there was a girl out there made just for him.

“Look at you, my handsome boy.” I laid it on thick and even pinched his cheeks, causing him to scowl and me to laugh.

He extracted himself from my hold but bent to kiss my cheek before escaping. “I gotta run before you ask to do my hair. Good luck today!”

My nerves jangled at his words. I’d need all the luck I could get. I wasn’t sure how I’d let Fiona convince me this project was a good idea. I often find myself talked into things by that girl before I even realize what I’m agreeing to. I’ve heard Mark say

she's a witch, and I was beginning to think the notion had some merit.

Like it or not, I was heading downtown to the offices of The Schooner Group, an advertising agency based here in Greensboro, to meet with one of the partners about a reception we were catering. Don't get me wrong, Fiona and I were good at what we did, and we had reliable staff we could hire for events. But this would be our biggest undertaking yet. Laney and Nate's wedding may have technically been larger, but they're like family so it doesn't count.

My phone sounded with a text notification.

Fiona: *Stop procrastinating and get your booty on the road!*

This witch theory was sounding more and more likely.

Me: *I'm grabbing my coffee and will be on the road in five minutes.*

Fiona responded with a little film clip of Catwoman cracking a whip. Jake had made coffee already, thank God, so I helped myself to the last of it, using a random travel mug from the cupboard. Then I hurried to the car.

Fifteen minutes later, I spotted Fiona waiting outside a restored brick building on Elm Street. She was draped head to toe in designerwear, as usual, and I didn't even allow myself to ponder how much money was on her body. My own outfit had come from Marshall's and I was just fine with that. Any extra money I had would be spent on more important things than clothes and shoes. Although I'd never tell Fiona that for fear she'd expire on the spot.

"I still have five minutes to spare!" I picked up the pace.

As soon as Fiona spied me, her face broke into a grin. "Kelly! Yay! You're here!" She pulled me into a hug.

I hugged her in return and laughed into her blond hair. “Did you think I wouldn’t show?”

“The thought did occur to me.” We pulled apart and she looked me up and down. “Nice!”

Despite my reservations about expensive clothing, I was pleased she deemed my appearance acceptable. The last thing I wanted was to project a less-than-stellar image to our new clients. With that in mind, I’d paired my best black pencil skirt with a floral-print blouse, black heels, and a layered gold necklace. I even spent extra time on my hair, making sure it behaved.

I hitched my bag up on my shoulder and only then realized I had brought my coffee with me. Was that tacky? I had no idea.

“Shoot. What should I do with this?”

Fiona waved absently as she reached for the door to the building. “Nobody will care. It’s not like you’ll be the only one with coffee.”

I shrugged and followed her into the building, letting my eyes take in the space. It was an open concept office with large tables scattered throughout the space and young professionals typing on laptops and leaning over tables talking. The tone of the décor was cheerful and modern with pops of color dotting the space. I noticed two smaller areas toward the back enclosed in glass and figured those must be conference rooms or partner offices.

“David!” I heard Fiona exclaim as a man around fifty with neat silvery-blond hair approached. He smiled broadly at my partner, revealing twin dimples in his unshaven cheeks. Ridiculously, my first thought was to wonder at the nerve of a man his age looking so ... cute. Shaking my head at myself, I turned to stand closer to Fiona. At my movement, the man—whom I presumed was David Rossi, a partner at the firm—let his gaze transfer from Fiona to me. And something changed. His eyes, which I noted were a golden shade of brown, seemed to darken, or maybe the color became more saturated. Whatever it was, it had a very odd effect

on my lower belly. I felt almost tingly, and the feeling intensified the longer he looked at me.

Fiona cleared her throat, and only then did I realize I'd been standing there mute, like a deer in headlights. "David, this is Kelly Beckett, my partner. Kelly, this is David Rossi."

David extended his hand and I shook it, feeling the warmth of his touch spread from my hand and up my arm. What was going on? I was acting like a virgin schoolgirl, titillated by a mere handshake from a handsome guy. Ugh. I had to get it together. "It's lovely to meet you, Mr. Rossi."

He shook his head and smiled again. "David, please. And the pleasure is mine." He released my hand, but his eyes lingered. I could feel a blush creep up from my chest and overtake my face. I only hoped my olive skin tone did something to hide it. "Shall we?" David gestured toward the back of the office.

Fiona motioned for him to lead the way, and she was less than subtle as she elbowed me hard in the side while we followed. I gave her a stern sideways glance, but the girl just grinned at me. Mark had his hands full with this one.

We all sat at a table in one of the window-lined rooms, and an assistant poked his head in asking if we wanted coffee. I declined, lifting my mug and setting it on the table in front of me. Then I extracted the contract from my bag and set that down as well. I avoided David's eyes the entire time. There was no way I could conduct a business meeting with my uterus doing cartwheels every time the man looked at me.

This was all so unusual. Don't get me wrong. It's not as if I hadn't had fantasies and felt flutterings of desire since my marriage. I just never gave them much thought. There were more pressing things to worry about, and in my experience, men were more trouble than they were worth—something I needed to remind myself of at that very moment if I were to finish this meeting without embarrassing myself.

The assistant delivered coffees to David and Fiona, and she began the discussion. “We wanted to give you a chance to tell us about your event in more detail, so we can be sure to set the right tone with the menu.”

David nodded, but I only saw it through my peripheral vision. My attention was focused on a spot about two feet to his left. “Right. Well, we’ve decided on a low-key, local focus, not that we want to dumb down the food, by any means. But we discussed it and think the guests will enjoy a more casual vibe this year. I think we’ll go with the small bites idea you pitched, as well as bringing in the local craft beer.”

I forced myself to be an adult and contribute to the meeting. “Will you want the mini dessert bar or just the savory small bites?” My eyes finally met his again, despite my best efforts. His look was surprisingly soft. Oh.

“Absolutely. Everybody has a sweet tooth, right?” Maybe soft wasn’t the right word. His question was absolutely innocent, but my mind disagreed and redefined his look as sultry. My ears were on fire by this point. Good grief. I lowered my eyes to my papers and took excessive notes.

“Sounds terrific,” said Fiona, and I didn’t dare look at her either. I was a fifty-two-year-old woman, and here I was making an idiot of myself over a man who probably wouldn’t even give me another thought after this meeting. Ridiculous. “You have the list of options I gave you before, plus I’ve come up with some new items, including a pancetta and mushroom phyllo cup you have to try to believe! And I’ll get on the phone with Flynn from the brewery and have him select maybe four beers? In addition to assorted non-alcoholic choices, of course.”

David nodded. “Four should be good. And it’s a yes on the pancetta and mushroom thingy.”

Fiona giggled. “Thingy? I thought you were supposed to be all smart and sophisticated, Mister Advertising Genius.” I envied Fiona’s ease with people.

“What can I say? I enjoy the simple things in life.” His gaze drifted to me once more, and I didn’t know if I should feel offended or flattered. Or just plain flustered, because that’s what my body chose to go with.

I cleared my throat. “Do you need recommendations for decorating the venue? I’m afraid our skills are rooted in the kitchen, although Fiona could probably dream something up if she needed to.” I smiled at her.

David chortled. “That won’t be necessary. This place is crawling with creative types so I’m handing the decorating off to the venue manager and some of my team. They told me I had to take care of the food, though, since I’m always complaining I’m hungry.”

“Well we can certainly fix that,” I reassured, allowing myself to relax a bit.

We continued to iron out the menu and finalize numbers as we chatted and tried not to let our stomachs growl at Fiona’s descriptions of the food. David was easy-going and witty, and he held himself with a combination of self-assurance and casual grace. I caught him looking at me a few more times throughout the meeting but (mostly) managed to brush it off and focus on the task at hand. But each time I looked at his face, a corner of his mouth hitched and he almost appeared as if he might laugh. Either the man was perpetually amused, or just in a really good mood this morning.

When it was time to wrap things up, we all shook hands and David walked us out to the sidewalk. I was feeling good about the event, despite my earlier misgivings. We could do this, I was certain.

“It was nice to see you again, Fiona,” David nodded to my beaming partner before turning to me. “And it was an absolute pleasure to meet you, Kelly. I look forward to seeing you again.”

Just then, Fiona let out a loud gasp. We both turned to her as she proceeded to engage in the worst acting job in the history of big giant fakers. Her phone was in one hand, while the other covered her open mouth. “Darn it all! I’m late for another meeting!” Her adorable brow furrowed and I thought she might actually stomp her foot and say “shucks.” But before David or I could utter a word, she scampered away on her four-inch stilettos, leaving us standing alone on the sidewalk. Well, this was more than a little awkward.

I attempted a smile and stole a glance at David, unsure what to say. I hadn’t talked to a man I was attracted to in ... I don’t even know how long.

Before I could do anything stupid, David chuckled and shook his head. “She doesn’t have a meeting, does she?”

When I looked back he was beaming at me, both dimples at the ready. My smile grew. “Um. No. I’m pretty sure if she’s late for anything, it’s a hair appointment. But it should probably be an acting lesson. The girl has no appreciation for subtlety.”

That made David laugh again, and I felt it in my belly and my chest this time.

“I’d hate for her hard work to be wasted. I should at least ask you to dinner, don’t you think?”

I opened my mouth but nothing came out. Dinner? As in a date? I didn’t date. I was a mom and a waitress and now a business partner. Dating was for people Fiona and Mark’s age. Right?

David’s face fell. “I’m sorry. I didn’t see a ring, so I assumed you were single.”

“I am!” Wow, that was loud.

His smile returned. "Great. Would you like to go to dinner with me sometime, Kelly?"

I didn't know what to say. Damn that girl for running away. I needed her to fix this for me! It wasn't as if I could tell David that I hadn't been on a date in over thirty years. That made me ... pathetic? Crazy? Desperate? Hmm. Desperate it was.

"Okay." Oh my lord. I bit my lip and watched his dimples flash.

"Terrific. How about this weekend? Saturday?"

What had I gotten myself into? And why was my heart beating so fast?

"Okay." That appeared to be the only word left in my vocabulary. I clutched my empty mug and my purse to keep my hands occupied.

"I'll call you, okay?" He put a hand on my arm and that warmth began to spread again.

Predictably, my response was, "Okay."

David chuckled and turned to go back into his building. I turned toward the parking lot and my car, my eyes practically bugging out of my head since I couldn't exactly jump up and down ... or faint. My feet moved without me noticing, and when I was a few yards away, I heard David's voice again.

"Hey, Kelly!"

I schooled my features and turned, attempting casual and most likely falling more to the side of crazy.

"I forgot to tell you. I like your coffee mug. I'll call you tonight!" The door closed behind him before I could react. Perhaps *I* wasn't the crazy one after all.

My eyes fell to the mug I'd been carting around all morning. Then the words printed on its side registered for the first time. "Yes, there's vodka in here. Don't judge me."

I was going to kill Jake.

Or maybe not.

Because I had a date.

Ready for more of the Carolina Connections crew? Get your copy of [The Lucky One](#) and find out what happens between Jake and Bailey!

Stay up to date on Sylvie's upcoming releases, news, and giveaways by subscribing to her [newsletter](#)!

© Copyright 2018 – Sylvie Stewart