

Chapter One of *The Mating Game*

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What more could a woman want than a stud contract?

Kelby Lynn Richards, navigating the hallway from grooming area to dog show arena, could think of a thing or two she'd rather have. Like love and Mr. Right. But at age twenty-seven, she was beginning to despair of ever finding either.

Not that she'd looked too hard of late. Nice, Midwestern boy-next-door types left her yawning and all because of one bad boy with a heady, Texas drawl. So here she was ten years P.T.B.B.—post Texas Bad Boy—nurturing puppies instead of babies. Thank you very much Clay Davidson.

Why was she even thinking about Clay after all these years?

Because the stud contract she'd just signed gained her the services of the latest protégé from Bell Hill Kennels, Clay's mother's kennel.

Kelby's fingers tightened around the show lead in her hand. She should be focusing on the imminent heat cycle of the collie at her side and the fact Willow Creek's Second Chance was still a few points shy of a championship, not rehashing a defunct, decade old romance. She'd been a fool to offer herself body, heart, and soul to the most notorious skirt-chaser on the dog show circuit—to think she'd meant more to Clay than another conquest. She been a fool to believe he wouldn't kiss and tell. She'd never make that kind of spectacle of herself again.

Kelby quickened her pace toward the arena entrance. At least she wouldn't run into the culprit who'd caused it all here. Clay hadn't returned to the dog handling business after college the way she had, or so she'd garnered from his mother before she consented to sign the stud contract.

She was almost to the arena entrance when the rubber band around her arm anchoring the numbered armband, broke. The thin cardboard strip popped up and out, ricocheted off a handler's bald spot, and careened over a woman's shoulder toward the backend of a standard poodle.

Kelby lunged after the armband, tripping over her dog in the process of doing so, and lurched shoulder first into something solid as a wall.

Correction. Almost as solid as a wall. Whatever she ran into had the give of a firm body.

The impact pitched Kelby onto her backside hard enough to rattle her teeth and loosen the barrette pinning back her hair, hard enough to remind her of the first time she landed on her keester at a dog show. She could thank Clay Davidson and his win-at-all-costs methods for that embarrassing moment in her life, too. At least this time she hadn't fallen while gaiting her dog around a show ring in front of a crowd of spectators.

She blinked up through her blond hair but caught only a pair of long, denim-clad legs just before they stepped around her and out of sight. This revealed the traffic in the hall...which had slowed to gawking pace.

Blast it. This was not the kind of attention she wanted. She cast about for Chancy's leash.

"You all right, darlin'?" drawled a deep, masculine voice from behind her.

The hair at the nape of Kelby's neck bristled. Darned if this guy didn't sound just like—

Impossible. He wouldn't be here. Had to be this guy's Texas drawl that made her think of Clay.

"We in need of the paramedics, darlin'?" the drawling voice prodded, closer now as though he'd squatted to her level.

"No," she managed, tightening her fingers on Chancy's leash. She needed to take inventory of the damage done, pull herself together, and get to ringside. She couldn't afford to forfeit an entry fee. She bent her leg and a hole blossomed in her nylon where it stretched across her knee. She fingered the run and scowled. A low chuckle whispered across the back of her ear and her nerves.

"Appealing as those long limbs of yours are, it's unlikely anybody'll notice. People here come to look at the dogs."

Kelby shoved her skirt down over her knees. Even this guy's wisecracks were the sort Clay Davidson would have made. Please let this not be a sign that stud contract with Bell Hill Kennels is a mistake, she silently prayed.

"If a stocking and your pride are all you've injured, darlin', let's get you back on your feet." Masculine arms slid between her elbows and torso, slid along the sides of her breasts—large, warm hands. Maybe under different circumstances, maybe if this guy didn't have a deep Texas drawl and quippy comebacks, she might have savored the experience. God knows she had little time, what with work and a kennel to care for, to allot to dating these days.

She batted at the large hands hooked under her shoulders, making her body remember things better left forgotten. "Let go of me. I can manage on my own, thank you. Besides, you don't know if a nylon is all I've damaged. I could have jarred something."

"Like a sense of humor?" he asked dryly.

He tugged. She resisted.

"I could have pinched a nerve."

"You're close to pinching one of mine," he muttered. "Try cooperating."

Cooperating? The last time she'd cooperated with a guy who sounded like this one, she'd gotten her heart trounced.

His knees bracketed her hips far too intimately and he murmured in his deep, back-in-the-throat voice, "How long you estimate keeping me this way?"

Kelby's heart missed a beat. There couldn't be two men in this world who could utter such an irreverent sentiment in so seductive a voice. Or was it the whiff of orange lacing those droll words reminding her that Clay always drank orange soda that galvanized her into action?

As though shocked by an electrical charge, she reared up. The crown of her head collided with a firm chin. The chest pressed against her back flinched and the hands under her arms fell away.

"You're tryin' real hard to lay me out alongside you, aren't you, darlin'?"

She was on her feet, facing him in a flash. "In your dreams, Clay Davidson."

He stood there between her and the milling crowd, all six foot plus of him, a puzzled crease scoring his broad brow beneath midnight dark hair. Damn but that

hairline hadn't receded one iota in ten years.

She pushed her hair back from her face and he grinned, his teeth white between his chiseled lips, brilliant in contrast to the dark stubble along his jaw. He looked dangerous. More dangerous even than he had as the cock-sure, smooth-cheeked boy who'd charmed a confession of love out of her, then bragged about his conquest.

"Kelby Richards. I should have recognized the lash of that tongue."

She swiped floor grit from her skirt, refusing to meet his eyes, trying not to notice the long, square-tipped fingers flexing against the double-stitched, outer seams of his jeans. Those expressive fingers had once slid across her skin, making her skin tingle...bringing her body to life.

She flushed and looked up. "Only you'd insist on moving a person who'd been flattened. I might have been paralyzed."

"You just got knocked on your behind." He craned his neck as though checking out that part of her anatomy and added, "And a nice behind it is, too."

Kelby tingled and tugged the front of her blouse straight, anything to distract herself from his glib flattery, from the memory of how his touch had once made her feel. "The way you blind-sided me, I could have broken my neck."

"Blind-sided you? Darlin', I'm the one who caught a shoulder in the solar plexus." He thumped his chest with a bent knuckle. When the truth of what he'd been up to with her in the back of his mother's Winnebago that long ago night came out, she'd wanted to do something with her knuckles...like cram them down his throat.

"And, of course, you just strolled innocently into my path," she charged.

"Well, maybe I wasn't exactly strollin'," he allowed. "But who were you trying to tackle?"

Chuckles waffled through their audience. Chancy bumped against her thigh. One corner of Clay's mouth tugged upward, and Kelby's pulse spiked a beat that took her back beyond the moment of betrayal.

The first time he had smiled one of his sexy smiles at her, she'd tripped and fallen on her face. The second time, she'd darned near landed in his bed. And this time...

Kelby eyeballed the floor for her armband, hiding the tears that burned at her eyes behind lowered lashes. He held the numbered band out to her and she all but ripped it from his fingertips.

"Excuse me," she muttered. "I have a ring to get to."

"You're in a mighty hurry for a class not due to start for another fifteen minutes." He didn't move out of her way.

Trapped between him and the wall, she went for sarcasm. "Nothing gets past you, does it, Clay?"

His smile slipped. "You did, once."

His drawl slipped across her cheek making her want to tilt her head to the side and brush the hair away from her neck. She wanted him to speak again.

"You're looking good, darlin'."

Maybe if he hadn't used that particular endearment and a hank of her hair hadn't just slipped back over one eye, she might have remained caught up in his charm. Looking good? Oh, she had a good idea what she looked like with her clothes in

disarray and her hair every which way.

As if she needed the obvious to expose Clay Davidson's true colors. She cocked her chin at him. "Same old Clay. Haven't changed a bit, have you?"

The corners of his mouth twitched. "Good to see you after all these years, too, darlin'."

"Don't darlin' me." She thumped him hard in the chest with a bent knuckle. "Just stay out of my way."

Shrill yips echoed off the vaulted ceiling, powdered grooming chalk hazed the air, and the odor of damp dogs wafted past Clay's nose like bad *déjà vu*. He stopped just inside the grooming area; half an acre of dog crates, rubber matted tables, handlers and dogs fanning out before him. Kelby fled into the maze, motes of dog hair scattering in her wake.

She'd had her say, turned on her heel, and marched off in the direction she'd come. He wasn't surprised. They'd always been like oil and water with each other. Urban boy. Country girl. World class kennel. Backyard breeder.

Cad. Innocent.

How innocent he'd learned the last weekend of their junior handler careers in the back of his mother's Winnebago. He and Kelby had competed a few seasons against each other in junior showmanship by the time they hit seventeen. Sometimes she'd win. More often he'd taken the blue ribbon, and not always because he'd practiced good sportsmanship. Kelby had had a crush on him and he'd used it against her to affect her performance in the ring. She just didn't know it ...until that fateful night when, on a dare, he'd invited her inside his mother's motor home.

He winced at the memory of the moment his fingers had discovered she was a virgin. Winced, and experienced a familiar tightening low in his groin. He'd wanted it to be another part of himself inside her that long ago night. Judging by the reaction of his body, he still wanted her...even though he'd spent the last ten years thanking his lucky stars his fingers had made the discovery and not another part of him. Had the latter been the case, he wouldn't have been able to stop.

He wouldn't have been removed enough from the act to hear the urgency in her words of love, an urgency that had echoed his own emptiness.

Nope, he'd never forgotten the girl who'd made him look his deficient soul smack dab in its horrific face—the girl who'd changed his life.

Seemed she hadn't forgotten him either, leastways, not the hormonally-driven boy he'd been.

Clay sighed and gave Kelby a last look as her long legs hurried her off toward the rear of the grooming room, her blond hair swinging back and forth across her shoulders. Of all the things he should have said to her, "You're looking good" was far down on the list...even if it was true. The awkward duckling had grown into a spectacular swan.

He couldn't do anything about Kelby now, but he sure as blazes could take care of the conniving dog thief he'd tracked from Texas to Wisconsin. He scanned the prime locations nearer the main aisle for his mother.

Her perfectly coifed, henna-tinted hair wasn't hard to spot amid the handlers

snipping, spritzing, and brushing. A dozen dog crates away from the entrance where he stood and one row in from the commotion of the main aisle, Grace Davidson wielded a blow dryer in one hand and bristle brush in the other.

But it was the stolen dog on her table enduring the pre-ring fluff Clay focused on as he headed their way. The dog's nose twitched in his direction. Clay smiled and stepped up his pace. There was nothing better than a collie greeting. And Pirate, his pet and best buddy, never failed to make him feel accepted and adored, metaphorical warts and all. Clay was almost within arm's reach when Pirate spotted him, let loose a high pitched bark, and hurled his ninety pound black, tan and white body into Clay's arms.

"Nooo!" Grace shrieked, and dove across the grooming table after her escaping dog, or rather, his dog.

"Hello, Mother," Clay said dryly as he hugged Pirate and accepted a thorough face washing from a long, pink tongue.

"Clay!" Sprawled across the rubber-matted table, her eyes wide and her mouth agape, his mother looked like a burglar caught midway through a jimmyed open window. Appropriate, considering she'd run off with his pet while dog-sitting for him.

"You're slipping, Gracie. I'd have expected the first words out of your mouth to be for me to stop mussing the dog's coat."

His mother righted herself and stopped the hum of the blow dryer with a flick of her thumb. Her faded blue eyes narrowed at his coat-crushing grip on Pirate.

"The way that dog acts around you is utterly obscene."

"He's being a pet." Clay set Pirate back onto the grooming table and ruffled the fur behind his ears. "You don't recognize the behavior because you've never allowed the dogs at Bell Hill to be pets."

He leaned over his dog's back toward his mother. "Which I erroneously thought would be the only pitfall of leaving Pirate in your care while I worked on the Galveston project. What is he doing at a dog show?"

Grace raised her surgically-firmed chin. "Bell Hill's Pirate is the most spectacular dog I've ever bred."

"When you gave me pick of the litter for my birthday three years ago and I chose Pirate, you objected because you considered him mere pet quality."

"It didn't seem right," she huffed, "the son of a top collie breeder with anything less than a champion."

"You also thought the incentive of a champion quality dog would get me back in the show ring."

Grace looked her son in the eye. "You were Junior Handler of The Year three years running. You handled as well as any adult. You handled like a pro." She brandished the silent blow dryer at him. "You should be handling this dog."

"You gave up turning me into a professional dog handler the day I chose pet quality over show. What's the deal here, Mother?"

She tossed the hair dryer into the tack box atop a crate and shrugged. "Pirate grew into champion quality. Not showing him is a waste."

"For whom? Certainly not Pirate. He doesn't care."

"He loves the ring."

"He loves the liver treats you give him."

Grace's eyes turned the steely hue that had warned him as a boy when he'd overstepped the boundaries of his mother's authority. But he was no boy now. He had learned that the only pack over which she ruled was her kennel full of collies.

Clay met his mother's gaze. "My show days ended the day I aged out of the junior handling class."

She blinked. "But, Clay dear—"

"And his end today." Clay gathered up Pirate's leash.

"But he's only one win shy of a championship."

"A common dog suits me just fine." Clay gave his mother a tooth-baring grin. "Which is why I never registered him."

"I did," she said.

"Obviously," he retorted, motioning Pirate down from the grooming table.

"And he's been contracted to stud," she said just as Pirate's feet hit the floor.

"I didn't sign any stud contract," Clay said as he scanned the expansive room for the nearest exit.

"But the bitch is spectacular."

"I don't care if she took Best of Show at the Westminster. The day I drove away from Bell Hill with Pirate at my side, I promised him I'd never turn him into any champion stud." Clay spotted an open door at the back of the building. "And since you don't own Pirate, any contract you signed regarding him isn't legally binding."

"About his ownership—"

The lilt of his mother's voice raised the hair at the back of Clay's neck. He took one step toward the sunshine, toward escape.

"When I registered him," his mother went on, "I listed myself as co-owner."

Clay wheeled back at his mother. "You did what?"

"When you left his papers behind, all I could think was, if something happened to you, heaven only knows where the dog would wind up."

He glowered at her.

She clucked. "I couldn't very well risk a Bell Hill dog ending up servicing some puppy mill bitches."

"Or take the chance that you might have misread Pirate's potential?" He loomed over his mother's five foot five frame. "I want his papers signed solely over to me, and I want them now."

Grace plucked dog hair from the bristles of the brush, the nonchalance of the act sending an ominous shiver up his spine.

"I'll make you a deal," she said.

"You'll make me a deal? You gave me Pirate as a gift."

Carelessly, Grace dropped the wad of fur from the brush onto the floor. "Everybody knows I always give you a cashmere sweater for your birthday."

True, he'd gotten the requisite sweater from mumsy and daddy that year. The pick-of-the-litter gift had been offered by his mother privately.

"You'd actually fight me over him?" he demanded.

"Here's the deal," she said, waving the brush in his face. "Get me pick of the litter and I'll sign over Pirate's papers."

"And here's my deal. Catch me if you can." Clay spun on his heel toward the open door on the far side of the room, Pirate's leash firmly in hand.

"The stud contract is with an old friend of yours," his mother called after him. "You remember Kelby Richards, don't you?"

Clay wanted to keep walking. He wanted to feel the remaining rays of summer beating down on his neck and have Pirate cavorting at his side. He wanted to leave behind the show, his mother, and the girl who reminded him of the errors of his misspent youth.

He stopped and peered over his shoulder at his mother. "You specifically chose Kelby for this, didn't you?"

She gave him a smug smile. "Teach you to mind what you say to your mother in front of the entire membership of the North Dallas Kennel Club."

He faced her. "I was a mouthy eighteen year old who didn't want to handle dogs for his mother the rest of his life."

She jabbed the grooming brush at him. "You accused me of putting the producing of champion collies above family and home. You said I could take lessons in dog care and ring etiquette from Kelby."

Kelby, whom he'd more than once teased for mothering the dogs in her charge, whom he'd made fun of because she was such a goody two-shoes.

Kelby, whose example had taught him the greatest lesson of his life.

"You said I had no conscience," his mother huffed, flung the brush into the tack box, and slammed shut the metal lid.

"So this is about paying me back for embarrassing you ten years ago?" Clay asked.

"Don't be ridiculous." She waved a dismissive hand. "This is about producing spectacular collie puppies."

Clay snorted. "I reiterate. You have no conscience."

Grace braced her hands on her hips. "And I suppose you think your Kelby didn't jump at the chance to gain the services of a Bell Hill stud."

"If I explain to her about Pirate being a pet, she'll understand."

"Then explain it to her."

Kelby's parting words rang in Clay's ears. Stay out of my way. Not quite the sentiment of a woman who'd stand still long enough to listen to any explanation from him.

"This is your mess, Gracie. You explain it."

His mother folded her arms across her chest. "As far as I'm concerned, the deal is still on."

Clay rubbed his road-weary eyes. He'd like to oblige Kelby's request that he stay out of her way. Somewhere, a shaded, country road awaited him and Pirate.

But if he left without explaining the circumstances of the stud agreement to Kelby, when her dog came into season and the stud of her choice wasn't available, sure as God made little green apples, she'd resent him all the more. He needed to explain why his dog couldn't service hers.