

The Kissing Season
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Chapter One

Two seconds after Hannah Elliot's boss – who just happened to be her older brother – left Elliot's Emporium to meet his fiancée, Nikki, for Christmas shopping, she let out a 'whoop' of joy. Nikki had a reputation of being unable to make a decision quickly, which meant Luke would be away for ages. Hannah relished the thought of a few hours reprieve from people breathing down her neck about responsibility and family duty. Having returned to Western Australia from Vegas only two weeks ago, she hadn't even told them the worst of her situation yet, and still, every member of her immediate family thought her flighty and irresponsible. Always had, and now, no doubt always would. The idea of being free to phone a friend, peruse the latest gossip on Facebook or simply sit back with her feet on the desk and enjoy the gingerbread man under her desk was more than a wee bit appealing.

And in her condition she had to keep her strength up.

Four seconds after Luke left, the silly chimes at the entrance, which alerted Elliot staff to potential customers, clanged. She eyed the brown paper bag under the desk and groaned. She could practically hear the crumbly gingerbread man she'd bought early that morning at the Wildwood Point Bakery crying out to be devoured. What kind of person bought a bed the week before Christmas anyway?

Six seconds later she had her answer.

The male type of person. But not any old male. No way. Even sworn off men and on a necessary, self-enforced dating drought, she could look at this man with a critical female eye and admit there was absolutely nothing to be critical about.

'Good morning.' His cheery voice held the attractive hint of a foreign accent and also a question. She realised she'd been gawking quite freely at this impressive specimen of man –

at his tall, well-built but not too muscular torso that wasn't at all hidden beneath a decidedly designer shirt and smart black pants. His jet-black hair had a touch of unruliness that perhaps on another man would look scruffy and unkempt, but on him looked sexy as hell. And that was even before she started on his chocolate brown eyes that sparkled in a way she didn't think possible. 'I heard this was the place to buy a bed.'

'Yes. That's right.' She jumped to her feet, inwardly berating herself for getting distracted by this...this...man. What was she like? Barely five minutes onto the straight and narrow path that was to be her life from now on and she was ogling the customers. 'Elliot's have been crafting top-of-the-range furniture for almost a hundred years. Family owned and...and...'

Dammit, she'd forgotten the spiel.

He peered at her, his dark brows slightly raised in anticipation, his smile still wide, now almost bemused. 'Yes?'

If it wasn't bad enough she was the laughing stock of her family, now total strangers found her antics amusing. She racked her brain for the sales pitch but all she could think about was how perfect this guy would be as a model for a pin-up calendar. A calendar she'd happily give pride of place on her bedroom wall. Which was ridiculous. For a start, men in suits were definitely *not* her type. If they had been, she'd more than likely not be in her current predicament.

It had to be the insurgence of hormones wreaking havoc. Forgoing the traditional Elliot's sales pitch, she forced her rebellious hormones back into their box and summoned her most professional smile. 'You've definitely come to the right place. Would you like to look around or do you have an idea of the type of bed you're after?'

'I've got an idea all right.' Although his words were benign, the tone of his voice – smooth, sultry, sinful, suggestive – sent her hormones off on another wild spin. She leant

forward slightly, gripping the desk for support. He continued, summing up his requirements in one very distracting sentence. ‘Not too hard, a little bit bouncy, four solid bedposts, luxurious enough to be able to laze in on long Sunday afternoons, and, of course, big enough for two.’

‘Of course.’ She swallowed as heat flushed her cheeks. Of course someone like *him* would have a bed buddy. Of course. She glanced at his left hand, at his ring finger, and found it to be decidedly lacking in marriage bling. A silly spark of hope lit up her heart.

It was quickly extinguished by the one cell of common sense in her body. He might not have a wife but that didn’t mean he was ‘available’.

And she certainly was not.

Her hand fell to her still flat belly, to the tiny life she would already do everything to protect. She straightened and walked around the desk. ‘Well, I think most of our beds fit that description, so perhaps we should take a stroll around the showroom and see if any appeal to you?’

‘Sounds like a plan.’ That grin again. *Argh*.

Hannah stepped in front of him so she couldn’t be bamboozled anymore by his killer smile and led the way to the front of the showroom. ‘This here is our local range. All these beds,’ she swept her arm through the air like a model on some corny television quiz show, ‘are crafted with timber from Western Australian Jarrah, Karri or Tuart trees. Many of our local clients like that aspect and prefer them to imported woods.’

‘I can see why. They are very beautiful.’ He ran his hand along the foot of one of the beds and Hannah actually shivered as if he’d run his hand up her spine instead.

Ridiculous.

‘Of course, you don’t sound very local so you may be more interested in some of our international woods,’ she said, trying to divert her mind from all things physical. From his hands and lips and the way they’d feel traversing the planes of her body.

He chuckled. 'I'm Aussie born and bred, but my father is as Italian as they come and I've spent a lot of time working overseas the last few years.'

Italian. Her knees went weak. The French were known to be the most romantic nationality in the world, but she preferred Italians. She'd had an Italian boyfriend while she was travelling in Europe and he'd always have a special place in her heart. They had that bad-boy element combined with irresistible charm that she'd always been such a sucker for. Had always been, as in the past tense.

Although his grey shirt, a slightly loosened tie with ships, of all things, scattered over it and his sweet, boyish smile didn't scream bad-boy to her. She frowned, perplexed, as she tried to work him out.

'Is it okay to test it?' His dreamy voice snapped her out of her reverie.

'Sure, sure.' She cleared her throat, hoping she'd cough out some of this craziness. There was absolutely no need to try and work him out for crying out loud. 'How about I let you have a look around without breathing down your neck?'

He stepped a little closer, so he was just outside the boundaries of personal space. 'Sweetheart, you can breathe down my neck any time.'

Good God. She swallowed, grappling with the thought that she should reprimand him for being so presumptuous as to call her sweetheart while at the same time positively sweltering at the thought of her breath on his neck. Or vice versa. She wasn't fussy.

Somehow she managed to say, 'I'll be at the desk if you need any further assistance,' before she turned – and fled.

It wasn't Elliot's policy to leave potential customers on their own in the showroom but neither was drooling or freaking them out by staring in a stalker-ish manner. And unfortunately she seemed quite capable of doing both. She needed a few seconds to pull herself together, to perhaps eat her gingerbread man and get some much-needed sugar into her

bones. She felt light-headed and suddenly realised this dizziness wasn't a result of her customer's sparkling presence, or even her pregnancy. She probably just needed something to eat.

Shoving the biscuit in the drawer of the desk between stealing tiny mouthfuls, she watched as the tall, tanned customer prowled about the showroom. He stopped at almost every bed, rubbing his chin as he gave it careful consideration. So far he hadn't sat on any to test them and she wondered if perhaps they didn't have anything he liked. Swallowing the last morsel of sweetness, she was about to get up and ask if he'd be interested in ordering an individually designed bed when he kicked off his black shoes, no doubt Italian, and flopped back onto a bed in the very middle of the showroom.

She stared, warmth filling her and her lips curling into a helpless grin as he rolled back and forth across the bed. He wiggled about, mucking up the crimson quilt set that adorned the bed. He left no corner of the bed untested. He stretched out, puffed up the pillows and then clasped his hands behind his neck. She'd never witnessed anyone testing a bed in such a thorough manner. She was mesmerised, bewitched. Her hormones were banding together to form a positively hot pool of desire right where it mattered.

Until he stood right up in the middle of the bed and began to jump up and down.

On no! Her hand flew to her mouth in shock and she knocked her bottle of Mount Franklin over in the process. She let the water trickle out onto the desk, her mind focused on another problem entirely. Such as what would Luke say if he returned this minute? Trust her customer to choose to manhandle the most expensive bed in the store.

'No! Stop!' The words tumbled out of her mouth as she leapt out of her seat and made a mad dash to the bed. Elliot's beds were renowned for being solidly crafted but they weren't designed for ninety-plus kilo men to treat them as nothing more than a children's trampoline.

She reached the edge of the bed. ‘That’s not how you test beds.’ Even as she spoke, the hilarity of the situation sparked a bubble of laughter deep within. She struggled, failing dismally, in keeping her amusement a secret.

‘You’re absolutely right,’ he said, staring right into her eyes and catching her laughter like a disease. ‘Testing a bed definitely requires two people.’

Before she could guess his mischievous intentions, he’d flopped down into a seated position, leaned forward to grab her hands and hauled her onto the bed beside him – on top of him, in fact. Hannah’s insides twisted, rocked and praised the Lord as if she’d just indulged in a whole block of Cadbury’s dairy milk chocolate. She didn’t have time to wrap her mind around the idea that what he was doing to her wasn’t appropriate in the slightest, all she could think about was the tenderness of her breasts pressed into his chest, the feel of his long muscular thighs against hers, his deliciously male scent and the infectious grin on his face.

He rolled over, taking her with him until she was underneath and he was on top, gazing down at her eyes and lips as he held her head between his hands as if she were the most precious thing on earth. She licked her lips, all the while moving her eyes over his face, taking in every single detail and cursing the heavens above for not having met this face three months earlier. Time seemed to stand still, her heart stopped working as he took forever to drop his lips to hers.

But when he did...oh when he did...Hannah forgot everything she’d promised herself on the long flight back from Vegas. His hand swept down the side of her head, her body, and cupped her buttocks towards him as his tongue slipped between her lips and explored. She kissed him back, sucking, nibbling, delighting in him for as long as her conscience allowed.

Then, after about five minutes in this stranger’s passionate embrace, something hard pressed against her belly. Oh Lord, was that an erection she felt? *His* erection? Alarm bells sounded loud and clear in her head. What the hell was she doing kissing a potential client in

Elliot's showroom? Or a rapist? Not that she knew much about rapists, but she watched the news, they were out there. As if sensing her sudden retreat, he did something illegal with his tongue, making her bones melt, leaving her wanting a lot more than one kiss.

Hell, Hannah!

Never mind the rapist, what the heck was she doing kissing anyone? Horrified and shamed by her wanton actions, she gave him a hard shove. He barely moved with her effort but his eyes blinked open and his lips leapt back from hers as he scanned her face.

'Get off me,' she panted, thinking that she should feel violated when all she felt was hot, turned-on and flustered. *Not good.*

'Sorry.' The guy obeyed her immediately, rolling over to free her from his clutches. He wiped her pink, strawberry-flavoured lip-gloss from his mouth and stood up.

She remained prostrate on the mattress, too shell-shocked by what had just occurred to make a move.

'I'll take the bed,' he said, digging in his pocket, presumably for his wallet.

'I should think so.' Her heart finally made an effort to return to normal speed but she feared it'd be a while before her temperature did the same. Somehow she managed to pull herself together enough for her brain to give the instructions for her legs to stand.

'And those.' He pointed to a tallboy and dressing table that matched the bed, before taking a quick stroll around the rest of the showroom and picking out a number of pieces. She had to jog to keep up as she pressed little yellow sold stickers onto everything he pointed at.

'Did your house burn down or something?' She could think of no other reason why someone would go out and buy so much furniture with so little thought. 'Or did you win the lottery?'

He chuckled and she prayed he'd hurry up and finish this crazy shopping spree so she could begin to forget him and the feel of his big beautiful body mashed against hers. 'None of

the above. I've just bought a house in the area and I need to furnish it. I'm also the type of man who doesn't like to waste time and knows what I want when I see it.'

Why did she get the feeling he wasn't talking about the furniture?

'Fair enough.' She shrugged as if she really didn't care either way and placed a sticker on the coffee table he'd just earmarked. She guessed he was one of the many rich business people choosing south-west Australia – amidst the forests and wineries, seconds from the coast – as their place of residence.

'I think that'll be it for now. Do you do home delivery?'

'Of course.' Shaun, her youngest brother, would have to do at least two trips in their truck with this load. She smiled at the thought, suddenly realising how good this sale was going to make her look when Luke returned. 'Let's take a seat so I can finalise your order.'

Not waiting for another word from the Italian, Hannah headed straight for the sales counter, determined not to look him in the eyes for fear she'd forget all her resolutions yet again.

His long legs had him just behind her. As she sat in the swivel chair, he slapped his Platinum Amex card down in front of her and smiled. She glanced up and even though she recognised that smile as one perfected for a hundred ladies before her, it had the power to unravel need deep within. Ignoring that need – or at least trying to – she found his name on the credit card and almost swooned. *Matteo Della Bosca*. It was the perfect name for all the tall, dark, gorgeousness in front of her.

He didn't ask for the price and she forgot to give it to him, but as she slipped his card into the machine, he spoke. 'Would you like to go out to dinner with me?'

She almost fell off her chair in shock. 'I'm sorry, what did you say?' She looked up and met his gaze for the first time since their kiss. She had no idea why his request surprised

her. He'd been making sweet eyes at her the moment he walked through the door. But her world had shifted recently and she kept forgetting no one else knew her secret.

'I said,' he cleared his throat and smiled, 'would you like to come out to dinner with me?'

Yes please, was on the tip of her tongue. But ignoring the raging disappointment of her libido, she swallowed her instinctive reply. 'No thank you,' she said instead. Her time for men – especially men as dangerous as this one – was finished.

Matteo Della Bosca, known mostly as Matt, knew if he intended to settle down and find Miss Right, he'd have to stop indulging in spur-of-the-moment activities such as this one.

Unfortunately that was his mother's wish for him; he was quite happy with the status quo. He hadn't yet met a woman who made him want to change his carefree ways. His mum believed he couldn't just kiss every girl he felt like kissing, and frequently begged him to stop what she called his Casanova ways and get serious, but he hadn't been able to help himself with this one. In fact, he'd been more impulsive than usual, not even pausing to question if she was available.

The smile as she returned his card didn't meet her eyes and he couldn't believe his ears when she rejected him. That kiss had been smouldering and he knew he wasn't the only one to think so.

'Are you married?' he asked. 'Engaged? In love with the boy next door?'

He swore he saw the corner of her lips crinkle with amusement and although he felt the pull of victory, she didn't let such feelings go any further.

'Nope, none of the above.' Then added, 'I'm simply not interested.' Holding her pretty chin high, she pushed a piece of paper in front of him. 'Sign here.'

He didn't believe she wasn't interested and had a good mind to kiss her again just to prove it. Instead, he slipped his card back inside his wallet and leaned forward to sign the paperwork.

As he scrawled his signature, she turned back to the computer. 'Your address, please?'

Without glancing up, he said, 'Why do you want to know? Planning to stalk me?'

'Uhh, no. I need it to give to the delivery driver.'

Damn. He closed his eyes as he cursed silently and wondered where the hell he'd misplaced his cool. He didn't usually use such shocking lines. 'Wishful thinking, I guess.' And it was best to move on quickly from such a low point. 'I've just bought a place on the beach.' He rattled off the address of an old shack that had been renovated to look like something out of movie set. His mum had always dreamed of living somewhere that overlooked the Indian Ocean but her deadbeat husband would never have managed to scrape together the dough. He'd barely left her enough to cover the costs of his funeral.

'Ahh, I think I know it. Pretty place.'

Something the house and you have in common. Luckily he managed to bite his tongue before he looked the fool. Who said things like that? Certainly not him. Was it because this cute girl had turned him down so flatly, without any hesitation? He tried to recall a time where any woman had been so hasty to reject him but came up blank. 'Yes, it is. Have you lived here long?'

Although he'd grown up in small town Wildwood Point, he'd lived with his father in Melbourne as a teenager and hadn't been back much in the last decade. His job kept him busy and on the move; at least that was the excuse he'd always given his family. Now that his wicked stepfather was gone, he might manage to make it home a lot more often.

'All my life.' Her tone suggested this was some kind of punishment. 'Although I've been travelling the past few years and have only come back home recently.'

‘Ah... a kindred spirit.’ He raised his eyebrows suggestively at her. ‘You see, we already have something in common and if you promise to come out to dinner with me tonight, we’ll never run out of conversation.’

‘I’m busy tonight.’ She took his receipt off the printer, folded it and slipped it inside an Elliot’s envelope.

‘Tomorrow night then?’ This was the closest he’d ever come to begging for a date.

She looked at him as if he’d grown another head and she didn’t want to kiss that one either. ‘This is the week before Christmas. Sorry. I’m all booked out.’

‘You really don’t want to go out with me, do you?’ he asked, unable to keep the scepticism out of his voice.

‘Nope, I really don’t.’

The blink of her eyes told him otherwise and Matteo decided then and there, if he did nothing else while home for Christmas, he’d succeed in getting this particular girl into bed.