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The Heart of the Matter © 2007 by Kristy Dykes
Merely Players © 2006 by Kathleen E. Kovach

ISBN 978-1-59789-990-1

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Published by Barbour Publishing, Inc., P.O. Box 719, Uhrichsville, Ohio 44683,
www.barbourbooks.com

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Printed in the United States of America.

Chapter 1

The bell above the door jingled. Renee looked up. “Aaron, how’d the appointment go?”

“Not good. They went with the competition.” Aaron Chapin, her boss, rubbed the back of his neck.

“What?” Renee stood up. That was impossible. They’d worked hard on that proposal. “What happened?”

Renee sent a quick glance to John, an art major at a local college who did part-time work for Sunny Flo Designs. He bit his lower lip and looked back at his drafting table.

Aaron’s gaze locked with hers, his dark brown eyes appearing almost black. “They said we weren’t original,” he answered, his words tight.

“They’re crazy. No one, absolutely no one, has anything on the Web marginally like that. I checked.” Renee tapped the top of her desk with her recently manicured fingernails.

“Apparently, that’s not the case. The competition gave them something very similar at a fraction of the price.” In a couple of brisk strides, Aaron sequestered himself in the back room of the store, where he kept a couple chairs, coffee table, refrigerator, coffee machine, and a love seat. He often used the room to go over proposals with customers.

A desire to comfort him washed over her. The poor man had seen more than his share of suffering. His wife had died in an auto accident two years before. Her heart went out to him, a single parent raising a four-year-old son, Adam, who happened to be the cutest little guy she’d ever seen.

She squeezed her eyes closed and covered them with her thumb and forefinger. *Why’d he have to be so vulnerable, Lord?* she silently prayed. *What if I become attracted to him?*

She’d keep her distance. Renee sat down at her desk, glanced at the computer monitor, then retyped the advertising slogan she’d been working on all morning.

“Psst,” John whispered. “I’m bailing before Aaron asks me to put in overtime tonight. Midterms are staring me in the face. I haven’t even cracked the book open from my civics class.”

“No problem. I’ll stay if he has a mind to work.”

John reached for his blue backpack, swung it over his shoulder, and hustled out the door. “Tell Aaron I’ll be in after class tomorrow.”

Renee waved him off and turned back to her computer screen. The I-beam blinked at her, beckoning some new words of inspiration. She snuck a peek back toward the open door to the back room. No sound. Nothing. Should she check on him? *No*, she reminded herself. *I've already decided not to pry.*

She tapped the keys of the keyboard. "Office relationships never work out," she mumbled.



Aaron stirred his coffee. How on earth could he have lost this account? They'd come up with a unique angle and twist to the Web design. Something not yet on the Web. He dropped the wooden coffee stirrer into the trash.

The phone rang.

"Sunny Flo Designs, Renee speaking. May I help you?"

Renee Austin had been a gold mine. The woman knew Web design and graphic layout, and she added the creative edge he felt he'd been losing. But how long could he afford to keep her on if he kept losing accounts like this one? *Stop it*, he reprimanded himself. *It's only one account; it's not the world. There will be more accounts, Sunny Flo is—*

"Aaron, Adam's on line one," Renee called out.

He picked up the receiver and sat down on the soft white leather love seat. Hannah had picked out the set; it worked well with the laid-back yet professional atmosphere. "Hey, buddy, what's up?"

"Dad, Grandma said I had to call you about supper."

"Oh." Which meant Adam had been giving his grandmother a hard time about what he wanted to eat. "Tell Grandma I'll be picking you up for supper."

"Really?" The joy in his son's voice tugged at his heart.

"Really. My appointment canceled."

"Yipee!" Adam screamed as Aaron pulled the phone from his ear.

"I'll see you in a little while, sport."

"Okay. Bye, Dad."

"Bye, son." He clicked the portable phone off.

Of all the days to have an account fall through. Perhaps it had been his fault. He never should have scheduled such an important client the day before. . . .

Yes, he'd lost the account, pure and simple. His mind hadn't been on his work. "God, why?" He rubbed his face as tears threatened his eyes. *Not at work.*

He picked up a tissue and blew his nose, then stormed into the bathroom and splashed his face with cold water and patted it dry. He heard the phone ring again. Aaron listened, thankful Renee hadn't called him. He sat down for a moment with the light off. His mind drifted back to the accident. Shaking, he recalled the vision of Hannah's mangled car, the blood—so much blood. "Oh God, please take these memories away. I. . . When won't I have to deal with them anymore?"

Who was he kidding? He knew those images would be with him the rest of

his life. He'd been told not to go see the vehicle. He'd been told to get a close family friend to go, but he hadn't listened. He'd always been stubborn. Aaron didn't know if he'd gotten that from his prideful Yankee father or the hot-tempered blood of his Cuban mother. Often he figured it came from both of them, making him an immovable object on far too many occasions. And because of that streak, he'd been left with nightmarish images. Currently those images tore at his soul, tore at the fabric of his beliefs. No man should see how his wife suffered before her death, especially following the impact of a tractor-trailer careening into a small SUV.

His eyes fully adjusted to the darkness of the small rest room as the meager light revealed the mirror and sink, the toilet paper roll that needed to be replaced soon, and the framed picture of his first layout ad. He'd been fresh out of college and on top of the world then. Hannah had saved it, and when he'd branched out to start his own business, she'd had it framed and then presented it to him the day Sunny Flo Designs opened.

"Enough." He stood and washed his face with cold water once again. *It's been two years. Get used to it*, he resolved. Stepping back into the conference area, he picked up the phone and called his mother. "Hi, Mom. Did Adam tell you?"

"Sí, when will you be arriving?"

Aaron turned his wrist and glanced at the metal hands that displayed the time. "I figure in an hour."

"All right, son. I'll have him ready. Unless you'd like to stay for dinner?"

He'd love to. His cooking skills were vastly inferior. But he didn't want to leave himself vulnerable with his family. "Thanks, but no. I think I'll take him to his favorite restaurant."

"The cheese place?"

"Uh-huh."

His mother groaned. He couldn't blame her. The place was for children, and they ran wild from one game to another. The food was for kids, too—pizza, hot dogs, hamburgers—and the noise of the place sent more than one parent home with a headache. Grandparents seemed particularly susceptible.

After a quick good-bye, he went to his desk.

"Aaron, John has a layout on his drafting table you'll want to look at." Renee walked over toward John's work area.

Why'd he have to hire a woman, a blond-haired, blue-eyed temptation? He should have known better and overlooked her superior work compared to the other applicants.

"Thank you. How's the work on this year's tennis championship coming?"

Renee stepped back to her desk. "Take a look. I've just about worked out the kinks with the Java script. The tennis ball isn't too busy, and I like the speed at which it comes across on my screen. But we need to check it out on the older computer and see how it performs."

Renee thought Aaron wise to keep an old computer with a dial-up modem

off-line to check out the Web pages they were creating. They'd upload them in a secured location on the company's Web site and view them on-line. They'd circumvented quite a few problems that way. Not everyone had the latest and greatest software on their personal computers.

She glanced over to Aaron. His face seemed puffy, his back stiffer than usual. The tension he'd been carrying for the past week seemed to be growing.

It's none of your business; just keep your mind to yourself. You don't need to be messing with this man's troubles. Didn't you have enough problems before? The sting of Brent's horrible actions came back into focus. How could he have done such a thing?

"Renee, look at scores.htm."

Renee clicked on the button. What was he seeing? "I'm there."

"Scroll down halfway."

"I'm there." She scanned the document. "What's that?" she yelped. *Where'd that purple line come from?*

Aaron chuckled. "That was my question to you."

Renee looked over the code. Sure enough, it was in there, but how? She hadn't put it in, had she? What was she working in purple for? "That's really strange. I don't recall doing this."

"Probably a copy and paste without realizing it."

Renee quickly fixed the glitch.

The phone rang. Aaron picked it up. "Sunny Flo Designs."

"Hi, Mom." He paused, then added, "Sure, you can drop him off."

He leaned forward in his chair. "What? Is she all right?"

Renee watched him clench his fist, then swivel the back of his chair to her. Right, it was none of her business. Then why did she care so much?

Aaron's mumbled words ended with the click of the handset in its cradle.

"I'll be right back." He stormed out the door and marched across the parking lot to the small café.

Renee shrugged her shoulders and looked back at the screen. Aaron Chapin didn't need her messing up on any further accounts.

"Hey, Renee, how's it going?" John walked back through the doors.

"Fine. I thought you were studying for midterms."

John came over and looked past her to her computer screen. "I forgot my textbook. Where's the boss?"

"Next door; he's on edge." She highlighted the foreign coding and hit the DELETE key.

"Well, it is that time of year." John's thin frame, wild curls, and baggy jeans reminded her of her own college days.

"What time of year?"

John straddled his stool like a cowboy on a horse and thumbed through the piles on his desk for the book. "Anniversary of his wife's death. It was sometime

this month. I wager by the way he's been acting, it's this week or next."

And to have lost the account, too—no wonder he retreated into seclusion. "Guess we better just mind ourselves and keep busy."

"Nope, I'm outta here." John jumped up and slipped out the front door as fast as he'd entered.

"Does he go off the deep end, Lord?" Renee looked for her purse. Perhaps she should call it a day, too. She opened her desk drawer to retrieve her wallet.

"Where'd John go?" Aaron asked as he came back in.

"Uh, he said he'd be back tomorrow."

"Great." Aaron's temper was beginning to show.

"Aaron," she whispered.

He turned toward her and came up beside her. His finely bronzed skin, dark eyes, and dark hair seemed imposing. She'd hate to anger the man.

"Are you all right?" she asked tentatively.

"I'm fine." The edge on his words could have cut steel.

Instantly a look of regret crossed his face. "Sorry. Look, I know you're a Christian and, well, I'd like you to pray for someone. She's just been beaten by her husband and has landed in the hospital."

"Oh my. I'll definitely pray. What's her name, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Marie." His hands shook. "She's my sister."

Her sympathy for this man took control. She eased out of her chair and walked around her desk. "I'm sorry, Aaron. I'll pray."

He nodded and started to retreat toward the back room.

Renee hesitated. Should she follow? Should she show compassion? Did he want it? She wouldn't be much of a Christian if she didn't reach out to him. Cautiously, she entered the back room.

He sat on the chair angled to the right of the love seat.

She sat down in front of him on the coffee table. "Aaron, John said your wife died around this time of year."

He raised his head and narrowed his gaze upon hers. "Yes," he croaked out.

"I'm sorry. Can I do anything for you?" She cupped his hand with her own.

His gaze changed. He reached out and touched her hair. She didn't move—she couldn't move.

"It's so silky," he whispered.

Odd, he'd been married; he knew what a woman's hair felt like. Then she remembered that his wife was Spanish. Perhaps she had more of the South American Indian's style of hair.

He slowly rubbed the ends of her hair with his thumb and forefinger. "Hannah's was soft, but in a different way," he mumbled. "I miss her, Renee. I really, really miss her. Why did God allow her to die?"

What could she say? She didn't know? She'd never understood her own losses. Her parents had died when she was only eight. She'd been sent to live

with her aunt, who gave her a roof over her head but was too caught up with her male friends to take much notice of her niece.

His thumb touched her cheek.

Renee closed her eyes and swallowed hard.

He pulled her toward him, then his soft lips blazed against her own. She pulled back and reached up to slap his face but caught the shock in his eyes.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. It'll never happen again." Aaron jumped up and rushed out of the room.

"Daddy!" Adam called as the front door banged behind him.