

## A MAN OF HER OWN

### CHAPTER ONE

Sarah Colby rolled her eyes. Her former college roommates were at it again.

“Men are disgusting toads,” Kate announced in a sharp voice, swiveling her barstool. “Both of you are naïve to think kissing a man will turn him into Prince Charming.”

“C’mon, Kate, lighten up,” Tracy chided. “Sarah’s ready to look for her Prince. You’ll discourage her.”

Sarah lifted her wine glass to her lips and sipped the smooth liquid, the noise of the Fourth Street Live nightclub practically drowned out all thought, let alone conversation. Tracy was right. Kate’s cynical remark wasn’t the kind of encouragement she needed, especially tonight when she was determined to put Tracy’s plan into action.

She’d always wanted a Prince Charming. As a little girl she’d lie awake at night imagining him. He would walk toward her in her dreams with a warm smile on his lips and a tender look in his eyes. Tall. Dark. He’d put his arms around her and kiss her. Slow and easy. The image always faded with the kiss. But Sarah knew, just by that kiss she’d marry him.

The strange fantasy stayed with her as she grew up. Maybe it was normal to want to feel cherished. After her mother died of cancer when she was nine, she always felt lost and alone, as if a piece of herself was missing.

With a heavy sigh, Sarah glanced at her barhopping companions—Tracy, single but looking, and Kate, divorced and not looking. They were her best friends in the whole world. She’d met them at the University of Kentucky.

Sarah ran her fingertip along the edge of her wine glass. She was ready. Hearing Tracy voice her desires made the knowledge settle deeper into her heart just as the wine settled into her head. At twenty-four, it was time to get serious. If she was ever going to find a man of her own, she needed to do something about it.

“I doubt anything I say will scare Sarah off.” Kate shrugged. “Women do stupid things where men are concerned. Look at me.”

“We’re not here for one of your pity-parties,” Tracy said.

“Excuse me.”

“Cut it out, both of you.” Sarah shifted on her barstool, uncomfortable with their bickering as well as wearing the skimpy black cocktail dress that hiked up her legs. “Along with celebrating the one year anniversary of Kate’s divorce, I’m here to learn how to kiss frogs.”

“Toads,” Kate amended under her breath.

“You didn’t think David was a toad when you married him,” Tracy pointed out.

Kate slurped down the rest of her pina colada. “Well, he had me fooled. Then the man morphed from Prince Charming into a toad as soon as the wedding ring was on his finger. You’d think I’d put it through his nose.”

Sarah sighed, struggling with mixed feelings. Her romantic heart still supposed there was a guy somewhere just for her. “Tell me again how kissing a lot of guys will help me find the man of my dreams.”

Tracy leaned forward on her barstool. “It’s very simple. To make sure you’ve found the right man, you need a point of reference. Because you’ve been so busy with school, you’ve not dated and have no baseline. I guarantee your judgment about men is faulty.”

“There are no guarantees,” Kate grumbled into her empty glass.

“We know that.” Tracy waved Kate’s complaint away. “We’re being proactive.”

“And how many toads have you kissed?” Kate asked with a direct glare.

Tracy frowned, her normal optimistic smile fading. “Too many, I’m afraid.”

“And you haven’t found ‘Mr. Right’ yet.”

“You don’t have to remind me.”

Sarah ignored Kate and focused on Tracy. “So, how do I start?”

Tracy swiveled around and surveyed the whole nightclub. “Check out that guy over there hitting on the blonde.”

Sarah studied the man in the low-rider jeans and the biceps-baring tank top. “Looks rough to me.”

Kate wrinkled her nose. “By the looks of that guy, I guarantee he’ll be glad to give you practice.”

“Or there’s that hunk sitting beside you,” Tracy said, ignoring Kate’s disdainful comments.

Sarah turned and eyed the man hunched over his drink beside her. He seemed oblivious to the clamor around him, but she liked his clean-cut, Romeo good looks.

She sipped her wine. What were her options? If Aunt Amelia had her way, she wouldn't be going back to graduate school this summer. Sarah's former guardian and food critic wanted her to do historical research for a regional cookbook she was writing. Not much chance of meeting Prince Charming if she was stuck in a dusty library or behind a computer screen working for her aunt. So, it was now or never.

Besides she'd come dressed for the occasion, prepared to take that critical leap from dream world to reality. Still it was scary. She'd always been shy. Maybe that was the real reason it had taken her so long to find Mr. Right. But she was ready and anxious to begin.

Sarah drew a deep breath. Eyeing the loud guy who'd just been dumped by the blonde, she said to her friends, "Okay, ladies, time I kissed a toad."

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