

EXCERPT – SLOW BURN

Kate MacKenna's Wonderbra saved her life.

Five minutes after she'd put the thing on, she wanted to take it off. She never should have let her sister Kiera talk her into wearing it. Yes, it did make her look voluptuous and sexy, but was that the message she wanted to send tonight? She was a business woman, for Pete's sake, not a porn star. Besides, without the push'em-up-and-out bra she was already sufficiently endowed.

And why was Kiera so hell bent on "sexing her up"—as she so eloquently put it? Was Kate's social life that much of a dud? Apparently her sisters thought so.

Of the three sisters Kiera was the oldest and the bossiest. She had vowed she'd get Kate to wear the little, black, way-too-snug cocktail dress, or die trying. Isabel, the youngest, had sided with Kiera, but then she always did, and Kate had finally given in and put on the silk dress just to get them to stop nagging her. When the two of them ganged up on her, they were a force to be reckoned with—a loud, unrelenting force.

Kate stood in front of the mirror in the foyer tugging on the bra in an attempt to get it to stop digging into her ribs, but her efforts were useless. She checked the time and decided if she hurried she could change, but when she turned to go back up to her room, Kiera walked down the stairs.

"You look great," Kiera said after giving her sister the once-over.

"You look tired." Kate was stating the obvious. There were dark circles under Kiera's eyes. She'd just gotten out of the shower, and her blond hair was dripping on her shoulders. Kate didn't think she'd even bothered to towel it dry. Her sister wasn't wearing an ounce of makeup, but she still looked beautiful. She was a natural beauty, like their mother had been.

"I'm a medical student. I'm supposed to look sleep-deprived. It's a requirement. I'd get tossed out if I looked rested."

Despite their pestering, Kate was happy to be with her two sisters again, even if it was for only a couple of weeks. They had had little time together after their mother died. Kate had returned to Boston to finish her graduate degree, and Kiera had gone back to medical school at Duke while Isabel remained at home with their Aunt Nora.

Kate was now home permanently, but Kiera, after two weeks off, would be returning to Duke again, and Isabel would be heading to her first year of college. The changes were inevitable, Kate, presumed. Life should move forward.

"While you're home you ought to take a day and go to the beach...you know, relax. Take Isabel with you," Kate urged.

Kiera laughed. "Nice try. You're not going to unload her on me, even if it's just for a day. I'd spend the entire time fighting off the boys chasing after her. No, thank you. It's bad enough right here with the phone calls. There's some guy named Reece in particular. He seems to think he's Isabel's boyfriend. Isabel said she worked at a couple of concerts with him, and they went out a few times, but it was nothing serious. She stopped seeing him when he wanted to be more than friends. Now he's calling here nonstop wanting to talk to her, and because Isabel refuses to take his calls, he's becoming

more and more belligerent. I love Isabel dearly, but sometimes I think she can make life just a little too complicated. So, thanks for the suggestion about the beach, but no thanks."

Kate tugged on her bra again.

"Oh, *that's* lovely," Kiera said.

"This contraption is killing me. I can't breathe."

"You look gorgeous, and isn't that more important than breathing?" she teased.

"Suck it up. It's for a good cause."

"What's the cause?"

"You. You're my cause these days. Isabel's too. We're determined to lighten you up. You're way too serious for your own good. I personally think you suffer from the middle child syndrome. You know, you're filled with insecurities and phobias, and you have this need to constantly prove yourself."

Kate decided to ignore her. She put her small clutch bag down on the table and went to the closet.

"You're textbook material," Kiera continued.

"That's nice."

"You're not listening to me, are you?"

Kate was saved from responding when the phone rang. While Kiera hurried into the den to answer it, she opened the closet door and began to search for her raincoat. The television was blaring away in the kitchen, and she could hear the obscenely cheerful weatherman gleefully remind his audience that Charleston was still in the throes of a heat wave unlike anything the city had seen in thirty years. If the temperature remained in the

high nineties for just two more days, a new record would be set. The possibility made the weatherman sound giddy with excitement.

The humidity was the real killer, though. The air was heavy, stagnant, and as thick as glue. The steam curling up from the sidewalks and streets mingled with the pollution hanging like a hazy specter over the airless city. One strong gust of wind would help clear the sky, but neither wind nor rain was predicted anytime soon. Unless one was acclimated, taking a deep breath required concentration. The muggy air drained the young and the old, and left everyone lethargic. Swatting a mosquito away required more energy than most people were willing to exert.

Yet as horribly hot as it was, the party Kate had promised to attend was still being held outside on the grounds of a privately owned art gallery. The event had been planned weeks ago, and the white tent had been erected before the weather turned so oppressive. Only one wing of the newly constructed gallery was completed, and Kate knew it wasn't large enough to accommodate the expected crowd.

There was no getting out of it. The owner, Carl Bertolli, was a friend of Kate's. She knew it would hurt his feelings if she didn't show up. Because of the traffic, the drive from Silver Springs where she lived to the other side of Charleston would take over an hour, but she didn't plan on staying long. She would help with any last minute details and then, when the party was in full swing, she'd bolt. Carl would be too busy to notice her departure.

A controversial artist from Houston was showing her work, and there had already been protests and threatening phone calls. Carl couldn't have been happier. He believed that any publicity, good or bad, was good for his gallery's business. The artist, a woman

who was calling herself Cinnamon had quite a following—though, for the life of her, Kate couldn't understand why. As an artist Cinnamon was mediocre at best. She was, however, excellent at drawing attention to herself. She was constantly in the news and would do anything to get noticed. Currently she was against anything organized. When she wasn't throwing paint on her canvasses, she was half-heartedly trying to overthrow the government. Cinnamon believed in free love, free expression, and a free ride through life. Her paintings weren't free, however. They were outrageously expensive.

Kiera came back into the hall saying, "That was Reece calling again. He's beginning to give me the creeps." She stopped when she saw Kate. "We're not supposed to get rain tonight. How come you're all buttoned up in your raincoat? It's like a hundred and twenty outside."

"One can't be too cautious. I wouldn't want the dress to get wet."

Kiera laughed. "I know what you're doing. You don't want Aunt Nora to see you in that dress. Admit it, Katie. You're afraid of her."

"I'm not afraid of her. I'm just trying to avoid a long lecture."

"The dress isn't indecent."

"She'll think it is," Kate said as she slipped the coat over her shoulders.

"It's going to be odd not having her here to boss us around. I'm going to miss her."

"Me too," Kate whispered.

Nora was moving back to St. Louis. She had come to Silver Springs when her sister had taken ill, and she had stayed on to keep the household running until Isabel graduated from high school. Now that Kate was back and Isabel was going away to

college, Nora was ready to go home. She missed being close to her daughter and her grandchildren.

Nora had been a godsend and had taken good care of all of them, especially when they needed her most. However, she was set in her ways, and in the sisters' opinions, she was obsessed with sex. Kiera called her a born-again virgin. After their mother had died, she had appointed herself the girls' moral guardian. According to Nora, every man was out for "you know what," and it was her job to see that they didn't get it from her girls.

Kate peeked around the corner. Fortunately, Nora wasn't in the kitchen, so Kate turned the television off, removed her raincoat and draped it over a chair. She grabbed her keys and hurried for the garage. If luck stayed on her side, she'd be out of the house before Nora returned. She really wasn't afraid of her aunt, but when Nora got wound up, her lectures could go on and on and on. Some lasted as long as an hour.

Kiera followed Kate through the kitchen. "You be careful tonight. There are a lot of crazies out there who don't care for Cinnamon's views on government or religion. Doesn't she preach anarchy?"

"This month I think she does. I don't keep track of what she says and what she does, and I'm not worried about tonight. Security will be tight."

"Then Carl must be worried."

"No, it's all for show. I don't think Cinnamon believes any of the nonsense she spouts. She's just a publicity hound, that's all."

"The groups she's offended don't know it's all for show, and some of those groups are real radicals."

"Stop worrying. I'll be fine." Kate opened the door and stepped into the garage. The heat took her breath away.

"Why do you have to leave so early? The invitation said eight to midnight."

"Carl's assistant called and left a message for me to be there by six."

She got into the car which felt like an oven and pushed the remote control to open the garage door.

Kiera called out, "Are there going to be Kate MacKenna gift baskets?"

"Of course. Carl insisted. I think I've become one of his projects. He told me he wants to be able to say he knew me when," she called back. "Now shut the door. You're letting all the air conditioning out."

"You're already becoming a household name. Pretty sweet, isn't it?"

Kiera evidently didn't require an answer, for she'd shut the door after making the comment.

Life *was* pretty sweet right now. Kate had plenty of time to think as she inched along the highway in the heavy traffic. Though she wasn't a household name yet, she was definitely headed in that direction. It was funny how a little hobby could end up becoming a satisfying career.

While she had been busy trying to figure out what she wanted to be, her company was born. She had been a senior in high school and scrounging for ways to make money so that she could buy her family and friends birthday gifts. She had also been taking a chemistry class. She'd gone into the teacher's office, and there was a lighted candle on the desk. Kate had always been sensitive to various scents, and the musky odor from the candle was offensive to her. The horrible smell had given her an idea to make her own

candles. But she wouldn't do the same old same old. She would do something unique. How hard could it be?

She started out using the kitchen as her lab. By the end of the winter break, she'd made her first batch of scented candles. They were a disaster. She'd mixed several spices and herbs and made the kitchen smell like a sewer.

Her mother banished her to the basement. She didn't give up her experiments, though. Every spare minute she had that summer she worked on her project. She scoured libraries and labs, and by the end of her freshman year at college, she had come up with the most wonderful basil-and-grapefruit-scented candles.

Kate's intention was to give them away, but her college roommate and best friend, Jordan Buchanan, saw great potential. Jordan took ten candles, priced them, and sold all in one evening. She talked Kate into using her full name on all of her products. Then she helped her design a logo and some unusual boxes.

The clean and fresh scents along with the octagon glass containers Kate found made the candles irresistible and an instant hit. Orders started pouring in. Kate with two part-time employees tried to make and stock as much she could during summer break, but her enterprise outgrew the basement, and so she moved to a rental space across town. It was located in a horrible area and for that reason was dirt cheap.

By the time she graduated from college, orders were coming from all parts of the country. Kate realized her weakness was in management and decided to return to school in Boston to complete her master's. To keep the company running while she was away, she made her mother a partner so that she could sign checks and make deposits. Because Kate poured her profits back into the company, money was tight. She lived with Jordan

in her apartment in Boston and often spent her weekends with Jordan's large family out on Nathan's Bay.

It was a struggle, but Kate managed to make the business grow in her absence. Then, when her mother became so ill, Kate's ambition was put on hold so that she could return home to be with her. A long, sad year had passed since her mother's death, but in that year Kate had completed her graduate degree and formulated plans for expansion.

Now that she was back in Silver Springs permanently, she was ready to take her company to the next level. She had branched into body lotions and three signature perfumes named *Leah*, *Kiera*, and *Isabel* after her mother and her sisters. The space she rented was becoming too cramped, so she was negotiating a new lease in a warehouse that was much larger and also closer to home. She was also thinking about hiring more employees. Anton's, a chain of upscale department stores, was eager to carry her products, and soon she was going to sign an exclusive and extremely lucrative contract.

And any and all money worries would evaporate.

She smiled thinking about that. The first thing she was going to buy when she had a little extra money was a car with a proper air conditioner. She kept adjusting the vents, but that didn't help. The air coming out was lukewarm.

She felt wilted by the time she reached Carl's outrageously pretentious estate. He'd inherited Liongate from his father and was building his gallery on the property. Two massive lion faces adorned the electronic iron gates.

A security guard checked her name off his list and let her through. Carl's two-story house was at the top of a winding drive, but the gallery that would showcase

Cinnamon's work was halfway up the hill on the south side. A massive white tent sat adjacent to the white stone structure.

Another security guard showed her where to park. Carl was obviously expecting quite a crowd if the number of security men and waiters rushing back and forth from the annex to the white tent were any indication.

Kate cut across the well-manicured lawn, her heels sinking into the irrigated sod. She'd almost reached the stone path when her cell phone rang.

"Hello, Kate darling. Where are you?" Carl's melodious voice wafted through the receiver.

"I'm right here on your lawn, Carl."

"Ah, that's wonderful."

"Where are you?" she asked.

"I'm in my closet trying to choose between the white linen suit and the pinstripe blazer with the cream-colored pants. Either way, I know I'm going to absolutely melt, but I have to look dashing for all the critics who are going to be here tonight, don't I?"

"I'm sure you'll look very handsome."

"I just wanted to let you know that I won't be down for a while. I have to hurry and dress and then go pick up Cinnamon at her hotel. The limo's waiting for me. I have a favor to ask. Would you check on the tent set-up for me? I won't have time to get there before guests arrive, and I want to be sure everything's perfect. With your impeccable taste, I know you'll see that it's glorious."

"I'd be happy to," Kate answered, smiling at her friend's flare for the dramatic.

"You're a sweetheart. I owe you," Carl said as he hung up.

Kate found the entrance and went inside the tent. There were air conditioners operating full blast around the perimeter, but they weren't doing much good with all the waiters coming and going. Huge buffet tables stood in a line at one end. They were topped with colorful flower arrangements in crystal bowls and gleaming silver servers. Small tables with white linens and white folding chairs were scattered around the rest of the space. Everything seemed to be going smoothly.

She spotted her gift baskets on a table at the back. The white tablecloth reached the ground, and her logo hung suspended in front. She hurried over to straighten it and to place the baskets in a semicircle. When she was finished, she stepped back to admire how lovely it looked.

She circled the table and reached for the chair but changed her mind. The Wonderbra was driving her nuts. The undergarment felt like a suffocating vise around her ribcage. She was in agony and was trying not to rip the thing off as she hurried into the art gallery to find a powder room so she could remove it and toss it in the trash.

Unfortunately, the ladies' room was blocked off and so was the men's room. There were servants cleaning both. Kate would have ignored the closed signs and gone in, but there were security guards stationed by the doors, and she was sure they wouldn't let her through.

Now what? Kate looked around for a vacant room with a door she could shut. There weren't any. She headed back to the tent feeling absolutely miserable, but her mood improved when she noticed a large basket of flowers had been placed on the ground just beneath her logo to showcase it. She must remember to thank Carl for being so thoughtful.

The heat was stifling. She picked up a program and began to fan her face. With less than two hours before the crowd would arrive, waiters were hurrying to set up more portable air conditioners. Kate stepped to the back of the tent to get out of their way.

As she lifted a flap of the canvas to get a breath of fresh air, she spotted a cluster of trees circled by a skirt of dense shrubs a few yards away. Bingo. She knew exactly what she was going to do. The bushes would give her privacy, and it would take just a few seconds to unhook the strapless bra and pull it off. She looked in all directions to make sure no one was watching or going to follow her and headed for the trees.

A minute later she had accomplished the feat.

"Finally," she sighed with relief. Now she could breathe.

It was her last thought before the explosion.