

## Larkfield House

Katie Cox glared at the pottery shards neatly arranged on the floor. They were precisely where she had not left them.

“Well, damn.”

Unless the house was haunted, she was the only one to touch them in a couple of hundred years. She squatted down and eyeballed the top of the table.

Level.

Katie had hoped to discover whether the shards were English or Spanish. Now she just hoped they would stay put.

A shiver ran down her spine as if someone had walked over her grave.

A cool, swift breeze brushed her face. She glanced at the side window. Closed. Another ripple of unease ran down her back.

The approaching rumble of an engine caught her attention then abruptly cut off. Whoever was out there was going to distract her from the mystery of the repositioned pottery.

Standing up, she took the opportunity to stretch but froze at the sight in her front yard. A gorgeous specimen of manhood got out of his truck and walked across the weed-studded lawn. Katie was more than happy to be distracted by him. She blinked hoping he wasn't a product of her overactive imagination. He kept on coming.

*Oh, yeah.*

The hunk stepped onto the porch and out of Katie's sight—even though she followed his progress until her forehead was pressed against the window. The rickety screen door bounced and squeaked reassuring her that he really was real and waiting for

her on the porch.

“How lucky can a girl get?” she asked herself. Running her fingers over her hair, she went to answer the door.

Up close, he was even better. The epitome of the blonde-haired, blue-eyed football-captain contrasted with her own memory of being the freckle-faced, pig-tailed, four-eyed geek. Thank heavens it was just a memory.

“Uh, hello?”

Katie shook off the geek flashback. “Hi, there. Can I help you?” *Oh, God, I hope so.*

“If you’re Katie Cox you can.”

“Thank the Lord.”

“Excuse me?”

She laughed a little. “Never mind. I’m Katie Cox. And you are. . . ?”

“Matt James.”

She was in heaven. She was a sugar junkie turned loose in a fudge factory. She was—

“Miss Cox?”

—Not paying attention. This time she had to shake off a daydream. An erotic one. “Yes?”

“Are you all right? You looked a little lost for a moment.”

Katie moved to the door. “I’m fine.” She shoved the warped screen door open. “Come in, come in. I’m so glad you could come. Uh, make it.” She cleared her throat. “Show up.”

*Down girl.*

If she had heard right, this was the man who would change her old, dilapidated house into a homey bed and breakfast. It was said that Matt James had the skills to do the job but, more importantly, he had the passion the job—and Katie—required. She didn't do things halfway. As the proud owner of a wreck of a house, she fully intended to welcome guests to a comfortable Florida plantation-type B&B in eight short months.

With the help of this hunk.

*Tough work but well worth it.*

Matt James stepped through the door and Katie thrilled to see he had to duck. He stood approximately six foot three or four. He had shaggy hair and cobalt-blue eyes, wore jeans and scuffed, steel-toed work boots and a long sleeve flannel shirt in deference to the cool February breeze that played with the palm trees and live oaks dotting the grounds.

The breeze that had made its way into a closed room. She stopped the thought. In front of her stood something much better to think about.

As the broad-shouldered dream turned slowly in the large foyer, his eyes raked the walls and woodwork appreciatively. He rubbed the fingertips of his right hand together, like he couldn't wait to get his hands on the place and start sanding. She watched him drink in the details of the foyer while she drank in a few of his details.

She'd already seen the foyer.

Her gaze glided from his boots to his shoulders. Long, muscled legs, slender hips, flat stomach and a wide chest. When her gaze reached his face, and she realized she'd been caught ogling him, she grinned.

“Uh, I’m, ah . . . ” He shook his head and smiled back. “I’m here to give you an estimate on renovating Larkfield House.”

“I know.”

“How about you show me what you want me to do?”

Katie barely refrained from making a randy comment by biting her lip. “Let’s start here in the foyer.”

“Let me get my things.”

Katie nodded. She could use the time to get her breathing—and her libido—under control.

Like that was gonna happen, she admitted.

Matt James, Contractor, returned with a clipboard, a tape measure and a carpenter’s pencil.

“All the floors need to be done,” Katie said as he came to a stop in the foyer.

“I’ll say,” Matt said as he looked at the undulating floorboards. “You’ll probably have to replace most of them.”

“Not me,” Katie informed him. She’d known Matt was the one for the job the minute he rubbed his fingertips together. That he was gorgeous didn’t influence her decision at all. Not one bit. Katie managed to cover an inelegant snort. She was glad she wasn’t still staring at his butt when he turned to her.

“Miss Cox,” he started.

“Katie,” she said.

He raised an eyebrow. “No matter what I call you, some of these boards will have to be replaced.” He pressed the toe of his boot on one of them and watched it dip a good

inch below the others. “You can’t leave weak boards like that and have a sound floor.”

“I know that. But I’m not replacing any floorboards.” She paused. “You are.”

Surprise was evident in his face. “I thought you were gathering estimates.”

“I was. Until you showed up.”

“I haven’t even given you a ballpark figure. How can you assume my price will be better than the other estimates you’ve gotten?”

His quizzical expression drew his dark blonde eyebrows together in the middle. His eyelashes were long but not girlie-long. The tips glittered in the sunlight bathing his face.

“I don’t assume anything of the sort, Mr. James.”

He kept staring at her. “I must be a little slow this afternoon. Could you please explain this to me?”

“Sure. You’re hired.”

He drew back and crossed his arms across his very nice chest. “What if my price is more than you’re willing to pay?”

Katie actually felt a shiver run through her at the innuendo. She was willing to pay anything he asked.

“I doubt it.”

“Why?” he snorted. “Have all the other estimates been that high?”

“I haven’t gotten any other estimates.”

Now his eyes went wide in surprise. “Why not? You really shouldn’t start a job like this by hiring the first guy that comes along. You need—”

“I need you to renovate my house and I don’t need any estimates.” She didn’t

want him to think her an absolute nut case, so she kept on rolling. “Your eyes told me you appreciate all this,” she said indicating the house. “Your hands told me you’ve done this before,” she said nodding at his workman’s callused hands. “And rubbing your fingertips together told me you can’t wait to get started.”

She took a minute to catch her breath and to let him make up his mind. He didn’t seem ready to run out the door. Yet. She linked her hands together at her waist.

Matt’s lips twitched and he rubbed a hand over his face like he was wiping a smile off. Katie laughed and, when he joined her, she knew she had him. She clapped her hands.

“You’ll do it!”

“I’ll do it,” he said smiling at her.

Katie grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the ancient kitchen. “Come on, you’re gonna love getting your hands on this.”

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Matt James, who knew exactly what he wanted to get his hands on the minute she turned around, watched the slightly wacky woman with the fabulous ass—now his employer—as she dragged him down a crudely constructed hallway bisecting the beautiful house. The result of a painfully practical, soulless renovation, it destroyed the gracious flow of the old, genteel, Southern house stuck out in the middle of nowhere Florida. He shuddered. The hall would be the first to go. When Katie pulled him out of the tunnel-like hallway, he drew in a breath and stared at the remains of a once-beautiful kitchen.

Okay. First to go is a toss-up between the hall and the kitchen.

The appliances had been new in 1965. The wallpaper looked like it was put up in the 20's when large, garish cabbage roses were in vogue. The floor, ugh, the floor was hopeless. Cracked vinyl tiles almost covered it. Bare wood showed through in several places and floor joists could be seen in front of the sink. Matt shuddered. So much hideous work for him to fix.

This house was the reason he'd given up Wall Street. Well, not this house in particular, but this type of house. But he wondered about his gut reaction to Larkfield House as he drove through the trees to see the house. If he was being fanciful, he would say it called out to him, yelled, "Help me."

"How could anyone let this happen?" he said more to himself than to her, but she heard.

"The house has been empty for almost ten years."

Matt lifted his eyes to look at the woman he'd almost forgotten. Right. Like he could forget that sexy whirlwind. This was her house and he better not forget it. Putting the kibosh on his fanciful imaginings, he checked the kitchen floor then wandered around the kitchen. The back door was solid-core and might be salvageable. The cabinets were a total loss, thank God. The pressboard construction had swelled in the Florida humidity so the doors didn't close, and the cabinets looked ready to leap off the buckling wallboard. Surprisingly, the white sink had no chips or scratches, although the faucets were rusty and the countertop looked like it would follow the cabinets the moment they made the leap. He ran a hand around the sink and let his imagination fill in the blanks.

He pictured the gradual metamorphosis from White Elephant to Home. Basic repairs—the foundation of any renovation—would practically take care of themselves as

he worked on returning the old girl to her previous splendor. Ideas for the kitchen poured through him unfiltered. His mind jumped to the outside where he wanted to extend the railed front porch down both sides of the house, and put real shutters on the old-fashioned windows. Matt vowed that this house, Larkfield House, would be his best work ever. No compromises, no having to cave when the owner insisted on something that went against what he knew was right. When he realized he was seeing Katie's house as his own, he was stunned. No other house made him feel so at home. He looked over at Katie.

She was watching him with a satisfied smile on her face. She wouldn't be very satisfied if she knew his thoughts.

"Sorry, I sometimes get lost in my head picturing repairs and things."

"No problem. It's why I hired you."

"I like what I do." Matt shrugged. *And I love this house.*

"I can tell."

He had an uncanny feeling she knew his thoughts. He gazed out the broken kitchen window. This was his dream house, er, job, and he was happy, alone and free to wander all over the country fixing up beautiful old houses.

Matt looked at her over his shoulder. "I enjoy turning a rundown house into a livable home. I'll do a good job for you, Miss Cox, at a reasonable price."

Her smile had grown while he talked and it changed her from merely pretty to fabulously pretty. How had he missed that? He looked at a rundown house and pictured it after he was done doing his magic. Obviously, he didn't have any magic when it came to women.

"I knew that the minute I saw you. And it's Katie, remember?"

“I’m Matt.”

“Yeah. I know.”

They stood in the dilapidated kitchen and stared at each other for a moment. Matt felt more satisfaction than landing a plum job should cause. He wondered if it had to do more with lusting after the house, or lusting after its owner. *Too deep.* He broke eye contact and clapped his hands together.

“Let’s get to work, shall we?” He swept his arm out in front of him, gesturing for Katie to lead the way.

“Okay.” The enigmatic Miss Katie Cox strode past him like a warrior queen on the march. The brilliance of her smile told him she was very happy with him taking the job. Matt didn’t think the picture would hold for long if she found out he was lusting after her house.

Ahead of him—jeez—she bent over. Immediately, his lustful thoughts shifted from foundations to females. With his breath locked in his throat, he watched her shorts ride up to reveal more leg and, man, oh man, did she have legs. Feeling a little warm, he envied the shorts outlining the best butt he’d seen in a long time. It had shape, it had curves, it had just enough flesh to fill a man’s hands. His hands. His empty, aching hands.

Katie cleared her throat and Matt’s head jerked. She was examining some broken pottery she had picked up and hadn’t caught him staring. He took the opportunity to study her instead of her house. His gaze swept from head to foot and he liked the middle as much as the ends. Shoulder-length, dark auburn hair topped off an oval face with perfectly shaped lips the color of pink coral. Her arms, bared by a sleeveless cotton

blouse, were defined by the outline of very feminine muscles. She's in good shape he admitted, letting his gaze travel down her back, into the dip of her waist and over the flare of her hips. Which brought him right back to that fabulous ass.

Glancing up, he saw Katie still fingering the pottery. She'd given him the once over earlier, now it was his turn. He'd been a little surprised at his physical reaction to finding her checking him out. He had never before felt the stir of arousal just because a woman looked at him. He decided to blame it on the magnificent house that he couldn't wait to get his hands on.

And now he couldn't wait to get his hands on Katie Cox.

The first stirrings of arousal may have caught him unaware but the second, and third, prompted by Katie bending over, were almost expected. Things were looking up in more ways than one, Matt thought, redistributing his weight. *Time to focus.*

"What's that?" he asked. Anything to divert his lust.

She frowned. It was the first frown he'd seen on her pretty face. She put the piece down on the worktable and dusted off her hands. "Nothing really. Just some broken pottery."

Matt wondered what there was about the piece that brought a frown to Katie's face. A question for another time.

"This the living room?"

She smiled. "Now it is, but originally it was the front parlor."

"Let's measure it. Do you have any blueprints for the house?"

"No drawings," she said. "The seller doesn't have any of the original plans or blueprints. There are a few old photographs of the outside though."

He handed her the end of his tape measure and—jeez—she bent over to hold it against the baseboard. He experienced a momentary fantasy about which measuring stick to use. Forcing his thoughts to what he was supposed to be doing, he checked the measurement and made a notation on his pad. “No pictures of the inside?” he asked. She shook her head. “Too bad. You can reconstruct a lot from photographs.”

“That’s how you did the Palmer house in Key West, isn’t it?”

Matt eyed Katie. “You know about that?” The Palmer house had been his most ambitious project to date and one he was quite proud of.

Katie laughed. Her face lit up with amusement at catching him off-guard. “You don’t think I’d hire the first guy that walked in here, did you?”

Matt shook his head and being hoodwinked. “You got me. I have to admit, you had me going. I think this is going to be an interesting project.”

“You betcha.” Then she—jeez—bent over again.

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Katie led Matt through the house, pointing out all the problems she was aware of. He made notes on his clipboard then scribbled in the margins. They measured floors, walls, doorways and windows. Katie tried speeding him up, to stick with the big picture for now. But Matt kept crawling into closets and leaning out windows looking at every single detail he could find. She kept an eye on his anatomy in case he needed help.

She really liked this guy.

Trailing behind him, she let her mind play with naming the guest rooms. *The Green Room and the Blue Room? Or something more romantic, like the Cary Grant Suite and the Lauren Bacall Bedroom?*

“What’s behind here?”

Matt ran a hand over the faded and chipped paint on the wall that cut off access to most of the second floor. A quick image of his hand running over her—he wouldn’t find anything faded or chipped there—flashed through her mind. She had to shake her head to clear it.

“A small apartment. The entrance and stairs are on the west side of the house.”

He tapped his knuckles at intervals along the wall.

“You want to open it up?” He caught her gaze. “Or is it going to be your living quarters?”

“I may live there at first but then I hope to lure a manager/cook into living in the house. I still have my apartment in town and I’ll eventually finish the attic for myself.”

Matt stared at the ceiling like it was an indoor blue sky. His eyes lit on the narrow stairway that led to the attic and—Katie couldn’t believe it—he bounded up the stairs and disappeared.

“Hold it right there, Mr. Renovator.” She scurried up the stairs behind him. The attic was still the same musty, dusty open area it had been when she bought the place. It was dotted with a couple of broken chairs, an old empty trunk and empty paint cans.

Katie had plans for that trunk.

“That trunk could be refinished into a nice coffee table.”

She started. “That’s exactly what I planned to do with it.” She gave him a smile.

Matt propped his hands on his hips and studied the dimensions of the room. “It’s probably big enough for one bedroom, a sitting room and a decent size bathroom. Not much else because you lose floor space as the ceiling slopes down.” He studied the

exposed rafters for a moment. “It would be a shame to enclose the rafters with ceiling tiles. Maybe you could use the rafters to hang plants from, maybe scatter a few baskets and stuff around up there?”

“Humph.”

He grinned at her. “Sorry. I get carried away sometimes.”

“I was considering just that.”

“Getting carried away?”

Katie chuckled. “No. Putting up baskets and plants on the rafters.” She planted her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes at him. “Have you been reading my mind?”

He looked disconcerted. “I don’t read minds. I don’t have any of those ‘extra’ senses.”

Katie heard a tiny squeak and peeked over Matt’s shoulder. An ancient rocking chair, sans seat, slowly rocked back and forth. She looked at the windows to make sure they were still closed. They were. She remembered the faint breeze downstairs in another room with closed windows.

Matt, unaware of the otherworldly activity going on behind him, wiped his hands on his jeans.

*Otherworldly?* Pottery wandered around the first floor, non-existent breezes blew through closed off rooms and empty rocking chairs rocked in the attic. Katie was starting to see a pattern.

“You don’t believe in mind reading? ESP? Stuff like that?”

He scoffed but didn’t look at her. “Nah. It’s all nonsense.” He took out his handy tape measure again.

Some people were funny about stuff like that, Katie knew. From his comment she had to assume she and Matt were of two different minds on the subject. He might not believe stuff like that existed, whereas she hadn't seen any evidence of it. Until now, of course. If her perfect renovator saw a rocking chair rocking by itself, or shards ending up where no one had put them, he'd probably climb the walls looking for strings or, God forbid, run down the stairs, out of her house and out of her life. She couldn't afford to let that happen. Since he didn't believe in that stuff, a blatant demonstration of unearthly activity would likely force him to do just that.

She had to get him downstairs immediately. And she refused to consider the reality of the self-motivated rocking chair.

"Matt, let's not measure up here. If I decide to finish this area, it'll be far in the future. The rest of the house comes first."

"Well, we could do that. But if I rough this area out now, when I'm working below, I won't do anything to interfere with your future plans."

*But if you rough this out now you'll interfere with my plan to keep you from seeing the empty rocking chair rocking back and forth without a hint of a breeze because all the damn windows are closed.* "How clever of you," she said.

Matt made a bow from the waist. "That's why you hired me, right?"

It wouldn't do to make a big deal out of going downstairs. Just because she was hot for his body, and Larkfield House needed him, she didn't want him finding out she was hiding paranormal activity from him. Then again, she didn't believe in that stuff either, so it just wasn't happening, rocking rocking chair notwithstanding.

To Katie's relief, her cell phone rang. *Saved by the bell.* Katie paused. What did

it mean when you started using clichés on yourself?

“Excuse me,” she said as she flipped open her phone and strolled toward the stairs.

“Hello?”

“Katie! It’s good to hear your voice,” Russell said.

Her ex-boss. Again. True, she appreciated him selling Larkfield House to her, and she appreciated his holding the mortgage, but she did not appreciate being called back to his office at the Ocean View Hotel every other day for any and every piddling reason he could conjure up.

“Russell. What can I do for you?” she said. Civility, she reminded herself.

“There’re a couple of little things we need to clear up on the paperwork.”

“I’m sure we cleared up everything when I was there the day before yesterday.”

*Civility.*

“Unfortunately, the lawyers have come up with more questions. Can you come to my office this afternoon?”

*Ci. Vil. It. Ty.*

“No, I’m sorry but I can’t.”

Her statement was greeted with silence. Russell cleared his throat. “I see. What about tomorrow?”

Her foot started its I’m-annoyed tapping. “I can come to your office tomorrow afternoon, around two.”

“Why that late?”

She gritted her teeth and switched the phone to her other hand. “Because I have a

lot of work to do here. I'm taking estimates on renovations, cleaning dirt and cobwebs, airing out the place. I'm working on plans for the interior decoration."

"My, my. You are busy."

"Yes, I am. And I can't keep driving into town to look at more papers."

"I wouldn't ask if it wasn't imperative." His voice took on its I-am-imperative tone, the one she detested.

Katie closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead. "I'll come in tomorrow around two. Have everything, and I mean everything, ready for me because I won't be going to your office again any time soon."

"Of course, my dear," Russell answered in his smarmiest voice. "I didn't realize you were so high strung."

Katie sighed again. Civility. "I'm not high strung, Russell. I'm busy."

"Yes, well. Tomorrow at two and then I'll hold off the lawyers myself. How's that sound?"

"Sounds good, Russell. Tomorrow then."

She clicked off the phone and clasped a hand to her heart when a metal tape measure rattled and surged back into its case. Her first thought was the stupid thing was rewinding itself.

"Oh, you scared me to death!" she exclaimed when she saw Matt palm the square silver case in one hand.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to."

He didn't look sorry. "Yeah." She lifted the phone and stuck her tongue out at it.

Matt laughed. "Nothing's ever done until the paperwork is finished."

“Well, that paperwork has been finished three times already.”

“That’s some paperwork.”

As a special treat for being so civil to Russell, Katie let her gaze settle on Matt. He was some piece of work himself. She spun around and down until she landed Indian-style on the dusty wooden floor. Matt lifted an eyebrow, and then dropped down across from her in a slightly more conventional way.

“My boss—my ex-boss—sold me this place,” she started. Matt would have to understand some background before he ran into Russell Raven, whose attitude would run Matt off faster than the rocking chair. “He inherited it a few years ago when his aunt died but he never did anything with it. Out of the blue, Russell—the ex-boss—offers to lease it to me. He knew I wanted to open a B&B some day, but I didn’t want a lease. I turned him down. A couple of weeks later, he offered to sell it to me at a very good price and hold the mortgage.”

Katie fell silent, again trying to reason out why Russell had done that for her. He hadn’t wanted her to leave the hotel because she was his money machine, the best at bringing in meetings, conventions and seminars to the small hotel that occupied a small but priceless plot of oceanfront land. But her dream of a home of her own finally becoming a reality, and owning her own bed and breakfast, coming together right where she lived, overshadowed everything. She had saved her money and the accommodating down payment and mortgage terms made it work out to everyone’s advantage. Except Russell’s.

“You have a problem with getting a good deal?” Matt looked at her expectantly.

“I don’t have a problem with getting a good deal. I have a problem with getting a

good deal from Russell.”

“Why?” Matt leaned back on his hands and stretched his legs out. The muscles in his thighs bulged and, if they ran out of lumber, his shoulders were wide enough to hold up the whole house. *Concentrate, girl.*

“Because Russell doesn’t make deals that favor the opposition. He makes deals that favor him.” Katie filled him in on her old job at the Ocean View, her boss and the mortgage he held. “Trouble is, he keeps calling me back to his office to take care of more details.” She shook her head. “I know something else is going on but...”

“Like what?”

“Damned if I know.” Katie leaned back on her hands and looked up at the ceiling joists.

Matt sat up and dusted his hands. “I don’t know if this is out of line, but are you two alone in his office?”

Katie distracted herself from the problem of Russell by thinking about how cute Matt looked when he was uncomfortable. Then her brain registered what he said.

“Why?”

Matt shrugged. “I know of a couple of women who have been put in uncomfortable positions by their boss.” He didn’t look up at her.

“Have you?”

Matt’s head jerked up. “No! Absolutely not. Why, I—”

“I meant ‘you’ve known women in uncomfortable positions’, not ‘you’ve put women into uncomfortable positions’. You wouldn’t do anything like that.”

He relaxed a little but didn’t seem convinced. “How do you know? You don’t

know me at all.”

Katie smiled. “I’ve never felt this comfortable with any man right off the bat. I feel like I’ve known you for years.”

Matt smiled. “I kind of feel like that, too.”

“Good.” That was very good.

“So, are you guys alone in his office?”

Katie thought about it. “Sometimes there’s a secretary or someone in the office when I get there. But they usually leave soon after I arrive.”

“Hmm.”

Katie tilted her head. “I honestly don’t think it’s sexual harassment. The guy is sixty if he’s a day.”

“So? What does age have to do with it?”

Katie frowned as an old memory surfaced. A year or so after she’d taken the job, she’d gone into Russell’s office to talk over some banquet details and he cornered her between his desk and the wall. When she told him in no uncertain terms she didn’t play those games, he backed off. He had never made another pass at her, and she’d worked for him for eleven years.

“Well, there was. . . . But that was years ago.”

Matt’s only answer was to raise his eyebrows. “Whatever you say, Boss Lady.”

“He just wants me back. At work, I mean.”

He stood up and flicked some dust off the seat of his pants, then reached a hand down to help her up. She wished he’d let her dust off his pants. She graciously accepted his hand and dusted off her own pants. Asking him to do it was a little too forward, even

for her. She headed for the first floor.

“It still gets dark early,” Katie said. She mourned the loss of sunlight because there was no electricity at the house yet. It was time to go home.

“Daylight Savings time is coming up.”

“Hmm. Do we lose sleep, or gain sleep?”

“Spring forward, fall back.”

Katie smiled at him. “You just keep proving you’re so clever.”

They gathered up their things and went out the front door. She closed and locked it, then joined Matt on the coquina rock steps.

“See you tomorrow, okay?”

“I’ll be here,” Matt said. He got in his truck but, before he drove off, he pulled around to where her car was parked.

“What time do you want to start?”

“I like to start early since it gets dark so early. How’s eleven?” She laughed when his jaw dropped open. “Only kidding. Is seven too early?”

He shook his head. “Not at all,” he said. “I’ll bring donuts.”

“Oh, goodie. I’ll bring coffee.”

“Good.” Matt put the truck in gear.

“Before you go. . . Do we lose an hour’s sleep when we spring forward?”

Matt drove off with a grin. Katie got in her car and started the engine. The sun was cut in half by the horizon. Squinting into the fading light, she saw zigzag flashes in the distance. Heat lightning?

Heading for her apartment, she thought about potshards and hunks, rocking chairs and fantasy men, and smiled at the thought of Simon leaping with joy at her arrival.