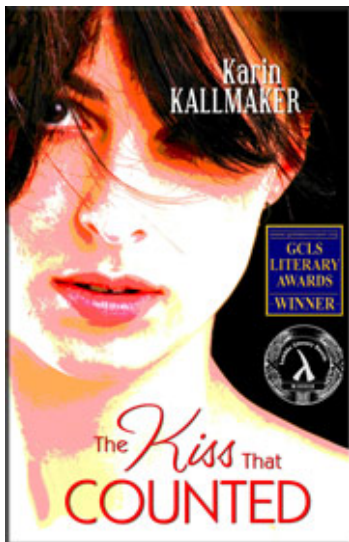

Excerpt from THE KISS THAT COUNTED



THE KISS THAT COUNTED IS A CONTEMPORARY LESBIAN ROMANCE BY KARIN KALLMAKER.

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CHAPTER ONE

Gracie's, the fair trade and all-things-organic coffee bar halfway between CJ's office building and Abby's medical center, was crowded with after work couples. CJ scanned the room and exits again, then reluctantly brought her focus back to Abby.

"I am not a sexual drive-thru, CJ. You can't just call me up when you want a roll in the hay." Abby licked whipped cream off her stir stick with no sign of her usual pleasure.

But you're here, CJ Roshe wanted to say. Takes two to tango to any tune, she might have added. Given the din of cutlery and conversations, she could have even pretended not to have heard what Abby had said.

Instead, she tried a distraction. "Between your

residency schedule and my wall-to-wall meetings, we aren't able to get together that often."

Abby didn't fall for it. With a level look across the steaming cups, she said, "Seven weeks."

Okay, distraction wasn't going to work. Elements of the truth—for instance, that CJ had only realized yesterday how long it had been since they'd gotten together—were not what Abby wanted to hear. Abby's assessment of their relationship was accurate, after all, and CJ wasn't going to pretend otherwise. But she wasn't going to take the whole blame. Abby, deep in the demands of medical residency, hadn't called for a date either. Still, what was the point of hashing over their dysfunctional relationship, especially when the one thing that was more than functional was what they would both be pleased with by morning? Maybe they didn't have to have their usual argument before they adjourned to a more private setting.

"I know." CJ leaned forward to rest her arms lightly on the tiny table. One finger traced the back of Abby's hand. "Seven weeks."

Abby's shiver was palpable. Her problem was that she couldn't admit they were about sex. For some reason, that was a bad thing in her book. It wasn't as if either of them was seeing someone else, so what was the big deal? Why was sex supposed to lead down the aisle to ever-after and white picket fences? Regardless, those options weren't available to CJ and she had never told Abby they were.

A clap of thunder announced the arrival of another summer afternoon downpour, and the café's air grew

humid and warm in spite of the air conditioning. CJ watched the ritual of new arrivals shaking off water from their shirts. Denver in August made a raincoat unthinkable; it was drip-dry season.

After another quick visual sweep of the premises, CJ glanced at Abby again. If Abby was truly peeved she would have drawn back from CJ's touch. CJ's pulse stirred as she watched faint mottling creep up the pale throat and chest, enchantingly displayed by a revealing blouse. CJ was almost certain she'd once before unbuttoned that very blouse with her teeth. It was a guarantee that Abby hadn't been wearing a silk blouse on call at the hospital, in the same way that the collar of CJ's tailored shirt hadn't been undone to the top of her cleavage while she'd been at work.

"I'm not—stop that, CJ."

CJ stilled her finger. "Have I ever misled you?"

"No," Abby admitted. A flare of anger marred her lovely face as she tossed back her shoulder-length brown hair. "No, you've been quite honest that I'm in your life to fuck when you feel like it."

"You can call me whenever you like."

"And hear that sexy voice of yours telling me to leave a message."

"Some day you'll find that perfect one you want, Abby. Dearly beloved, diamond ring, the whole deal." Blah, blah, blah, CJ thought. "In the meantime, why not enjoy yourself?"

"You mean why not let you enjoy yourself with me."

"Are you saying you don't enjoy it too?" CJ couldn't

help the sardonic lift to one eyebrow and the pointed look at the alluring curves revealed by the clinging silk.

Abby flushed again and CJ was certain Abby could hear the echo of some of the earthy things she had said during their last tryst. “You know that I do. I just wish—”

“That’s not going to happen. I’m not made that way.” I can’t ever be that way, CJ added to herself.

Abby regarded her sadly. “I know.”

Yet we have to have this conversation every time, CJ wanted to say. “Would you like to get some dinner?”

“No.” Abby’s little sigh was a mixture of chagrin and resignation. With a glimmer of a smile, she added, “You know what I want.”

CJ always tried to be truthful. It made lying easier. “I really want to spend the night with you, too.”

“The whole night, huh? Let’s go to your place because you make better breakfasts.”

CJ squeezed Abby’s hand. “Breakfast, and everything leading up to it, will be my pleasure.”

Abby picked up her handbag and as CJ rose she surveyed the crowded café to confirm that the route she’d noted earlier was still the best way to exit. No one in her line of sight had a studied nonchalance that set off her internal alarms, but her gaze lighted on an average-looking man in an average-looking suit with his tail so far between his legs that she thought, Someone just broke his favorite toy.

She glanced at his companion, then looked away.

Looked again, looked away, then stared. Platinum hair hung to her mid-back, straight like sewing silks and catching the light like diamonds. A sleek, shimmering blouse the shade of Kentucky bluegrass set off pale, rose-tinted skin. A nose too long to be conventionally pretty highlighted eyes of crystal-sharp blue. And that wide, curving mouth...

“Are we going?”

“Sure, yes.” CJ hid her discomfiture and glanced at the Nordic beauty again. She’d have no trouble at all calling up the woman in her memory. She wouldn’t mind if those long legs and vibrant eyes showed up in her dreams. The woman was smiling sweetly at her companion, who looked as if he wanted to crawl under a table to lick his wounds.

As the door closed behind her, CJ resisted the urge to look back one more time. The voice in her head sounded just like Aunt Bitty when she was hunched over her tarot cards. Dreams, the voice said, will be the closest the likes of you will ever get to a fantasy woman like that.

Abby tended to drive more slowly than CJ did, and they got separated on the way to CJ’s apartment. She drowned out her petty annoyances over the traffic with a sweet and sultry Diana Krall CD. She left behind the carefully gridded Victorian streets of the old historic district near the Capital, and wended her way east, easing onto the long, wide avenues that proclaimed Denver a city of the Limitless West. Her pace increased as she turned

onto Colfax. Like most other commuters she was headed for the sprawling network of the multi-lane boulevards.

From there, most drivers would crawl onto the interstates that gave the illusion of all destinations being only a short drive away, that everywhere worth going was connected to Denver. Unlike most of the other commuters, however, she wasn't headed toward a newer bedroom community like Aurora or Centennial, but a small 1950s-era apartment complex, still within the city limits, that had so far escaped the makeovers of its neighbors.

Her gaze moved constantly from the traffic to the speedometer to the rear view mirror as she drove past posh condominium complexes that offered pools and rec rooms, and gentrifying neighborhoods where former small lots were being combined for more opulent homes. She was happy with her nondescript second-floor apartment. It wasn't a place where anyone would look for her. And, giving her the kind of peace of mind she craved, her apartment had a rear exit.

CJ pulled into one of the guest parking spaces so Abby could take the designated spot close to CJ's door. Nearby cars were all familiar, as were the other people arriving home from work. She ran through the rain, which had eased to a misty drizzle, and was up the stairs and inside her door in record time. She quickly went to the tiny second bedroom she used as a home office to plug in her various portable electronics and make sure the phone rang directly to voice mail.

With only a few minutes at most before Abby arrived,

CJ opened the unlabeled folder that never left her desk. A faded newspaper clipping floated to the floor and she stuffed it back with the others before running one finger down the handwritten list of a dozen names and amounts. She studied it every night, almost without fail. Once a week she opened the safe in the back of the small closet and added to its contents. Nine of the names now had lines through them and she allowed herself a tight smile. The first person on the list was the reason she'd settled in Denver, and here she was, eight years later, hunkered down, selling commercial real estate like it had always been her career choice, and slowly but surely crossing names off this list.

When she heard the uneven putter of Abby's car, she tucked the folder into the top desk drawer. From the front window she could see Abby's VW disappearing under the covered parking. Everything else below, the little she could see anyway, looked the same as it had earlier.

She selected some sultry Ella on her way to the door, opening it just before Abby knocked. She pulled Abby inside and neither of them seemed to care that a small grocery bag and Abby's purse ended up on the floor in their haste.

"Please, baby," Abby whispered. "Let's go."

"Hold on, sweetie, let me close the door."

CJ ended up with her back against the now locked door with one foot on the groceries, which were probably Abby's favorite sticky rolls.

"What's taking you so long to get me naked?" Abby

grinned between kisses.

“Let’s at least get to the couch.” CJ was relieved to see Abby’s sense of humor had returned. Sex ought to be fun, fantastic fun, and with Abby it most certainly was.

Once Abby made up her mind, she was like a racer at Indy with a green light. The fire of her mouth, the taste of her, always roused a similar urgency in CJ. They fell on the sofa not all that gracefully, clothes still in the way.

Abby laughed, said, “That’s my hand,” then made that little noise that confirmed that CJ had found a nipple through the blouse. After that, everything was natural and heated, Abby’s head tipped back in offering and CJ’s mouth nuzzling into one of the most delightfully heaving bosoms she’d ever had the pleasure to know.

Goosebumps dusted Abby’s arms, and the texture brought a highly pleasurable tingle to the tips of CJ’s fingers. Abby was special, and maybe CJ would care more if she wasn’t always aware that at any moment she would have to leave without a word. All it would take to get her running for the nearest state line was a glimpse of an old but still familiar face or an authoritative knock at the front door. She wouldn’t mind if Abby never forgot her, but she’d feel badly if she left Abby with a broken heart.

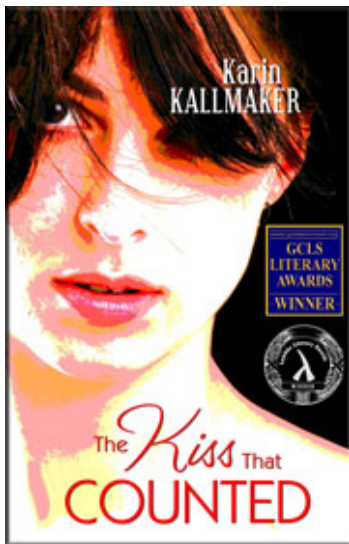
“There’s nothing better than this,” CJ whispered. She took her time dipping into Abby’s mouth, then other places that were as wet and welcoming.

Abby’s reply was a familiar and pleasing croon, and her hands cupped the back of CJ’s head with another rising sound of pleasure. What more did there need to be? It

didn't just feel good, it felt wonderful.

Within a few minutes Abby was calling out her name with the abandon that pleased CJ in deep places that didn't seem reachable at any other time. CJ pulled Abby into her arms and kissed away the aftershivers of pleasure, silencing, too, the softly murmured, "CJ" that Abby continued to repeat. Moments like these, when there should only be sweet words and intimate touches, loving caresses and easy smiles, were the only times it ever bothered her that Abby used the name of a woman who didn't exist.

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