



BOOK 1 IN THE PASSION SERIES

DISCOVERY IN
Passion



SHIELA STEWART



Discovery in Passion

by Shiela Stewart

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*To my sister, my best friend, Shelley.
You are an inspiration, and the proof that you can
always start over again and have it all.*

Chapter 1

Home sweet home.

Dear God, what had she done? No one pulled out a map, closed their eyes and pointed to a place to start their life. Let alone travel halfway across the country to a place you'd never heard of and knew no one. Only insane people did that. Was it any wonder her family had been concerned for her? She had definitely lost her mind, and she wouldn't be at all surprised if her mother marked this day on her calendar.

August eighth, nineteen eighty-three, Cassandra Evans loses her mind.

Yet, she couldn't be happier.

Standing before the tall two-story house with its white siding looking a little worn, the brown trim around the windows peeling and the lawn in desperate need of maintenance, Cassie was giddy with excitement.

This was her first home, and though it was small compared to her parents' home, where she had lived all of the twenty-eight years of her life, it was home. And honestly, what did she need a bigger home for anyway? She was only one person, after all.

Lifting the latch on the hip-high white picket gate, Cassie made her way to her new home. When the front door opened and a tall, goofy-cute gentleman in a dark navy suit stepped out onto the porch,

she put on her best smile. And the reaction on his face at seeing her made that smile lift even more.

She knew what he saw, what everyone saw when they looked at her. More than once she'd been compared to Marilyn Monroe. Her naturally blonde hair curled in waves around a delicate face and hung past her shoulders. She had the same Marilyn sultry lips and the same dreamy eyes, or so she had been told plenty of times. But it was the body more than the face that every man saw and drooled over.

She was a full-figured girl who proudly liked to display her D-sized breasts in tight shirts, tanks and dresses. She didn't dress ostentatiously, but if you've got it, why hide it? And from the looks of the hang-jawed look of the man before her, he liked what he saw.

"You must be Steven Welsh. Pleased to finally meet you." Stepping up the three steps to the porch, Cassie held her hand out to the gentleman. His mouth still hung open.

"Uh...Cassandra Evans?"

"One and the same, sugar though I prefer Cassie." She took the hand he held out to her.

"You're early, not that that's a bad thing. I just got here myself."

"I believe in being early. Catch people off guard." She winked at him and actually saw his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed.

"Yes, well...would you like to see your new home?"

He was sweet the way he was blushing. "I would love to." He stepped aside to allow her through the door, and passing him she could see his cheeks blushed up even more. "Well," she said simply as she stepped into the small entryway.

The cubbyhole of an entry was adjacent to the living room, which was no more than twelve feet by ten feet. She knew from previous discussions with Steven that the brick fireplace had been renovated only a year ago. It certainly took space from the already small room. The walls were white; the floor was carpeted in a sandy brown.

To the left of the living room was a staircase in the same sandy carpet. Moving past the stairs, she walked into the dining room which was only a few inches smaller than the living room. To the left of that was the kitchen. An island separated the two rooms with counters in white and appliances in stainless steel. Her parents' cabin was bigger than this place.

But it was home.

"Those appliances are only a year old. The previous owners were remodeling before they left."

"Hmm," she replied while taking the stairs up to the second floor. The walls leading up were also white, and the doors and trim all in some sort of wood that resembled faux oak. To the left of the stairs was one bedroom no bigger than her closet back home; beside it was another bedroom of equal size. To her right was the washroom—and she was absolutely floored to find out it didn't have a jet tub. That would be remedied.

Entering the master bedroom, Cassie was surprised to see it was larger than the other two by a great deal, and also had a walk-in closet. She nearly snickered when she stepped inside and barely had room to turn in a complete circle. Whoever designed this had no idea what a walk-in closet really was.

And again, everything was in white and fake wood.

"I'll need a list of designers."

"Um...pardon me?"

Cassie shifted, her mouth curving in only the slightest bit of a smile. "Decorators. Who do you recommend?"

"Oh, well, there really is only one guy in town that does...some decorating. Actually, he lives next door. I could get you his number—"

"Or I could go over and see him. I like it," she said, turning to face him. "I really like it."

"You do?"

"Well, it needs some work, like paint, new doors, and the carpet needs to be removed downstairs. Aside from that, it's good. I like it." And it was a good thing because she'd already paid for it in full.

"Wonderful," he said on a long sigh. "Here you go."

She took the keys he held out to her, curling her fingers around them, and smiled. "You've been such a doll, Steven. Taking care of all the business here for me, finding the house and a space for my shop. I don't know what I would have done without you." She leaned in, simply because she couldn't resist making him blush even more, and kissed his cheek.

"If there's anything you need, I'm but a phone call away."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"What time are your things arriving?" he asked while walking back to the front door.

"This afternoon."

"Great. Well, welcome to Passion, Cassie."

"Thank you, Steven." Escorting him to the door, she decided to take a walk around her property and see what the outside had to offer. She waved to him as he walked away.

It was a warm sunny day. Stripping from her coral blazer, Cassie tossed it over the porch railing, kicked off her heels and walked along the sidewalk examining her yard. Dear God, she'd need to mow the lawn, wouldn't she? Why hadn't she thought of that before? And didn't flower beds need maintaining? Oh, wow, she hadn't thought of any of that. Maybe there was some kid in the neighborhood that would do it for her.

"No," she told herself. "You wanted this; you will take care of it." She mentally added a lawn mower to her list of things to pick up when she went shopping and hoped she could figure out how to work one.

The sidewalk led to the back of the house, which was actually quite large and boasted a two car garage. She had her work cut out for her if she planned on mowing all that grass.

Movement next door caught her attention, and walking towards the fence that separated her lawn from her only neighbor, her jaw nearly dropped to the ground. Standing on a ladder that leaned against the house stood a man in tight cut-off jean shorts and nothing more. His body was bronze and rippling with muscles. Lord, he had muscles. His arms, his back and even his legs. His sandy blond hair was long and tied at the back of his head. She felt the drool slide down her chin and did nothing to wipe it away.

Sweet heavenly God, the man was magnificent.

"Ex—" She cleared the lump in her throat. "Excuse me." *Oh, baby, look at those muscles bunch as he moves.* "Hi." She swallowed the drool about to dribble down her chin.

"Hey."

"I'm your new neighbor." And hadn't she hit the jackpot with him. Who could ask for a better neighbor than a god like that? "Cassie Evans."

"Welcome to the neighborhood, Miss Evans."

Those muscles rippled when he climbed down the ladder, and she actually felt herself moisten watching them. "Thank you. My stuff will be arriving this afternoon. I was told by my realtor that you do some decorating."

"Depends on what you mean by decorating."

Even his face was magnificent. It was long, sharp and damn sexy in those dark glasses that unfortunately hid his eyes. And the closer he got, the more she saw. His chest was firm, muscular and glistened with a light film of sweat. She was going to start drooling again. "I'm looking at having carpet removed and replaced with hardwood,

doors replaced, maybe even windows and the entire house painted inside and out."

"Well," he swept a hand across his brow. "I do floors, I do doors, but I don't paint and I know someone who does windows."

Even his voice was sexy. Deep, low and a little scratchy. "Okay. Do you know who I could contact to paint my house?"

"I know a guy; he does interior and exterior. I can get his number for you."

"I would appreciate that." She shifted, suddenly feeling a great deal warmer than she had earlier. "I didn't catch your name."

"Because I never gave it. Thomas Healy, but everyone calls me Tom."

She held her hand out to him "Pleasure to meet you, Thomas." She winked, taking his hand and giving it a good squeeze before releasing it regretfully. Thomas suited him better. "Have you lived here long?"

Thomas hooked his thumbs through his belt loops, and she nearly sighed as they dipped just a bit lower revealing a thin line of hair from his navel down. If he looked like a god, she could only imagine what the parts that were hidden looked like. And if she didn't stop imagining it, she was going to embarrass herself.

"About five years now."

"Oh, you didn't grow up here?"

"Nope."

"I came from Calgary, so this is a big change for me." From big city life to small town living.

"I imagine so. Well, I need to get back to my gutters."

"Oh, was that what you were doing up on the ladder? Okay, I guess I'll see you around, neighbor." She cast him a flirty smile before walking back to the house.



Thomas waited until she was inside and had closed her door before he let out the breath he'd been holding. Holy shit, that woman had a body and then some. And that scanty camisole top she wore didn't leave much to the imagination. What color were her eyes? The hell if he knew; all he'd seen was that bod. The short skirt she'd worn had been unbelievably snug against a mighty fine ass, and as she'd walked to the house, swaying her hips, he thought he might lose his mind.

Shaking his mind clear, he walked back to the ladder.

Chapter 2

The anticipation was killing her. Standing at her front door—and that was still something she was getting used to, her house—Cassie waited while the delivery man walked up the path towards her. Having lived with her parents all her life, she'd never bought anything for herself aside from clothing, music or bed coverings. Now, not only had she bought a house, but she'd purchased furnishings to fill that house. Cassie thought she might burst with excitement.

"Miss Evans?"

"Please, call me Cassie." She wanted to jump up and down and scream with joy, but instead she simply said, "Is that all of my stuff?"

"Every last piece. My name is Mike, and I need you to sign here."

She took the clipboard and the pen he held out to her and read over the details of what she was signing for. Giving it a nod of acceptance, she signed her name and handed it back to the gentleman who looked to be at least fifty and slightly overweight. "There you go, Mike." She flashed her winning smile, knowing full well it always made a man sweat.

He turned, unaffected, and sauntered off to the van. *Can't win them all over*, she thought, watching another gentleman, this one younger, slip out from around the van and open the back sliding door. She couldn't wait.

Spinning around, Cassie mentally arranged where she would set everything up. The dining room table might be a tad bit too large, but

it didn't matter. She had loved it the instant she'd seen it in the store. It was dark oak, oval, with beautifully detailed etchings along the bottom edge of the table. And the chairs were also in oak with fluffy black speckled seat covers. It would fit perfectly in the kitchen.

And in the living room, she would put the cream leather sofa under the window beside the fireplace, so she could relax after work with a good book while the fire warmed her feet. She'd heard the winters were brutally cold in the prairies. The TV would go on the opposite wall and the chair in the corner. Oh, she simply couldn't wait.

Three hours later, Cassie was in her kitchen, unpacking one of the boxes that held her dinner set. This, too, was in black and white, and she thought how perfectly she had chosen things. She hadn't even known what the inside of the house had looked like when she'd purchased it. Feeling that black and white was the safest, she'd gone for it.

The knock on the back screen door made her jump. Guess she was a little jumpy all alone in her house. Laughing off her skittishness, Cassie walked to the door. When she saw who was standing on the other side, she beamed up at him. "Well, hello, neighbor."

"I thought I would run these over to you." Thomas held the business cards out to her.

Taking them, her nails brushed over his fingers, and she smiled inwardly, amused when his eyes flickered with a reaction. She knew perfectly well when men looked at her they saw a woman with huge tits and a stunning face. She'd been blessed with both looks and a killer body, and she loved to make men squirm with both.

"What are these?" Cassie asked, purposely dipping her voice lower to make it sound sultrier.

"My business card, along with a few people I think who might be able to help you."

"Sweet! Thanks." She could smell the scent of some sort of soap on him. Seeing his hair was still wet, she deduced he'd just showered. He'd changed his clothes, so instead of the tight shorts he had worn, he now wore jeans and a t-shirt. She regretted that most of his muscular body was covered. "Care to join me for some lemonade? I just made a fresh pitcher."

"I don't—"

"Oh, come on, one glass. I thought maybe you could fill me in on the town and what I have to expect. One glass," Cassie prodded on, refusing to take no for an answer.

"One glass, I suppose."

Smiling bright, she stepped aside to allow him in and as he passed she closed her eyes and drew in his scent.

"Looks like your stuff got here in one piece." Thomas said, glancing around the rooms.

Her eyes opened slowly, lazily. "You say that with surprise." Skirting around the large table, she walked to the kitchen. Placing the cards on the island, Cassie grabbed two of the glasses she'd already unpacked and filled them with lemonade from the fridge.

Thomas shrugged, leaning against the island splitting the kitchen from the dining room. "There's always bound to be something broken, especially in long distance moves."

"Well, I gave them plenty of incentive to make sure I got everything in one piece. Here you go."

He took the glass, glancing down into the yellow liquid. "Thanks."

"So, tell me about the town." Heading to the dining room chairs, Cassie sat down and slid her bare legs out, crossing them at the ankles.

"Not much to tell. It's quiet, for the most part. We're in the older section of town, so it tends to stay quiet. It's a little noisier in the newer section."

"Why is that?"

"The high school, mostly, and younger families living there."

"You sound like you don't care for kids?" She sipped her lemonade, watching him carefully. He really was dreamy, and she could tell by the calluses and scrapes on his hands that he worked with them often. He was a hands-on kind of man, and she so loved a hands-on man.

Especially if those hands were on her body.

"Oh, I love kids. I just like my quiet time."

A man who liked his quiet time...he was getting better and better by the second. "Where did you live before coming here?"

"Mississauga, Ontario."

"Do you have family here?" Cassie asked leisurely.

"Nope." Thomas lifted his glass and drank.

"Why the move then?"

"Wanted to get away. You?"

There was more to his story, she thought, than that. "Came into a huge chunk of money, was told to do something with it in order to have it. Closed my eyes, pointed to the map, and here I am."

One sandy brow lifted. "Just like that?"

"Just like that. I bought a little shop on Main Street that I plan to open as a trinket shop."

"A trinket shop?"

"Yeah, doodads, collectables, dust collectors. Things like glass animals, crystal, bells, vases, ceramics, that sort of thing. I'll also be selling some jewelry."

"This is a small town."

"Uh huh." She spoke while lifting the glass to her mouth.

"Of two thousand people."

"Yeah, and your point is?"

"How many trinkets and jewelry do you think people will buy in a small town?"

"Lots, I hope."

"Well, good luck to you." He rested his glass on the counter. "So, show me around, tell me what you're thinking of redoing."

"Everything." She laughed, standing up and giving her short skirt a tug. "This rug, for one, has to go. I was thinking hardwood."

"Good idea. I do hardwood."

"Goodie." She rubbed her hands together as she led him to the stairs. "I'm not sure about the stairs, but the carpet has to go here." She took the steps up, Thomas right behind her.

"They can be done in wood."

"Great. The hallway here has the same carpet which, of course, has to go."

"Wood," was all he said.

"I like your thinking. These doors—ew." She shuddered.

"You want all the doors and trim replaced?"

"Big time. I was thinking white."

"This is going to cost you a fair chunk of change."

She looked up at him with a sly smile, leaning one arm seductively against the doorway to her bedroom. "Honey, I have plenty to give."

He cleared his throat, swallowed. "Okay. I can write up an estimate, and you can decide if it is still something you want to do."

"I don't need the estimate; I want it all done. How long do you think it will take?"

He scratched his head. "We're talking several thousand dollars here."

"Uh huh."

He shoved his free hand in his jeans pockets. "Look, Miss—"

"Cassie."

"Cassie, I don't want to pry—"

"I'm worth two point five million dollars. I think I can afford it. If you would like a check upfront, I can do that. It's quite a lot of money, and I can give you whatever you like. I wouldn't expect a small businessman like yourself to have that kind of ready change."

He blinked several times, keeping his eyes level with hers. "As a businessman, I like to do things accordingly, and that includes writing up a proposal. If after seeing it you still agree to the terms, we can proceed from there, and—" he interrupted her before she could speak, "if at that time you wish to give a down payment, that is your prerogative. I neither require it nor need it. I have more than enough money myself."

She watched him turn sharply, heading back down the steps and wondered what it was she had said to irritate him.

"I'll have the proposal written up and back to you by tomorrow morning."

He didn't slam the door as he left, but she was damn sure he wanted to. A cool one he was, but she'd seen the anger in his eyes. Resting her glass on the table, she lifted the cards he'd left her and saw his on the top.

"Thomas Healy. Artist. Contractor." Her eyes went wide as the name stuck a cord. "No, no way. It can't be the same guy." *Could it?* Well, the only way to find out was to ask. Clutching the card in her hand, she headed out the back door and across her lawn. When she didn't see him outside, she figured he'd probably gone inside.

Lifting her hand, she knocked on the screen door. Through the screen, she could see into his house and into what looked like the dining room. There was only a table with four chairs. Shifting, Cassie tried to get a better look.

He stepped in front of the door and she gasped, her eyes lifting to meet his, then she began to giggle. "You surprised me." When he didn't reply, she cleared her throat and spoke, holding up the card. "It says you're an artist. Thomas Healy, as in *the* Thomas Healy?"

"That's what the card says."

She let out a breath. "*The* Thomas Healy who painted the *Lonely Mistress* and countless others?"

"Is this going somewhere?"

"Oh, my God, I can't believe I didn't recognize you. My parents have several of your paintings and sculptures in their house. They went to your show in Washington eight years ago, and my mother spoke about it for days afterwards. I've seen you in the papers. Wow,

you don't look the same—well, you still look the same but not. The casual clothing threw me." Now she understood why he'd seemed miffed at her. He wasn't just any businessman; he was a famous, rich one.

"That's who I was; this is who I am. Was there something else you wanted from me?"

Oh, now, that was a loaded question. "What the hell are you doing in a small hick town doing construction and cleaning out gutters?" The guy was worth more than she was, and here he was acting like he was a normal class citizen.

"I like doing it," Thomas emphasized. "If there is nothing else, I have some things to do."

She'd insulted him. She hadn't meant to insult him. "Oh...right. I only wanted to confirm. Okay, so now I understand why you got pissy." Cassie giggled, shaking her head. "Man, *the* Thomas Healy, and he's my neighbor." When he simply stared at her, she cleared her throat and stepped back. "Right, busy. Okay...see you around, neighbor."



Thomas watched her as she walked across his lawn and back to her place. The woman had moves, and they were damn near hypnotizing. Shaking his head clear, he headed back to his office. His eyes flickered to the easel at the back of the room before shifting them to his desk.

He might have been a great painter once, but not any longer. That part of his life was over, had been over for four years, and there was no point dwelling on it. He enjoyed what he did now; enjoyed fixing things. Creating was in his blood, and he still did it, even if it wasn't on canvas.

Sitting down at his desk, his eyes lifted to the canvas, and then down at the paperwork he'd been working on when he'd heard her at his door. He didn't need her distracting him, and she certainly had done that.

Damn, the woman was fine.

Shaking his thoughts clear, Thomas looked down at the paperwork, his brow frowning. Before him, on the pad he'd been calculating on, was a rough sketch of Cassie. Putting the pencil down—he hadn't even realized he'd held it—he pushed from his desk and left the office.

Damn woman was distracting him.