

LOVE LIES

MARYJANICE DAVIDSON

MS Reader (LIT) ISBN # 1-84360-307-1

Mobipocket (PRC) ISBN #1-84360-308-X

Other available formats (no ISBNs are assigned):

Adobe (PDF), Rocketbook (RB), & HTML

(c) Copyright MaryJanice Davidson, 2002.

All Rights Reserved, Ellora's Cave.

Ellora's Cave, Inc. USA

Ellora's Cave Ltd, UK

This e-book may not be reproduced in whole or in part by email forwarding, copying, fax, or any other mode of communication without author permission.

Edited by Martha PUNCHES

Cover Art by Scott Carpenter

Warning:

The following material contains strong sexual content meant for mature readers. LOVE LIES has been rated Hard R, erotic, by three individual reviewers. We strongly suggest storing this electronic file in a place where young readers not meant to view this ebook are unlikely to happen upon it. That said, enjoy...

CHAPTER ONE

Victor Lawrence glanced at his watch and sighed. Administration had been keeping him waiting four minutes by his count, and they were allowed exactly one more before he walked out of here. He was the money-man, for God's sake. What did they think they were doing, making him cool his heels like a patient?

He got up and stepped outside to see if Dr. Langenfeld was on his way, when he heard a shrill, "Look out!" and then felt a wallop pain in his knees. The impact drove him to the carpet.

Holding both knees and swallowing an undignified yelp of agony, he rolled over on his back and glared at the reckless driver. She was sitting in her wheelchair, both hands clapped over her mouth, looking at him with wide, shocked eyes.

Immediately, he swallowed half the things he wanted to say. He was a bastard, at least, according to his ex-wife and her lawyers, but he wasn't mean enough to scream at a woman in a wheelchair. Especially one who looked as horrified as she did, if the size of those baby blues was any indication.

"If you're late, don't let me keep you," he managed to say without gasping. His knees were throbbing in perfect rhythm with his heart. He was afraid to let go of them to see how badly she'd shredded his slacks. But not knowing was actually worse, so he cautiously let go, sat up, and looked. Amazing! The fabric wasn't torn. Neither, presumably, was his skin. And now that he thought about it, he'd taken harder knocks in the dojo. But there, at least, one expected it. Hospitals were supposed to be safe places. "Were you going to therapy?" He gentled his tone, not wanting to frighten her further.

She made a strangled sound and he climbed to his feet, forcing a smile. "It's all right. No harm done," he lied, certain he'd be limping the rest of the week. "Don't get upset, now."

She finally dropped her hands—and started laughing. He saw at once that she hadn't been frightened at all, that she'd been covering her mouth in an attempt to swallow the giggles before they could escape. By the time she finished she was slumped in her wheelchair, wiping her streaming eyes.

"I'm sorry," she gasped, "but you—oh, God! You went over like a bowling pin. And the look on your..." She snorted and appeared ready to go off into still more gales of laughter, but he interrupted her.

"As an apology that leaves a lot to be desired. You..." *Should watch where you're going*, he'd been about to say, but that wasn't the sort of thing one said to someone who didn't have the use of her legs. Perhaps he should have been more careful—they were in a hospital, after all. "You could have been hurt. You should be more careful."

She grinned up at him and her great looks hit him like a blow. She had rich brown hair that glowed with red highlights, even under poor fluorescent lighting. Her eyes were pale blue, almost icy, and if she weren't smiling they would have seemed cold. And her smile! Her mouth was wide and mobile and her lips were full, the upper lip a near-perfect cupid's bow. It was a mouth meant for staring at, for worshipping, for kissing. She was very pale, but her skin had a pinkish undertone, giving her face a healthy glow. In short, she was the best looking woman he'd seen outside Hollywood, much less within the bowels of The Carlson-Musch Institute for Mental Health.

He realized he was staring with his mouth open and said again, harsher than he intended, "You should be more careful."

"Don't get huffy with me," she said tartly—and unrepentantly! "You're the one who didn't look both ways before exiting the office. Tall people, I swear. They can't see below five feet."

“We can when we get run down like a gopher in the road,” Victor snapped back, then immediately felt bad. No one liked it when he was angry, ex-wives, divorce lawyers, aikido partners, and now she would cringe, and those gorgeous eyes would glisten with unshed tears, and she’d fumble for the wheels so she could roll away, probably sobbing, and—

“You whine like a toddler,” she informed him cheerfully. Before he could respond to that, they both heard the chime of the elevator. “Oops! Company coming.”

“Finally,” he muttered. “Stimulating as this has been, er, whatever your name is, Dr. Langenfeld has finally remembered I’m his ten o’clock. Time to part ways.”

The effect of his statement was electric. The woman’s eyes widened, then narrowed, and she leapt out of her chair. *Out of her chair*? In his surprise he nearly fell back to the carpet again. “Dammit!” she cried, dodging past him and into the office. “He can’t see me, if he sees me he’ll kick me out and I’m not—listen, cover for me, okay?” And with that, she dived into the closet, slamming the door shut behind her.

Victor stared at the closet door, nonplused. He hadn’t been this astonished when he managed to successfully evade being audited for the third year in a row. When his ex-wife left him but disdained alimony. When—

“Ah, Mr. Lawrence. I’m Dr. Langenfeld.” Langenfeld held out his hand and, robot-like, Victor shook it. “Sorry to keep you waiting—what, over ten minutes!” Langenfeld gulped thirstily at his coffee and sat down. “Yes, well. We had a problem with a patient’s family...my secretary should have told you.”

“Ten minutes?” Victor echoed stupidly. It had been four minutes when he stepped outside and got creamed by what’s-her-name. Time flies when you’re being assaulted and insulted.

“Yes, and, as I say, it’s unforgivable. Take your coat?” Langenfeld didn’t wait for an answer, just scooped up Victor’s jacket and opened the closet door.

“Don’t!” Victor yelled, startling the doctor into turning and dropping the jacket. The closet door hung part-way open and Vic could see the woman standing amidst white lab coats. Langenfeld, completely unaware that she was standing less than two feet away, was looking at Victor over his shoulder. The woman backed deeper into the closet, but there was nowhere to go. *Do something*, she mouthed.

“Beg pardon?”

“My coat. I’d like to keep it. Here, give it to me.” He hurried to Langenfeld’s side, grabbing his coat back and slamming the door shut at the same time.

It was rumored that Dr. Dean Langenfeld had gotten his job through nepotism, and that may have been true, but he didn’t get to be the head of one of the most prestigious mental hospitals in the country without learning something about people’s idiosyncrasies. As such, he didn’t comment when Victor snatched his jacket back and slammed the closet door. He just gestured to an empty chair and walked around his desk to the other side.

“All right, then,” he said briskly. “Where were we?”

“You were apologizing for keeping me waiting.”

“Right. Sorry about that.” The man didn’t sound too worried, though. Victor decided to remind him just what was at stake.

“Massachusetts General might be able to put my money to better use,” he threatened, “and they likely wouldn’t keep me waiting to write the check, either.”

Ah! This was satisfying. Langenfeld nearly choked on his coffee. “Oh no, no, no, Mr. Lawrence. I—that is, *we* want—we need the money. Very much. Please?”

“I’m not a big fan of hospital charity work.” Victor dropped into the proffered seat with a grimace. *Aargh*, his knees! “The medical community has billions of dollars, but hospitals are always whining for more money. Figure that one out.”

Langenfeld squirmed, but, Victor noted with an internal sigh, didn’t dare argue. Flash a little money at someone and they turned into a jellyfish. The country’s medical crisis was just a tad more complicated than all that. A pity Langenfeld wouldn’t point that out. Victor liked people who had guts. They were rarer than honest lawyers. He ought to know.

He tried once more. “If you guys spent a little less on inflated doctor’s salaries and a little more on equipment, you’d be doing a lot better.” Nope. Nothing. Langenfeld was even nodding in agreement. Victor sighed. “That’s neither here nor there. I’ll be frank, Langenfeld. I need the tax break. And good PR never hurts.”

“Right, right. And we’re very grateful. Ah...how much—I mean, what amount were you—did you want to—”

“Five hundred thousand,” Victor said casually. “To start, we’ll see how it goes from there.”

Langenfeld was, to no great surprise, nearly overwhelmed with gratitude. So overwhelmed he stood and pumped Victor’s hand for more than a minute. So overwhelmed that he let Victor kick him out of his own office after Victor explained he needed to use the phone to make a private call.

“Fine, fine, dial nine to get out.” Dr. Langenfeld was walking backward, practically genuflecting. Victor fought not to roll his eyes. “I’m late for a meeting anyway.” He rushed out.

Victor crossed the room and rapped on the closet door. “It’s safe now.”

The door opened and the woman stood there, shaking her head. “That was not a pretty sight. Luckily I couldn’t actually see it. Who’d a thought Langenfeld could be so...so...”

“Beside himself with gratitude?”

“Cringing and groveling.”

“Can you blame him?” Victor asked, a little piqued that she wasn’t staring at him with an awed gaze. She must have heard everything. She knew he had gobs of money to flash around. “It’s not every day someone drops a check for a half mil in his lap.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, you’re a real humanitarian.” Her voice roughened, deepened. “I’ll be frank, Langenfeld. I need the tax break. Also, I’m such a big shot that I’m going to torture you for keeping me

waiting. Also—”

“If I give you five hundred thousand dollars,” he asked silkily, “will you shut up?”

“Better than that, I’ll leave for free.” She gave him a haughty look and swept grandly out of the closet. He smothered a laugh. God, she was fun. And so beautiful it almost hurt to look at her.

“You can’t go yet,” he said reasonably, shrugging into his jacket. “I saved you from a humiliating discovery. How were you planning on explaining your presence to Dr. Langenfeld? He would have taken one look at you—” *And fallen in love*. Victor scowled. Where had that thought come from?

“—and called security,” she finished. “Tell me about it. He and I go way back.”

“I knew it!” he said triumphantly. “You are a patient. Why the wheelchair? You walk as well as I do. Are you a hypochondriac? Is it Munchausen syndrome?”

“What incredibly rude questions, Mr. . . uh . . . what’s your name again?”

“Lawrence. Victor Lawrence.”

She gave him a funny look. “Can I see your driver’s license?”

“What are you, a cop?” he asked good-naturedly, but he fished it out for her.

She glanced at it and wrinkled her nose. “Nice picture. You look embalmed.” Again, he had to choke back a laugh. It took most of his will power to look irritated. “Lawrence, Victor,” she continued. “Yep, there it is. *Is that* your birthday? You’re ancient.”

“I’m only thirty-four.”

“Only, he says! Do you realize if we were still in high school I’d be a seventh grader and you’d be a freshman in college? All your friends would laugh at you for dating me. And think of my parents! They’d have a fit! If I had parents, I mean.”

“You must be a patient. You can’t be a normal person.”

She handed his license back. “Forget it. Thanks for letting me see your I.D. I was a little weirded out when you told me your last name. It sounds like mine. I’m Ashley Lorentz.”

“Lawrence?” he said doubtfully.

“L-O-R-E-N-T-Z. See? They’re pronounced exactly the same. If we got married I wouldn’t have to get new monogrammed towels. Not that I have any now, but you know what I mean.”

“I doubt anyone but your psychiatrist knows what you mean. Why were you in the wheelchair?”

“Because they were after me,” she said matter-of-factly. “I had to ditch them until shift change.”

He nodded, pretending to understand. *Paranoia. Poor thing*. “Well, are they still after you, or is it safe to leave?”

“What time is it?”

He told her. She thought about it for a moment, then nodded. “Yes, it’s safe. I can go back up to the floors. Thanks a lot for covering for me.” She smiled at him and, annoyingly; he started to get hard. *She’s a mental patient, for God’s sake! Stop thinking with what’s in your pants. She could not be more off-limits if she had do not disturb tattooed on her forehead.*

“Can I walk you back to your room?”

“No, but you can walk me back up to 12A. I’m not a patient here.”

“Of course not,” he soothed her, gesturing for her to precede him. “If you don’t mind my asking, why were you in a wheelchair?”

“That’s the third time you’ve asked, actually, and not that it’s any of your business, but they had Wet Floor signs all over and I didn’t want to slip while I was running. I borrowed one and was well on my way to making a clean getaway when you had to blunder into my way.” She took the sting out of her words by patting his arm. “I’m really sorry about plowing into you.”

“And laughing at me,” he prompted.

“Oh, I’m not sorry about *that*. You looked so funny! But I suppose it was kind of mean. Still, it’s not like I’ll ever see you again. Having written the check, the writing hand moves on, and all that. In fact, why are you still here? Don’t you have a hostile takeover to engineer or something?”

“As soon as I see you back to your room,” he said with as much dignity as he could muster, “I’ll get right on that.”

She laughed and, after a moment, he joined her. His arm still burned where she had so casually touched him. What a pity she was a lunatic.

“You don’t have to walk me back,” she told him. “I know my way around. I’m here all the time. In fact, O Great God of Money, I know my way around here better than you do.”

“I don’t doubt it. Where did you say your room was? 12A?”

She kicked him. Actually kicked his ankle! “I didn’t say my room was on Wing 12A, I said I would go to 12A. Obviously you inherited your zillions... you’re not bright enough to have made all that money on your own.”

“Not bright—” He forced himself to calm down and started again. “For your information, I made my own damn money. And I’m very smart, extremely smart. Top-of-my-class smart. I went to Harvard, for God’s sake!”

“Are you trying to convince me, or yourself?”

“If you were not ill,” he told her through gritted teeth, “I would turn you over my knee for that.”

This dire threat fazed her not at all. “I’m not a patient here, I told you that.”

“You’re not a patient here.”

“No.”

“But you were in a wheelchair, which you don’t need.”

“Correct.”

“To get away from *them* .”

“Yes,” she said impatiently.

“Don’t take this the wrong way or anything, but have you taken your medication today?”

She let out a yowl that brought the hair on the back of his neck to stiff attention. “Stop making that noise!” he begged. “You sound like a squashed cat.”

“Stomped on a lot of them on your way to the top, eh? And for the last time, I’m a guest, not an inmate. Come on, I’ll prove it,” she said, grabbing his hand and practically wrestling him into the elevator.

“Sure, you’re a guest,” he said, humoring her. “*A special* guest.”

“You’re an idiot,” she informed him. “And there’s nothing special about that.”

“You’re amazing,” he said, laughing, then clenched his teeth to keep further nonsense from sneaking out. It was true—she *was* amazing, refreshing and marvelous in all ways—but it would never do to tell her such things. *Oh, why are you bothering with her?* he asked himself impatiently. *The ink on your divorce papers is barely dry, she’s a mental patient, and you’ve sworn off women until the end of the next century. Get her back to her room and get out.*

Ashley could sense the change in him and wondered about it. The silence gave her a chance to get her head together, to attempt to collect her whirling thoughts.

She’d hardly been able to take her eyes off him from the moment he plowed into her wheelchair. He was, without question, the handsomest man she had ever seen. Tall, he was broad-shouldered and muscular, but not bulky. His hair was so dark it was nearly black, and his eyes *were* black—so dark it was impossible to tell where the iris ended and the pupil began. Looking into those eyes was like staring up into a starless night—exhilarating and even a bit frightening.

He was darkly tanned, almost swarthy, and his mouth was thin, saved from being severe by a sensual twist of his upper lip.

She was so captivated by his good looks, she had spoken without thinking. Repeatedly. Thank God he seemed to like it. To like *her* . Though that had been short-lived. Now he was standing against the wall of the elevator, staring straight ahead, arms folded across his chest. He looked like he’d rather be anywhere in the world but here.

Ashley flushed with embarrassment. Here she was, dragging him all over the hospital so she could prove she wasn’t a patient. What did she care what this arrogant rich putz thought? And why should *he* care if she was a patient or not? He was just being polite. A busy man like him probably had a thousand things to do, and she was wasting time with her nonsense, all so she could keep looking at him. She was acting like an idiot!

“What’s the matter with you?”

Ashley jumped. “What?”

“Your face,” he said, sounding bored and not looking at her, “is as red as a tomato. You look like you’re going to have a stroke.”

“The curse of having a pale complexion,” she sighed. “Actually, I was kind of embarrassed. You’ve got way more important things to do than hang around with me. I’m sorry I was so pushy. I’ll see you around. Or maybe not.”

With perfect timing—or disastrous, depending on how you looked at it—the elevator doors snapped open. She stepped forward just as his hand closed around her bicep. “Please,” he said, “hold up.”

She looked at him, conscious of the warmth of his hand on her arm. “What? I said I was going. It’s going to be a lot harder if I have to drag you along behind me like the world’s biggest rag doll.”

“When did I say I wanted you to go?” He couldn’t believe her. Further proof she was clearly unbalanced: no sane woman would be this refreshingly honest, this direct. He had asked why she was blushing and she had told him *exactly* why, not worried about how silly it might have seemed to him. Not that he found it silly. He found her explanation—and her—charming. And she was going to walk out of his life with a glib ‘See you around’? Not likely! “Ah-ha! Now that you actually have to prove you don’t belong here, you balk. Why don’t you just admit you were wrong and we can go on from there? You don’t have to be ashamed about living here. It’s good that you’re getting help—this is an excellent facility. Who’s your doctor? I’m going to be able to pull a lot of weight around here, maybe I could get you—”

“Extra pudding with dinner?”

“—more privileges. Maybe you could get a day pass and we could do something together. You’re not...um...a danger to yourself or others, right?”

“Only when I’m in a wheelchair.” Ashley realized he was still holding her arm, and the elevator door was starting to close. She jumped through the narrowing crack, pulling him with her. He dropped her arm and she was sorry. She was still reeling from his casual invitation. He was asking her out? Mr. Rich Classy Guy Who Thinks She’s Nuts wanted to go out together? It was almost worth it to let him keep thinking she was a patient.

She realized he was waiting for an answer. “Maybe I’m dreaming,” she said with a frown. “Some Technicolor dream with tons of Freudian symbolism. You’re not carrying a banana with you by any chance, are you?”

“I left it home with my cigars. Come on, let’s get you back to your room.” He prodded her gently and she finally quit frowning at him and started walking. He wanted to rest his hand on the small of her back, but restrained himself. There were a lot of things he wanted to do, and he suspected restraining himself would get to be a habit. For he intended to get to know this creature very well in the coming weeks. She was fascinating and funny and drop-dead gorgeous, and if she had some problems, if she was a patient here, so what?

He wondered briefly if Ashley would be a transitional woman, someone to use in order to get over the pain of divorce, then dismissed the thought. This woman could not be less like his ex-wife if she were

from another planet. Where Crystal was calculating, Ashley spoke without thinking. Crystal's humor was biting and always drew blood; Ashley made him laugh out loud. Even Crystal's beauty was cold—short, spiky blonde hair, chilly green eyes, sallow skin, colorless lips smeared with frosty lipsticks. Crystal was a tall, urbane, refined woman, and Ashley was none of these things. Hell, she barely came up to his shoulder. No, she was nothing like the woman he married, loved briefly, lived with too long, divorced hurriedly.

“What’s the matter?”

Startled out of his train of thought, he looked at her. “Pardon?”

“You’ve got this really intent look on your face. Planning on foreclosing on a few widows after lunch?”

“Thursdays is Foreclosure day. Today I’m tearing down the orphanage.”

She snorted, then marched into her room (12A, he noted, and committed to memory) and gaily greeted the woman sitting on the bed. “Jeannie, you’ll never guess who saved me from being tossed out by Dr. Doofus Langenfeld.”

Victor nodded politely. “Ma’am,” he said, though he’d bet half his fortune she hadn’t yet seen twenty-five.

Jeannie nodded back. She was dressed in orange stirrup pants with the stirrups loose and flapping around her ankles, and a white turtleneck roughly four times too large for her. She had short, curly strawberry blonde hair and freckles, vivid green eyes, and a small, perfectly upturned nose. She looked like an imp, a sprite, some small creature of gaiety and fun, so he was more than a little surprised when she greeted him with a husky, “*Bonjour*. Many thanks for saving my friend from the dire Dr. Langenfeld’s odious clutches. And Ashley, as you well know, my name is not Jeannie, it is Jeannette. Triscuit?” She offered him the box.

“No thanks.”

“Jean, you’ll never guess! Vic thinks I’m a patient here. Isn’t that wild?”

“Your character judgment is shadowed only by your good looks. You are uncommonly handsome.”

“Thank you,” he managed.

“Why are you thanking me? You had nothing to do with it. You’re the result of a crapshoot, genetically speaking. I, unfortunately, was not so lucky.”

“You’re pretty!” he protested.

“Pretty,” she sneered, as if she were saying ‘garbage’.

“Oh, here we go,” Ashley said.

“I am cute, I am adorable, I am *pretty*. Bah! My outside should match my inside. I should be tall, stately and stunning, with a commanding presence. Instead I look like I fell off a Disney set.” Her tone was severe but she smiled as she spoke and Vic, after his initial discomfort, found himself smiling back.

“Anyway,” Ashley said impatiently, “this is why I was here, Vic. Jean’s the patient. I just come to visit.”

“Is that true?” he asked Jeannette.

Jeannette’s eyes, the green of dusty leaves, began to gleam in a way he didn’t like. “Now, Ashley. You know Dr. Ristau doesn’t like it when you tell lies.”

“This is not the time for one of your sick jokes,” Ashley said warningly, beginning to look alarmed.

“Did she tell you she could leave any time she pleased?” Jeannette asked him, her voice heavy with sympathy. Vic nodded. “Ah, well. New medication, don’t you know.”

“I’m not on any medication, you liar!”

“I’m the liar?” she asked, offended. “You’re the one claiming you don’t live here.”

Ashley actually hopped with rage. “*Idon’t* live here! And I’m never coming to visit you again if you don’t tell him the truth!”

Jeannette sighed. “Oh, Ash, poor darling. Deluded to the end.”

Ashley growled and started forward, fists clenched. Jeannette squeaked and snatched a pillow to her chest in defense. “Now Ashley,” she gasped. “Remember what Dr. Ristau said. You have to get in touch with your anger, stop lashing out at innocents.”

“I’m going to lash out, all right,” she promised grimly. “You won’t be able to walk for a week when I get done lashing out.”

Victor decided now might be a prudent time to jump in, so he reached out, grabbed Ashley, and pulled her back. “You’d better not,” he said, hellishly conscious of her warm bottom against his groin. “They’ll probably send orderlies to tranq you or something. I’m pretty sure they don’t let the patients get into fistfights.”

“Jeannie!” Ashley shouted as he pulled her away from the cowering woman. “Tell him the truth!”

“Actually,” she said, peeking out from under the pillow, “I find it interesting that it matters so much to you what he thinks. Most interesting.”

“You’re going to find *traction* interesting if you don’t cut the crap!”

“Ashley, Ashley,” Vic said soothingly, then nearly went sprawling as she tried to yank herself away from him by lunging for Jeannette. He solved that problem by wrapping his arms around her middle and picking her up off the floor, holding her against him. “Don’t get upset. It doesn’t matter to me.”

“*It does* matter,” she said, feet swinging impotently.

“No,” he said firmly. “It doesn’t. I’m just glad you’re in a place where you can get better.”

She made an inarticulate sound of rage and wriggled to get loose. Her feet kicked and swung six inches off the floor. He squeezed her until she squeaked and stopped kicking. “If I put you down,” he said, not particularly wanting to, “will you stop trying to hurt Jeannette?”

“No.”

Jeannette laughed, and he was surprised into temporary silence. It certainly wasn't the answer he'd expected. After thinking of with several things to say and discarding them all, he finally came up with, “Are you open to bribery?”

“Oh, put me down, I won't hurt the creep. Why give her something fun to talk about in Group?” He did as she asked and Ashley stood alone, hands on her hips, glaring at the other woman. “Jean, I'm about to prove I'm not a patient,” she warned. “It's your last chance to come clean.”

“She has an obsession with cleanliness,” Jean explained to Victor. “She scrubs her hands twenty, thirty times a day. And takes dozens of showers. It's even, as you can see, invaded her speech patterns.”

Before Ashley could reply, and what a colorful reply it would have been, he had no doubt, the door swung open and Dr. Langenfeld, flanked by two security guards, glowered at them.

“Bother,” Jean muttered.

“Miss Lorentz! I told you earlier you were banned from this floor for the week. In addition to ignoring visiting hours, your presence here has stirred up the patients. I asked you to leave or be escorted out. As you have not done the former, you will now suffer the latter. You will not be allowed back onto hospital property for one week.”

And before Victor's astonished gaze, the guards stepped forward in frighteningly perfect unison, grabbed each of Ashley's arms, and bore her away.

CHAPTER TWO

Stupid, Ashley told herself, racing to be on time. She dodged fellow pedestrians and darted across the street, just missing getting creamed by a taxi. *You're as giddy as a girl on her first date. Which this ain't. So get hold of yourself, you twit!*

No, definitely not a date. This was work. She'd gone to her editor, suggested a profile piece about the man who'd so casually donated half a mill to Carlson-Musch, and he'd given her the assignment. Now she had a legitimate excuse to see Victor again, and couldn't wait. Hell, look at her—sprinting to her luncheon with the man. She'd be trying to interview him while panting for breath. He was bound to get the wrong idea.

The trouble was, she had liked Victor from the moment she saw him. The trouble was, he was everything she admired in a man. The trouble was, she was very much afraid she was halfway in love with the guy already...and this, on less than an hour's acquaintance!

Play it cool, okay? Got that? Cooooool.

“Got it,” she said aloud. She always agreed when she heard good advice. She started to jump over a homeless man crouched by the curb, stopped, fumbled for a couple dollars, tossed them in the general direction of his cup, barely heard his, “Thanks, Cherry!” waved distractedly over his shoulder, and then was skidding to a halt in front of the restaurant, pulling open the door and charging inside.

She knew she was a sucker for homeless people but, again, knowing a thing didn't mean you could—or would—do anything about it. In her case, it was simple. That grizzled, trembling man on the corner, that too-thin, shivering woman in line for a free blanket, they could be her father, her mother. An uncle. A cousin. When you didn't know who you came from, you couldn't afford to be a snob. Or prejudiced. *Nothing worse*, she thought with grim cheer, *than biting your own tail*.

So, over the years she had tucked countless dollars into countless cups (once accidentally stuffing a fiver into a man's half-full coffee cup...he had been *soirritated*. "For Christ's sake, lady, I'm just wearing old clothes!"), working in soup kitchens during the holidays and donating blankets and pillows to the city's homeless shelters. Her friend Jean had once asked her if she expected to find her family that way, if she was, in fact, *looking* for her family that way, and Ashley hadn't been able to deny it.

This man, the one she had almost jumped over in her rush to get to the restaurant, had been calling her Cherry for most of the year. He said her hair reminded him of black cherry soda—dark, with dark red highlights. "Makes me thirsty for a Coke every time I see you," he had complained, but she could see the smile in his eyes. She kept a special eye out for him, and often gave him more than she could afford.

"Ma'am?"

The restaurant hostess brought Ashley out of her reverie; she treated the woman to a sunny grin and said breathlessly, "I'm meeting Victor Lawrence."

The hostess nodded and brought Ashley to Victor's table at once. She plunked down in her seat before he could rise.

"Hi!"

"Hello yourself. Are you all right?"

"Sure." Ashley tried to control her panting while she shrugged out of her jacket. "I was in a hurry to get here, that's all. Didn't want to be late." *And I couldn't wait to see you again*.

"Well, you are late. By twenty whole seconds."

"Damn! I knew I shouldn't have waited for the Walk sign."

He laughed, watching her struggle out of her jacket. He'd thought about her all week. He'd been furious with Langenfeld for throwing her out, for being so harsh. "So, what will you have?"

"Whatever I like," she said pertly. "I'm paying for it, aren't I? Actually, the newspaper is..."

He shook his head. "Sorry, no. My agreeing to the interview was just a ruse to get you here. Watch out! We're on a full-fledged date."

She did an alarming thing, then—blushed to the roots of her hair. He reached for her hand and then stopped himself. "Are you *sure* you're all—"

"Victor," she interrupted, "could we possibly talk about something else besides whether or not I'm all right? You've probably asked that question a dozen times and we barely know each other."

“It’s just...you’re so odd.”

“I’m not. I’m like everyone else. I’m exactly, totally normal.”

He smiled. “No. You’re not.”

“Please! Next you’ll be saying my eyes are like the desert sky and my hair is like...uh...”

“The deepest, richest mahogany?” he suggested, laughing out loud when she rolled her eyes at him.

“I do have to interview you, you know.”

“I don’t want to talk about me. I want to hear about you. *I’ll interview you.*” He’d been so pleased when she called his work number. She must have gotten it from Dr. Langenfeld, which would have been a dear concession on her part. So he’d been flattered as well. And now that they were here, damned if he was going to waste their time together yakking about his business deductions, which was how he viewed his donations.

The waiter came and Victor noticed with annoyance that the man couldn’t take his eyes off Ashley, walked away besotted, in fact. And came back too many times to see if Ashley needed something, anything, while waiting for her food.

Over appetizers, she listened to him talk about Crystal, his former wife. She noticed how tight his face got when he talked about the woman. She offered no opinion or comment, just listened.

“...and then I caught her cheating on me, but it was over by then, anyway. I wasn’t even that mad about it—her in my bed with some guy. I was just annoyed because it meant the divorce would drag on longer, if we were going to get into who’s fault it was, and why.”

“And did it?”

“No, not really.” He laughed hollowly. “Turns out she was as anxious to be rid of me as I was to be rid of her. All the baby talk, you know.”

Ashley was busily buttering her muffin, but she looked up at that. “Baby talk?”

“Well...yeah.” He shifted uncomfortably. “I really want—wanted kids. She didn’t. Not ever. We fought about it all the time. That’s when I knew her cheating was a message.”

“Because the other man had had a vasectomy,” she said matter-of-factly, then took a huge bite of her muffin.

Astonished, he stared at her. “How did you know that?”

“You said it was a message, right?” she said with her mouth full, lightly spraying him with crumbs. She swallowed, took a gulp of water, brushed crumbs off his sleeve, and continued. “She figured you weren’t listening when she said she didn’t want children, so why not do the humpty with someone who couldn’t get her pregnant? She could get her rocks off and teach you a lesson at the same time.”

“That’s right. That’s exactly right. You’re quick.”

“I am. Quick like a bunny.”

“And so modest!” he mocked.

“By the way, Crys-dull—”

The laugh almost escaped; he locked it back in time and looked stern. “Crystal.”

“Whatever. She sounds like a real charmer. What in the world did you see in her?”

“Well...” He cleared his throat. “Our marriage... it was sort of a business deal.”

She dropped her knife and it hit her plate with a loud clang. “You mean it wasn’t a marriage, it was a merger?”

“Yup.”

“Wow! This is going to make some story.”

“Don’t you *dare* print any of—” He saw she was teasing, and smiled. “Sorry. And not just for that... I can’t believe I’m telling you all this.”

“I’m glad you are,” she said sincerely. “Did you think it was going to last?”

He shrugged.

“Well, are you sorry you did it?”

He shrugged. She threw up her hands. “Well, have you at least learned your lesson? No more getting married unless you actually love, that’s L-O-V-E, the woman. Okay?”

“Okay. I take it from your outburst that you’ve never been married.”

“No, never.” The thought hurt her and she hoped it didn’t show on her face. When Victor had said he and his wife split up because he wanted children and she didn’t, her heart went out to him. There was nothing in this world she wanted more than a baby. A family. A husband and a child, a home that was hers, a house with a kitchen, not a cafeteria, and a bedroom, not a dormitory.

She knew such desires, such *needs*, made her vulnerable. Her background attested to this. Her background was the reason she so desperately wanted a family. All her life she had done without the things she most wanted, so that now she felt like a diabetic who couldn’t get insulin.

Warmth. Warmth on her hand. She looked and saw that Victor had reached across the table and took her hand. He was looking at her so kindly she thought she might weep. His eyes were very dark, almost sorrowful. “It can’t be that no man wanted you. So it must be that you haven’t found the right guy.”

She nodded, unable—or unwilling—to tell him the whole story. That not only was she wary of love, but she was terrified that whoever she loved would find out her secret, would revile her for a murderess. It wasn’t that she hadn’t found the right guy. It was that she hadn’t found a guy she dared trust with the truth. Which made this interview—date—with Victor doubly dangerous.

And yet, here she was. "I guess I haven't," she sighed. "Found the right guy, I mean." She smiled crookedly. "I guess I'm too picky."

"How very fortunate for me," he said softly, and now his thumb was stroking her palm, so gently. "Will you give me a chance?"

"For—to do what?"

"To woo you."

Something was wrong with her ears. She couldn't possibly be hearing right. She should get to a doctor as soon as possible. "Towoo me?"

"Woo, pursue, date, court, see, go steady with, tempt, charm, and maybe...hopefully...eventually..." He smiled. "Seduce?"

"But why?" she asked.

He saw her honest confusion that and was shocked, and then angered. Who had convinced her she had so little worth? A former lover?

"I mean, you're a rich, classy guy," she continued. "Why would you want to be with me?"

"Classy, eh?" Victor leaned back and belched, long and loud. Patrons stared. The waiter, who had been approaching to again ask Ashley if she needed anything, nearly swooned. "There, see? I'm not classy. Cripes, that felt gross. Now will you go out with me?"

She was laughing too hard to immediately answer, and threw her napkin at him while she got herself under control. "I'm already out with you, you slob."

"You haven't answered my question."

Oh, this had been a mistake, and now she was paying for her weakness. But he was so handsome...and so funny...and had been so kind... "I really can't," she said softly. "But it sure was nice to be asked. Thank you."

He leaned forward, until their faces were inches apart. "It's my breath, isn't it?" he asked.

She laughed again, flushing with embarrassment. "No! Don't be a goob. It's not you—"

"—it's me," he finished. "Which is a fancy way of saying, 'I don't want to hurt your feelings'. Come on, Ash. Another date. I won't bite."

She could feel herself weakening. Did she dare allow herself to get close to this man? Perhaps he would understand her past shame. Well, not understand, exactly...but maybe he wouldn't condemn. After all, it had happened a long time ago. She'd been a child. A stupid child. Maybe...

"Pleeeeeeease?" he was begging. "I'll get down on my knees right here in this restaurant, I swear to God I will."

"All right! But you've got to let go of my hand. And don't you dare leave that seat."

He released her hand after a brief squeeze. The waiter approached, hurriedly dumped their plates, and departed. Victor noted this and was not displeased.

“Why,” he asked during dessert, “would you think I wouldn’t want to be with you? That any man wouldn’t feel lucky to be with you?”

She choked on her mousse, and was racked with a coughing fit before answering. “It’s just—like I said. You’re somebody. You do important things—”

He snorted. “Like get cuckolded by my wife. Ex-wife.”

“Like donate gobs of money to hospitals,” she corrected him. “I’ve never done anything like that. The fact of the matter is, you’re rich and classy—well, moderately classy, when you’re not burping your way through the dessert course—and I’m a mongrel nobody. We might as well be from different planets. You shouldn’t be out with me. You should be at a society ball being drooled over by rich elitist babes.”

He couldn’t bear how she sounded. Not sorrowful. Matter-of-fact. He slammed his fork down so hard the glassware jumped. Startled, she dropped her own fork. “*Neverever* say such things about yourself again,” he said in a low voice, but his eyes were black and blazing. “And when I get my hands on whoever taught you to see yourself as a nobody, they’re going to wish their mother had never met their father.”

Astonished, she nearly fell out of her chair. “Victor! It’s not like that! I—”

“I mean it, Ashley. *Never* refer to yourself as a nobody. Rich and class *nothing* ! I’m lucky to be out with you and lucky I’m not so stupid I don’t know it. You’re unlike any woman I’ve ever met. You’re so—I mean you’re—I don’t have time to go into the list,” he said impatiently, still so angry he could hardly get the words out. And the way she was looking at him, her beautiful eyes wide with amazement, was damned distracting. He was still angry, but now he wanted to pay the lunch bill, take her by the hand, check into the hotel across the street, and love her until she was limp with exhaustion, until she was slick with sweat.

“All right. Victor. It’s all right.”

He started when she touched him, and had an odd look on his face. “What’s all right?”

“I don’t know. I was just trying to get you to calm down. You looked like you were going to charge out of here and go pound somebody.”

He jumped again, then seemed to shake himself. “I’m fine now, thanks. Eat your mousse.”

“I’m done.” She grinned. “I was thinking about finishing off yours.”

He smiled back and slid his plate over to her.

CHAPTER THREE

Meeting for lunch became a ritual, and if they didn’t eat together at least twice a week—and three times

was even better—they both felt as if something was subtly wrong. During these lunches he talked about his childhood and his family and his business, and she never talked about her childhood or her family, but could chat about her job for hours. He had the definite impression she was hiding something—several somethings—but it was too early in their relationship to pry. He didn't mind. He could wait. Some day she would be comfortable enough to tell him all her secrets.

Victor Lawrence, who had honestly felt that life had nothing more to teach him about women, was finding Ashley Lorentz a fascinating and marvelous surprise. She never ceased to amaze him with her quick wit, and she was as sharp as a shuriken. And how she could make him laugh! He often left their lunches with a big grin on his face and a stomach that actually hurt from laughing so hard.

These things aside, he was also powerfully attracted to her. And he knew the feeling was mutual. That was good—*great*—but he was determined to take it slowly. He didn't want to spook her, and he sure didn't want her to have any regrets after their first time. Or their fifth time. Or their hundredth.

That evening, they were returning from another dinner date, and Ashley was cracking him up with her tale of wrestling with the electric stapler at work.

“—it's not like they had a sign, 'do not put more than fifty pages into stapler'. I mean, how was I supposed to know? So I jam this thick document into the stapler, and it's not stapling, and I push it further...and it goes mad! It staples, it won't stop, and I can't get the damned document out! I'm wrestling with the papers, pulling back with all my strength—stop laughing—and the whole time the stapler's going *chunk! chunk! chunk!*, stapling like crazy...oh, it was a mess.”

“What happened?” he wheezed, stopping to catch his breath; he'd been laughing so hard he lost all his oxygen.

“I finally prevailed. But the report looked like it had been through a war. Which it sort of had.”

“Maybe next time you should let the secretary use the electric stapler.”

She cocked an eyebrow at him. “Not all of us are hotshot execs with secretaries, hon.”

He shrugged, and they started walking again. “Fair enough.”

“By the way, *whatdo* you do? We never got around to that interview...”

“I manage my family's estates and trusts, but I'm also a lawyer. It's really pretty dull, I don't get to wrestle with staplers or...” He noticed she wasn't walking with him anymore and turned. She'd stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, staring at him with wide eyes. “What's the matter?”

“You're a lawyer?” She practically choked on the word.

“Is that a problem?”

“Yes! I mean...no. I—” She jammed her hands in her pockets and hurried past him. “I can't talk about this. I didn't know you were a lawyer.”

He stared after her, nonplused. “Ashley...” She quickened her pace. He trotted after her and caught up to her. “Ashley, why should it matter what I do for a living? I haven't seen the inside of a courtroom for ten years. I sit in an office and read boring paperwork all day. Why should you care?”

“I can’t see you anymore,” she said in a voice so low he barely heard her.

“What?” He was utterly bewildered, and she looked terrible: white, frightened. Things had changed with dizzying speed and he was trying like hell to keep up. “I don’t understand. Honey, why should my being a lawyer bother you so much? You don’t even know what kind of lawyer I am. You—” Then it hit him. Her utter refusal to talk about her past. He reached for her hand, caught it, and gently turned her toward him. She wouldn’t look at him. “What did you do?”

She tried to jerk her hand out of his grasp; he held it firmly.

“Ashley.”

“I can’t talk about it.”

“It doesn’t matter. Whatever it was, I’m sure it—”

“I don’t want to talk about it and you can’t make me!” Shocked, he realized she was on the verge of hysterics, and was frantically trying to pull away from him, like an animal caught in a trap. “You can’t make me, I won’t, I won’t, *I won’t!*”

Her breath started to hitch; her face was drained of all color except for two red spots high up on each cheekbone; her eyes had gone so pale, they were more silver than blue. She opened her mouth again and he pulled her against him, holding her to him firmly.

“Shush,” he murmured. “It’s all right. You don’t have to tell me a damn thing. Calm down, now, it’s all right.”

She was completely stiff when he first pulled her to him, but gradually relaxed in his embrace. When she spoke, her voice was muffled against his coat. “I don’t think we can see each other again.”

“That’s bullshit,” he said harshly, frightened at the thought of having to watch her walk out of his life. “Listen, whatever it is—you don’t have to talk about it. You never have to tell me about it. Unless—you’re not wanted by the police, are you?”

She shook her head.

“Okay, then. It’s water under the bridge, right? It has no bearing on you right now, or me right now, right?”

“I . . . guess not.”

“Then I don’t need to know about it. And you never have to tell me, Ash, not ever. Okay?”

She studied his face for a long moment, then smiled so tentatively he thought his heart would crack. “Really? Aren’t you dying with curiosity?”

“I’m a little curious, sure. But I’d rather be curious and be with you, then have my question answered and *not* be with you. Okay?”

She took a deep breath and nodded. “Okay.”

He was still holding her; she hadn't stepped away, and he nearly sighed at how perfectly her body nestled against his. He tipped her chin up and stared into her eyes, which were no longer gray, but the light blue of the Montana sky—clear and beautiful. “You’re a fascinating woman, Ashley. Scared of lawyers and the bane of electronic staplers everywhere.”

She shivered as he spoke; his mouth was so close to hers, she felt the words against her lips more than she heard them. His hands were at her back, pressing her against him. His marvelous dark eyes filled her world. And when he brushed his mouth against hers, so, so lightly, she shuddered all over.

“You’re perfect,” he breathed, and lightly kissed her lower lip. “Have I not mentioned that yet? Perfect in all ways. And FYI, keeping my hands to myself hasn’t been easy.”

“Why?” she gasped. It was very hard to get a breath, all of a sudden. And her heart was pounding so hard she was sure he could hear it. Lord knew the noise was thundering in *her* ears. “Why have you?”

“Haven’t you ever savored a dessert before taking the first bite? Didn’t it taste better if you wanted it badly but had to wait for it? Ooooooh, Ashley, you’re shivering,” he husked. “Chilly?”

“Are you going to shut up soon?” she whispered. “Or am I going to have to kiss you myself?”

He laughed, and then he was laughing against her mouth, and then his tongue was lightly tracing her lower lip, and then delving inside to taste her. She gave herself up to the kiss, held nothing back, kissed him back with every ounce of pent-up longing she could muster. Before she knew it her back was pressed against the railing and his long, hard body was fitted intimately against hers. She could feel the heat of his arousal against her, could feel how very much he wanted her, and she sighed with the pleasure of it. But part of her sigh was relief. Relief that her secret was safe, that he would never try to drag it out of her. That she would never have to tell him, and drive him away.

CHAPTER FOUR

“A rare and wonderful thing has happened this week at The Carlson-Musch Institute for Mental Health,” Jean intoned while Ashley shuffled the cards. The other players watched the brunette intently while Jean lectured on. “Nearly half of the hospital’s psychiatrists are away at the national meeting o’ the shrinkers, which means Ashley can teach us many new games without interference.”

“Like Crazy Eights?” Kirsten asked. She was a large, frowzy blonde with one blue eye and one brown, and fists the size of large coffee mugs. She was a large and intimidating woman, with agoraphobia so severe she couldn’t go into the cafeteria, much less for a walk outside. The room they were in now, the size of a comfortable living room, was just large enough to make her twitchy, but not send her screaming into the hallway. “Like Old Maid?”

“Better,” Ashley promised. She began dealing cards, wondering if she needed to deal Freebs, who had multiple personalities, two extra hands. “This is called five card draw, aces high. It’s really easy and fun, too.”

Todd picked up his cards. “Will you go out with me?” he asked them plaintively.

“Todd, stop trying to date the cards and listen to Ashley.”

Ah! Very good; Freebs was in the driver's seat today. The core personality was an elementary school teacher. Very stern, very fatherly, completely ordinary. It would have been trickier if Joe, the pyromaniac, or Tanya, the paranoid, had been dominant.

"Okay, the first hand is going to be open, so we can all see our cards. Todd, you have three sixes. That's very good!"

"Will they go out with me?"

Kirsten shifted uncomfortably in her chair. "Did somebody leave the—my God!*The window is open!*"

Jean jumped up. "It's okay, Kir, I'm closing it. See? We're snug and safe now."

"Freebs, you've got a pair of queens. That's also very, very good."

"It's not Freebs, Ash." Jean had noticed the big man slump a little while Ashley was warily looking at Kir, saw his eyes roll back for a second, and knew he had switched personalities.

"I don't like the queens," Freebs snapped. "I want to get rid of them."

"But they're good cards!"

"They're *relooking* at me. You're all looking at me, and don't think I don't know it. I know people! I know very important people!"

"Hi, Tanya," Ashley sighed. Well, it could have been worse. At least Tanya wouldn't set the cards on fire. "Fine, hand them over. I'll give you two more."

Tanya was staring at 'her' cards, as if hypnotized. "Their eyes follow me," she whispered.

"I'll take your queens," Todd offered politely. "They'll go out with me." He held out his hand. Tanya slapped it away. Since she was in the body of a six foot four, 230-lb man whose weight was more muscle than fat, this hurt. A lot. "Owww!"

"Tanya!" Jeannie reprimanded, shocked. "That's sooo unbecoming a lady."

"He's after me, all right," Tanya snarled. She rubbed the stubble on her chin and looked more distressed than usual. "He's been sending messages to me in my sleep. I know him! I know all of you!"

Jean sighed. "Todd isn't sending messages—"

"Yes, I am. But only to ask if she would go out with me."

Kir threw down her cards. "The hell you have!*I'm* the one sending her messages."

"Nobody's sending anybody messages!" Ashley shouted.

"Not anymore," Jean said slyly. "The transmitter broke."

"Jeannie! You're not helping."

“Ha!” Tanya said triumphantly. “That’s why I’ve got my head to myself again. The transmitter broke.”

“It wouldn’t go out with me,” Todd added, “so I smashed it.”

“Please pay attention,” Ashley begged. “I’m going to go over the rules now.”

“You’re so beautiful,” Todd said dreamily. Ashley assumed he was talking to her—he was looking right at her—but with Todd you could never be sure. “Will you go out with me?”

“She can’t,” a voice said from the doorway. They all jumped—Jeannie and Tanya let out small screams of surprise—and turned to look. Victor was standing there, arms folded across his chest. He was so large he nearly filled the doorway, Ashley realized, and why did that thought make her feel so strange, so trembly and excited? “She’s going out with me.”

“Oh,” Todd said. “Well, willyou go out with me?”

“Close the door!” Kirsten yelled. “You’re letting all the space in!”

“Are you from the CIA?” Tanya asked suspiciously.

“Are you in?” Jeannie asked, tapping the cards. “Or out?”

Victor opened his mouth to reply and Ashley never knew what he was going to say, because at that moment Erika Growette, the head nurse, peeked around Victor and announced, “I’ll tell you who’s out, Ashley Lorentz. *You’re* out. Right now!”

“Awww, Erika,” she whined, but was already getting up. Having been thrown off the ward more times than she had fingers and toes, she knew the drill.

“Ashley, say your good-byes now, please.”

Ashley wasn’t fooled by Erika’s pleasant tone. She knew the woman was five seconds from siccing security on her. “Goodbye,” she said glumly.

“The rest of you, calm down. That girl’s gotten you all riled up.”

“I’m not riled,” Jeannie said coldly. “Just annoyed because my civil rights have once again been violated.”

“Tell it to your shrink, honey,” Erika said, kindly enough, and turned to escort Ashley out.

* * * * *

“Well,” Victor said, once they were in the car. “That was entertaining.” But he didn’t smile, and Ashley wondered what was wrong. He hadn’t smiled, in fact, since she spotted him in the doorway.

She had taken the bus to the hospital, knowing Victor would be picking her up, and also because she adored his car. It wasn’t a rich man’s toy, but instead an eminently practical white Saturn. He kept it

immaculate, and it still smelled new. Best of all, Victor was a good driver, and there were few things she liked more than spending long stretches of time riding in a clean, pleasant-smelling car. Cars meant trips, and trips often meant new and exciting experiences.

“It’s so embarrassing, but you’d think I’d be used to it now,” she said, stealing a glance at him. He was definitely unhappy about something. No smiles. No teasing. And his jaw looked tight, like he was clenching his teeth. “I didn’t mean any harm. Jeannie says the worst part about being in the hospital is the boredom. I figured if I taught them some games they could make the time go faster.”

“Thoughtful of you,” he said politely.

“Thanks. But sometimes—like if someone’s having a tough day, or more than one someone—it doesn’t work out so well.”

“And they show you the door.”

“Yes. They always claim I get the patients stirred up, but the thing is, the patients were stirred up before I even opened my mouth. It’s just an excuse for Langenfeld to keep civvies off the floors.”

“Civvies?”

“People like you and me.” Ashley tried to choose her words carefully. She didn’t want to say ‘normal’ because she didn’t think anyone was truly normal. “People who don’t have to stay in a hospital so they don’t hurt themselves or someone else. Langenfeld doesn’t like us around. I don’t know why.”

“I don’t like you spending so much time there,” he said abruptly. “Someone might hurt you. You’ll be blundering along, la-la-la, and not even notice when you tick off a psychopath. It’s too dangerous.”

“Well, Victor, I’m sorry you feel that way. Especially since I’m certainly *not* going to stop going.” She spoke firmly; he never looked at her. “I can take care of myself, and I know a lot more about the inpatients at Carlson-Musch than you do. And by the way, who rammed a stick up your butt today?”

“Oh, that’s charming.”

“About as charming as you taking it upon yourself to tell me where I can and can’t go. C’mon, Vic, what’s the matter?”

Long silence, then he sighed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to take it out on you. I’ve been looking forward to seeing you all day. It was the only good thing on my schedule. Then I got there and you were in the middle of all these screaming mental patients, and that guy—”

“Which one? The one who kept asking everyone out, or—”

“The big guy. The guy who looked like a damned Viking, the guy who looked like he could snap your arm off and use it for a toothpick.”

“Tanya.”

“Uh, yeah. Tanya. Anyway, so there was all this chaos and you right in the middle of it and I just got worried, that’s all. I was kind of glad when the nurse threw you out.”

“Well, I can’t go back until next week, so that should make you happy.”

He smiled for the first time, a small curl of his lips. Not much, but a beginning. “It does, actually. If you’re missing Jean, maybe I could try to get her a pass or something.”

“Oh, Jeannie can come and go as she—never mind. It’s a long story and I don’t want to go into that. I want to know why you’re in such a bad mood. Was it Crystal? Did her lawyer pull something?”

“No. Yes. I don’t—she said she wants to re-negotiate our marriage. That’s why her lawyer was there. With our divorce papers. All ready to null and void them.”

Ashley felt her heart pause, almost stop, and then start hammering at about two hundred beats a minute. “Oh, yeah?” she asked, striving with all her might to sound casual. *I’ll listen and I won’t interrupt and I won’t make an idiot out of myself*, she told herself fiercely. *We’ve only known each other a month, it’s not like he promised you anything, so don’t make a fool of yourself and for God’s sake don’t cry.*

“Can you believe the gall of the woman?”

Ashley relaxed. Relaxed so much, in fact, that she wondered for a moment if she was going to pass out. She slumped against the seat and said, “Yeah, that’s some nerve, all right.”

“She said—she said that...” Victor made himself stop talking for a moment. Much as he liked Ashley—liked her, hell, sometimes he worried he was falling in love with her—he couldn’t tell her this. It was too humiliating. Yes, getting married had been Crystal’s father’s idea. Yes, he had gone into it with his eyes wide open and yes, it had made both families a lot of money. But he had taken his vows seriously, and he had hoped to bring children to the union. Crystal, he found out today, had never seen it as more than a business deal. She had cheated on him from the start, and had been honestly astonished when he protested. She had never taken her vows seriously, never taken his role as her husband seriously. When she realized he viewed this as an actual marriage, that he wanted them to be faithful to each other and have children, she had panicked and put the divorce paperwork in motion...but not before taking yet another man to his bed.

And now, two years after the end of the debacle, she wanted to give it another go. “We get along, Victor, you know,” she had said. “It’s nice having a spouse—instant date, right? No matter what time of the day, or part of the year. I don’t like being single, and I know you don’t. And I hate living alone. And we can make money, Victor, lots of money! My father wants the deal, and so do I. It’ll work. Let’s re-negotiate, what do you say?”

“Get a roommate,” he had said, “we’re rich enough.” And then walked out.

“Anyway,” he said now, aware that Ashley was waiting for an answer, “it’s done. I think I made that pretty clear to her. But I have to admit, it’s left me in a filthy mood.”

“I’m sorry,” she said at once. “What can I do to help?”

He reached out and cupped the back of her neck, then stroked her nape. “You’re doing it right now. Just be you. Please. You’re all I could think of during that miserable meeting. I really care about you.”

“I care about you, too, Victor,” she said seriously. “I could strangle Crys-dull right now. I’m glad your marriage didn’t work out because otherwise I wouldn’t be here, but I’m sorry you felt so used.”

She was right, though he hadn't mentioned feeling used. Again, he was struck at her intuition. After a month she knew him better than his wife of six years.

"I know what it's like to be used," she was saying softly, and he could hear the thread of anger under her tone. "It makes you feel filthy. Filthy and *worthless*. I could kill her for making you feel that way for even a second."

It was at that precise moment he knew he could never, never let her go.

"Last week I saw her picture in *Vanity Fair*, and you know something? It made me feel bad. She looked like—like a goddess or something, so tall and blonde and perfect. And rich, of course."

"Ashley, don't—"

"Let me finish," she said sharply, and he shut up. "As I was saying, can you imagine how I felt? Her family's had money for nine generations! They probably owned the damn *Mayflower*. Anyway, there she was, smirking up at me on the page, and I asked myself who I was kidding, going out with you. But I'll tell you what. I don't have any money and I owe eight grand to MasterCard and I only made twenty-five thousand dollars last year, but I'd never use you and I'd never want to make you feel the way she made you feel today. Which means I'm worthy of you, dammit! And I want to be with you as long as you want to be with me. What I'm saying is, I don't care about your money and your background anymore. I like *you*. I want to be with *you*. What are you doing?"

"Pulling over," he said, doing just that. "Parking this damn car so I can kiss you. For about a hundred years." He yanked the parking brake and reached for her with his other hand. "You don't mind, do you?"

For reply, she unbuckled her seat belt. He pulled her closer to him, so that she was almost in his lap, and for once she was glad she wasn't tall. He kissed her hard, holding her in an unbreakable grip, and she was sure her mouth would be bruised later. He seemed to catch himself, to try to calm down, and then he was gently sucking on her lower lip, which was throbbing from his attention. "I'm sorry," he said hoarsely, near her mouth, into her mouth. "I didn't mean to be rough. I just had to touch you. Had to kiss you. Couldn't...ah, God, don't do that. I couldn't—what are you *doing*?"

She held up his belt. "This is the classiest belt I've ever seen," she said approvingly. "Real easy to get off, too."

"We can't," he said delightedly. "We're on the highway. It's the middle of the afternoon."

"Prude," she sniffed. He grabbed her and kissed her again, for a lovely long time, and when it was done she grabbed his shoulders to steady herself. "God, you're good at that."

"Spend the night with me," he said intently. "Please. I know it's only been a few weeks, but there's no one on the planet I want to be with more than you. Stay with me."

"Soon," she promised gently, "but not yet. I'm disturbingly old-fashioned."

"Me, too."

"I've slept with two men, and only because I loved them, and because they said they loved me," she

went on, and when he opened his mouth she clapped a hand over it. “Don’t say anything. Not yet.” She grinned. “I’m not sure I could believe you, anyway—we just got done necking like a couple of teenagers. I’ll love you soon, I know that. I’m halfway to being in love with you now. But in the meantime. . .there’s lots of fun to be had in a parked car, yes?”

“Only two men?” he asked, pulling her toward him. “Lucky bastards. I like your rule.”

“That’s not the only thing you like, I think,” she said slyly. He agreed, and showed her what else he liked, and they were having a wonderful time until the state trooper tapped on the window.

CHAPTER FIVE

“The cop gave you a ticket?” Derik Mann asked incredulously. “What was the charge? Necking without a license?”

Victor, changing into his *dogi*, the outfit used in martial arts lessons, had to grin. “Nope. Contributing to traffic flow problems. And he didn’t believe me when I explained it was an emergency.”

Derik snorted. “Some emergency. A fire in your pants.” Two years younger than Victor, Derik owned the *dojo*, was, in fact, Victor’s *sensei*. Derik had been studying aikido from the age of four. He had been teaching Victor as long as they had been friends. “Bet that went over like a lead balloon.”

“Ashley swore up and down she was giving me mouth-to-mouth, but the cop didn’t believe her. I could tell he was trying not to smile, though. It’s hard to resist Ash when she’s worked up about something. Didn’t stop him from whipping out the old citation book, though.”

Derik slapped his forehead and pretended to collapse on the nearest bench. “I don’t believe you! I was sure you’d be mega-pissed today, that’s why I booked the floor for us. Instead you meet with the ex, then go to the mental hospital to pick up your new girlfriend, make out with her by the side of the highway for half an hour, get a ninety dollar ticket for your pains, and now you’re practically whistling, you’re in such a good mood.”

“When you meet Ashley,” Victor said with utter confidence, “you’ll understand.”

“Vic, old buddy, I can’t wait to lay eyes on this girl. I haven’t seen you in such a good mood since. . .” Derik Mann thought back, and realized with a start he hadn’t seen Vic so happy since their graduate school days. Pre-Crystal, in other words. “In a long time. She sounds like quite a lady.”

“She is. She’s a writer,” he said proudly. “She works for the *South Shore Star*, but she does freelance stuff, too. She’s going to start a book pretty soon.”

“Smart?”

“Really smart. She’s practically a mind-reader. Let’s get together in the next few days. Are you still with Marya?”

Derik shook his head. “Catch up, Vic. Marya was two babes ago. Now I’m deeply, eternally, forever in love with Julie Kathryn.”

“Well, bring your third deep, eternal, forever love-with-two-names to dinner. I really want you to get to know Ashley, Der.”

Derik found this incredibly encouraging. He and Vic had been best friends since college, and he could only be insisting Derik meeting his new ladylove if he intended her to be around for a long time. After the Crystal fiasco, this was wonderful news.

“Damn!” He slapped Victor on the back. “Now you’ve got *me* in a good mood.”

“Great. Let’s go kick the crud out of each other.”

* * * * *

Ashley was so excited and happy, she felt like somersaulting all over the mats. Great things, she was sure, were going to happen. She had put aside her insecurities, her envy of Crystal and pity for Victor, and now they could go nowhere but forward.

“Onward and upward,” she said aloud, looking at the trophy case. Derik Mann, whoever he was, was apparently the aikido champion of the universe, if the dozen or so trophies in the case were any indication. “Today is the first day of the rest of your life. Go for the gusto. Abandon hope, ye who—wait, that’s wrong.”

“Victor didn’t mention you talked to yourself.”

She turned and saw a man standing by the water fountain, smiling at her. He looked about Victor’s age, but that wasn’t why Ashley was trying not to gape. Victor was taller, but this man was easily as broad, and dressed in the sort of white suit the good guys wore in karate movies. With his tan, blonde, chiseled good looks, broad shoulders, and tree-trunk legs, he looked like one of Jean’s G.I. Joe dolls come to life. *He looks*, she thought, *like he could break my legs with one arm while mixing a milkshake with the other*. Fortunately, the man appeared friendly.

“I—what?”

The man paused, then asked, slowly and carefully, “Which word didn’t you understand?”

She should have been annoyed—the man was clearly mocking her. Instead, she burst out laughing and after a moment, he joined her.

“That’s not even yours,” she protested. “You stole Val Kilmer’s line from *Real Genius* .”

“On top of everything else, you’ve got great taste in old movies.” The man stuck out a hand the size of a frying pan, or so it seemed to her. “Derik Mann. Vic’s bud.”

“Ashley Lorentz. Vic’s...friend.”

His eyes, very blue, twinkled at her. “Oh-ho.”

Ashley could feel her face getting warm. She wished, for the thousandth time, that she wasn't such an easy blusher. "What's that supposed to mean, Mann?"

"It means, Lorentz, that Victor and I have been 'friends' for almost ten years, and we never necked on the highway. Not even that time we got drunk and I flirted with him outrageously."

"Try starting with a back rub," she said archly, and Derik laughed so hard he had to sit down.

"He said I'd like you," Derik said after he got himself under control. "And he was right. Ashley, take a good look at me."

She did.

"Are you looking?"

"If I stare at you any harder, my eyeballs are going to dry up."

He snorted. "Excellent. Take a good look, Ms. Lorentz, because Vic's gone on you. He might not know it yet, but he is. And that means you and the guy you're currently looking at are going to be very good friends. So I'd advise you to get used to the idea. Starting now."

"Mr. Mann," she said sincerely, "you've got a deal."

They shook on it. While they were shaking hands, Victor came out of the locker room and trotted over. Ashley saw he was wearing the same outfit Derik had on, with one difference. Derik's belt was black, while Victor's was dark brown.

"Thank you again, sweetheart," he said, kissing her cheek. Even this innocent peck made her shiver. He felt it and bent closer, fully intending to do more than buss her cheek, and she turned, ready to happily melt into his arms, as he tipped her chin up, as the room seemed to fade away and there was only the two of them...

"Ennnhh! Don't *think* so! Get a room, you two. *After* the workout."

Ashley scowled. Victor regretfully straightened. "As I was saying, I wanted to thank you for waiting. I see you've met Derik."

"The man you'll love to loathe," Derik added cheerfully.

"He said hello, yes," Ashley said. "Then he plagiarized a movie and promised to be a pest."

"In thirty seconds? That sounds about right."

"It was more like a full minute," Derik grumbled.

"Anyway," Vic continued, "I appreciate you being a good sport. I knew I'd need to work out after meeting with—"

"Crys-dull," Derik said. He winked at Ashley. "Love that, by the way. If you think of any more nicknames for La Cold Fish, let me know."

“If my heart didn’t belong to Victor,” she teased, “I’d give it to you right now.”

“Of course you would. The enemy of your enemy, and all that.”

“*Anyway...*” Victor tried to sound irritated, but failed miserably. They were getting along great, as he’d hoped they would. *Does her heart really belong to me? Jesus, if only.* “Anyway...uh...what the hell was I saying?”

“Who was listening?” Derik asked.

“You knew you’d need to work out after meeting with La Cold Fish,” Ashley prompted.

He frowned, which fooled no one, and continued. “Right. And since Derik went to the trouble of reserving the floor...”

“Victor, will you stop with the explaining? It’s no big deal.”

“I appreciate that, but...”

“Sitting around a dojo all afternoon,” Derik interrupted, “isn’t most people’s idea of a good time, is what he’s saying.”

“Who cares? We’ve got the whole rest of the day.”

“And the day after that,” Vic promised, giving her a rich, slow smile. She looked down, but not before he saw her start to smile back.

“Ahem! Ya want I should leave the room, boss?”

“You’re as subtle as a runaway freight train, Derik. Ash, he and I will do a quick *kata*, then we’ll work out together, and then you and I can go do whatever you want, okay? Be less than an hour.”

She waved a hand casually. “Sure, I don’t care. I’ve got a book to read. Only try not to kill yourselves, okay?” She said it lightly, but a half an hour later she had to wonder if they really were out to do each other serious harm.

Derik, for all his light-hearted teasing, was serious trouble on the gym floor. Big as he was, he moved like a cat. She wouldn’t have believed any man could give Victor a run for his money, but Derik was certainly trying. Both men were sheened with sweat but their breathing was controlled, almost light.

“You’re not pulling that leg back quick enough, Vic.”

“That occurred to me,” Vic said dryly, “when you practically broke my ankle.”

“Who said you weren’t a fast learner? Besides all your college professors, I mean.”

They circled each other warily, taunting each other, looking for an opening. Though it was clear Derik was the more skilled, he was still quite careful around Victor. Ashley could see why, and felt a healthy respect for both men. Vic was bigger, for one thing, and while Derik was stronger, Victor was just a hair faster. *He’ll have one of those black belts before long, I bet*, she thought. *I’d hate to be on the floor with them right now. They look like they could wreck the place without ever running out of*

breath.

When Derik moved, it was almost too fast for her eyes to track. One minute he was three or four feet away from Vic, hands at his side, and the next he was on the attack, rushing Victor and doing something with his hands, and then Victor was doing something, and then Derik was on the floor. Just when Ashley was about to release her breath in a gasp, Derik swept his leg around and Victor hit the floor. The two men tussled briefly, almost playfully, and then Derik was flipped over Victor's head, thudding lightly to the mats and jumping to his feet.

"You've got the reflexes of a ninety year old woman," he informed Victor, easily avoiding a leg-strike, "with asthma. Also, you look like a monkey and you smell like one, too."

"Remind me to foreclose on your building," Victor growled. His face was flushed from exercise and adrenaline.

"Up for learning a new trick?"

"Always," he replied, getting smoothly to his feet.

"Atta boy. It starts nice and easy, like..." Derik struck, his arm a blur of movement, so startling Ashley that she actually cried a warning before she could stop herself. Victor, already preparing to block, jerked his head around to look at her. Derik tried to pull the blow, too late. The flat of his hand smashed into Victor's face, right between the eyes.

There was a long, frozen moment, and then Victor fell, crumpling to the mats like a puppet with its strings cut. Ashley screamed, a cry full of horror and rage, and then she was on the floor, running to Victor, but stopping to slap Derik's face with all her strength on the way.

CHAPTER SIX

Ninety seconds later, when Victor regained consciousness, it was to hear his best friend and his new girlfriend bitterly arguing about whose fault it was.

"Oh, God, it's my fault, all mine. If I hadn't screamed like an absolute wimp this wouldn't have happened."

"Of course you screamed, it looked scary. Who wouldn't have yelled? But me, dammit, I'm supposed to be a professional, I'm supposed to know how to pull a hit. Stupid, stupid!"

"Excuse me," he said fuzzily. His head was on something soft. After a moment he realized it was Ashley's lap. This was not at all unpleasant, though his head ached dreadfully.

"How can you maintain your professionalism when idiots like me are yelping on the sidelines? I shouldn't have come. I should have known I'd do something stupid and mess everything up. And Derik, I'm so terribly sorry I hit you. It wasn't your fault and I have no excuse, none. You must know, you *must*, that if I could take it back, I would."

"Will you stop already? If some asshole had punched the man I loved, I'd pop him one, too, bet your life. I deserved to be slapped, nailing my best friend on a sucker punch. I deserved to have my testicles

nailed to a washboard.”

“Guys...” he said weakly. “Guys, I’m going to throw up.”

“Shhh,” Ashley soothed.

“Yeah, Vic, shut up. The ambulance is on the way.”

“Oh, sweetie, are you okay?” Ashley cried. Her concern was touching, even though she was practically shouting in his ear. He tried to think of a polite way to tell her to knock it off. “I’m so sorry I distracted you. I’m a jerk, a—”

“I heard,” he said tiredly, “and it’s not true, so be quiet. It was no one’s fault but mine. I know better than to be distracted. You taught me better, Derik. If anyone was acting like an idiot, it was me. Now let me up.”

“No,” Ashley said firmly. “You’re staying right there until the paramedics come.”

“The hell I am. Besides, you’ve already moved me, unless I managed to pass out in your lap, which I doubt. So moving me again is no big deal. Help me up.”

“If you need help,” Derik said, pointing a finger the size of a bratwurst at him, “you’re not getting up. And that’s it.”

“Let me up, goddammit!”

Unimpressed silence. Ashley studied her nails. Derik looked at the ceiling and hummed the new Madonna release.

“You two,” he said through gritted teeth, “are in big trouble once I get my head together.”

Ten minutes later, Victor was insisting he felt fine and ignoring the EMT’s suggestion that he go to the hospital.

“You might have a concussion,” one of the EMT’s warned. “Loss of consciousness for any amount of time is serious stuff.”

“I feel fine,” he lied. He had a pounding headache and was horribly thirsty, though the thought of actually drinking anything made him feel queasy. “I’ll take it easy the rest of the day, promise.”

Over Ashley and Derik’s protests, Vic signed a form that said he refused medical aid. He did so hurriedly, so the paramedics would leave. He wanted to sit down. Actually, he wanted to lie down. For about a year.

“Last thing,” one of them said, while they packed up the stretcher he refused to use. “You definitely should not, repeat, should*not*, be alone tonight. Someone should stay with you.”

Derik opened his mouth to volunteer. Ashley stomped on his foot, hard. He closed it so quickly they all heard the click of his teeth hitting together, though only one of the EMT’s looked around at the sound.

“Whoever stays with you should be there to make sure you’re not getting really sick. If you’re

concussed—which we were unable to rule out—you could become disoriented to place, person, or time. That means you might not know who you are, or who other people are, or where you are, or what the date is.”

“The horror,” Derik said, “of not knowing there are only thirteen shopping days until Halloween.”

Despite the pain in his head, Victor laughed. The EMT was not amused. “Also, if you have any vomiting, or if you lose consciousness again, you need to get to a hospital as soon as possible. And whoever stays with you, they need to wake you up every couple hours to ask you your name, age, mother’s maiden name and birthday.”

“His mother’s birthday?”

“No, *his* .” The EMT glared suspiciously at Derik, who looked back with wide-eyed innocence. After a moment, the EMT continued. “It means a long night for someone, and I have a list of symptoms to watch out for. Who wants it?”

A quick learner, Derik didn’t move. Ashley reached for it, scanned it quickly, and nodded. “I’ll take care of everything.”

“Ashley?” Victor asked, surprised. “You? But I thought—”

“We can talk about this later, Victor.”

“—you only had sex with men you loved.”

The EMTs looked interested. Derik grinned. She groaned. “Victor, we can talk about this later. Besides, spending the night does not a sexual relationship make. You’ve got a couch, don’t you?”

“And three extra bedrooms,” Derik added. “His place is huuuuuge.”

“There, see? It’s settled.” She poked him and he nearly fell over. “I want to take care of you, not jump your bones, you dirty-minded creep.”

“That’s okay,” Victor said vaguely. “We can have sex later.”

“Victor, shut up. Please.”

He smiled at her. It wasn’t much of a smile—he was doing his best not to throw up—but it was the best he could do. “Thanks, sweetheart.” He pretended to glare at Derik. “Nice to see who my true friends are.”

“I was going to volunteer!” he protested. “She damn near broke all my toes when I tried!”

* * * * *

As a rough estimate, Ashley figured Victor spent more on his condo each month than she spent on living expenses in a year. *You weren’t going to let his money bother you* , she reminded herself, and it was good advice, but the fact was, Victor’s living quarters were a tangible reminder of the difference in their

lifestyle. His home was beautiful and clearly expensive. Except for the Museum of Fine Arts and Dr. Langenfeld's executive office, Victor's home was the prettiest place she'd been in. This wasn't the compliment it could have been, as she'd spent too much of her childhood in depressing buildings, most of them run by the state, overcrowded and ugly. But she figured anybody, even some Beverly Hills deb born with a platinum spoon in her mouth, would be impressed by this place.

Four bedrooms, two with fireplaces, all with adjoining baths. "Take this one," Vic had said, holding an ice pack to his forehead, "it's the nicest." A kitchen as large as her kitchen and living room combined. A dining room. Another fireplace in the living room. And unlike the museum, Victor's condo looked like someone actually lived there. Comfortable couches, lots of throws scattered about, a deep pile rug, warm colors throughout.

Ashley sat down on the couch and sank back with a sigh. "I could sleep here," she said. "In fact, I don't think I could get up again. Victor, your home is lovely."

He sat beside her. She didn't like how he looked, pale and drawn, but knew he wouldn't like hearing that, or hearing her fuss. "Crystal got the house, and welcome to it. I never cared for it—all glass and chrome and shiny surfaces."

"Like a doctor's office."

"Exactly like that. Every time I came home I had the feeling I was going to have a root canal instead of supper. I like this place a lot better."

"Me, too."

Silence. Ashley kicked off her shoes and wiggled her toes. Victor's icepack dripped.

"Mmmm...this is so romantic," she murmured, then snickered.

He smiled ruefully. "Let's put it this way—in all my fantasies of getting you on that couch, me feeling sick and dripping water all over my shirt didn't enter anywhere in them."

She sat up. "You feel sick?" she asked worriedly, scrambling for her list. "Define sick."

"Put that damn piece of paper away. My head hurts, but is that any surprise? Derik smacked the hell out of me."

"He got his," she muttered.

"I was going to ask you about that."

"About what?"

"About the hand print on Derik's face."

She looked at her hands, one of them the culprit, embarrassed. "I was upset. That's no excuse. So I apologized."

"Were you so worried about me, then?" he asked tenderly.

“Victor, you idiot, I was terrified.”

There was a long silence, while each thought things they were too shy or proud to say. Then Ashley broke the mood with a brisk, “So! Are you hungry? How about some soup?”

He swallowed a gag. “I’m not hungry.”

“Well, look. Why don’t you stretch out here, and I’ll put a movie in or something, and we can just veg out for a while. And when you start to get hungry I’ll fix us something.”

“What a little domestic you are,” he crooned, gently pushing her off the sofa with his foot so he could lie down. “Will you stroke my forehead and feed me grapes while we watch a *Seinfeld* rerun?”

“Har-har. Kick me again, pal, and your head’s not going to be the only thing hurting.”

Thus passed a fairly quiet evening. Ashley stretched out on the floor, her head propped up with a throw pillow, and read the new Tom Clancy while the television chattered softly in the background, and Victor dozed uneasily. True to her promise to the paramedics, Ashley prodded him to full wakefulness every hour on the hour to bug him about his birthday and his mother’s maiden name.

About an hour after they arrived, the phone rang. Ashley picked it up and nearly dropped it when the caller identified herself.

“Crystal who?” Ashley asked, recovering quickly.

“He’ll know who it is.” The voice was cool, well-modulated, just a hint of condescension. “May I speak to him?”

“He’s a little under the weather and can’t come to the phone,” Ashley said, too sweetly. “May I give him a message, *por favor*?”

Long pause. “He was fine this morning.” Then, “Who is this?”

“This is Frieda, the pool girl.”

Arm over his eyes, Victor said hollowly, “I don’t have a pool.”

“Shut up and go back to sleep. Is there a message, Crys-d—” Ashley bit her tongue in guilty horror as the nickname nearly slipped out. “I mean, should I have him call back?”

“Victor doesn’t have a pool,” Crystal said slowly. “Who is this really?”

“Fifi, his new live-in maid. I have to go now, I’ve got a run in my fishnet stockings. I’ll tell him you called.” She hung up.

“Not nice,” he said, still with his arm over his eyes.

“I couldn’t help it.”

“Yes, you could have. You just didn’t bother.”

Ashley didn't say anything to that. He was right, after all. A few moments passed and she asked, "Are you mad?"

"No."

"You sound mad."

"I'm tired and my head hurts. If I were myself I'd probably be rolling on the floor with hysterical laughter, all right?"

"All right," she said easily, refusing to be baited. He looked lousy, and had made it clear he felt lousy. He was entitled to be crabby. "Why don't you go back to sleep?"

He did, only to be awakened a bare half hour later and asked what his mother's maiden name was. "For the millionth time—"

"Third, actually."

"—it's Gottlieb. Got that? Maybe you should write it down."

"And your birthday?"

"Think hard, Ash. I'm sure you'll remember."

A rude finger, poking his ribs. He groaned. "November third, okay? Now will you let me alone?"

"Hey, waking you up and having you bite my head off is no picnic for me either, Lawrence."

"Mister Lawrence."

"Mister Jerkweed." She sounded pretty ticked off, but the whole time she was bugging him she stroked his forehead. It was almost worth it to keep needling her so she wouldn't stop.

"How come I don't get to ask you questions?"

"Because I'm not the putz who got his clock cleaned by the aikido champion of the universe."

"He's not even aikido champ of the state. And besides, it was a lucky punch."

"Which landed on your unlucky face."

"Forget it!" he yelled, and was immediately sorry. He clutched his head and groaned. "From now on I'm asking the questions, missy."

"Ugh, *do not* call me that. And the first question you can ask me is, what am I doing here?"

He had to smile at that, and she saw it and grinned back. He reached out and played with a deep brown curl. "So, you know all the intimate details of my life—my birthday, my mother's maiden name, what my ex-wife sounds like. Let's hear about you." She shrugged, suddenly uncomfortable, but he didn't notice. "What's *your* mother's maiden name?"

She didn't say anything and he was getting ready to repeat the question, louder, when she said with false brightness, "I don't know."

"You don't remember?"

"No, I don't know. I never knew my mother."

"Oh." The import of this was slow to strike. "Well, your father must have told you something—"

"I never knew him, either. My earliest memory is of a foster family. One of many, unfortunately."

He sat up so suddenly he nearly toppled off the couch. "You're an orphan? An honest-to-God, left-on-the-doorstep orphan?"

"Please." She held up a hand, traffic cop style. "I prefer the term 'parentally impaired'."

"That's it!" he cried, throwing his icepack on the carpet. "That explains why you've got such shitty self-esteem!"

He looked entirely too pleased with himself, she thought with growing irritation. And for a weird twist, she couldn't recall anyone being so pleased when she revealed her family background...or rather, the lack thereof. "What are you talking about?"

"I couldn't figure out how you could be so gorgeous and smart and have such a low opinion of yourself. Well, that explains it."

"I do not have a—"

"No wonder my money freaked you out. You've never had any money, ever. You can't tell me state-funded foster families are rolling in dough."

"How did my telling you about my childhood turn into a talk about your money?" She tried to sound light, unconcerned, but it was hard to conceal her anger. Now he would offer to take care of her, so she never had to feel lonely or unwanted again. Then she'd have to punch him.

"Don't you see, Ash? My money doesn't matter, and your background doesn't matter." He snapped his fingers. "That's why you're scared of lawyers. You must have done something when you were a kid...the state isn't known for its empathy toward children. Well, whatever you did, it doesn't matter anymore."

"It doesn't?" she asked coolly.

He smiled at her with great affection. "You were silly to let either one bother you."

She nearly gagged. "Silly?"

"Yes, honey, I'm afraid so. You shouldn't let being a foster kid get you down. You shouldn't have such a low opinion of yourself," he scolded tenderly. "I can give you everything you ever wanted." He smiled at her, so pleased, so anxious to be her Prince Charming. Well, she was no damn Cinderella, and that was a fact. For one thing, she wore a size nine shoe.

“You can give me whatever I want?”

“Whatever you want.”

She jumped up, knocking the phone over in her rage. “Here’s my order, then. See if you can fill it. I want my mother, you puffed-up cocksure jerk! I want to know why she gave birth to me, hung on to me for a year, and then *dumped* me.” His mouth fell open, and she wasn’t so mad that she couldn’t notice, and take malicious pleasure in it. “You think I don’t have a good opinion of myself? You’re all happy because you figured out the big mystery? What is the *matter* with you? My whole damn family didn’t want me! My father probably abandoned my mother, and my mother sure *asshit* abandoned me. So don’t sit there on your four thousand dollar sofa in your million dollar living room, with full knowledge of who you are and where you came from, and lecture *me* on self-esteem.”

She kicked the throw pillow away with a fat ‘pop’ and headed for the door. Then, remembering that if she left there would be no one to help Victor if he became dangerously sick (*sure would serve him right*, she thought in a rage, but, mad as she was, she couldn’t leave him), she turned around, marched to the guest bedroom, and slammed the door closed. This was a wonderful exit, yes, she was tough and strong and she sure showed him.

She clapped her hand over her mouth before the sobs could escape.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Nothing, absolutely nothing, could make him feel worse than he felt right now. Forget the pounding headache, the nausea, the pain of finding out your ex-wife never cared for you. Nothing was worse, he now realized, than having Ashley Lorentz scream at you in a rage because you behaved like a condescending schmuck.

Then he heard her crying, and wished the floor would swallow him, chew on him for a while, and spit him out, preferably with every bone broken. It was no less than he deserved. He made a fist and smacked himself on the thigh, hard. *What an asshole*, he jeered at himself. *You wanted to solve all her problems, and instead you made her cry. You passed off her childhood like it was a business deal gone bad, and tried to blow off everything she did, fought for, endured. Tried to turn your money into a magic wand that could make all her problems disappear. Great going, you stupid shit.*

Well, he had to go to her, and right now. Had to try and apologize, to try to fix things between them. He hoped he could do it without putting his foot further into his mouth. He rose and walked down the short hall to the first bedroom. Before he reached her room, the door was flung open and she practically jumped into the hallway. They met halfway.

“And another thing,” she snapped, her face streaked with tears, “which I forgot to say before I left, because I was very upset—hey!”

He reached for her, pulled her to him, buried his face against her neck. This was extremely nice and she worked hard to hold on to her anger. “What are you doing?”

“I’m so sorry,” he said hoarsely. “I’m an asshole. What I said was stupid and thoughtless and I don’t blame you for being mad, you *should* be mad, but please don’t cry anymore. I can’t bear it.”

“I *wasnot* crying,” she said, furtively wiping her tears away. “I was so angry my eyes leaked.”

He laughed before he could lock it back. Even in this midst of this, their first serious fight, their first fight, period, he was astonished and pleased. Rocketing out of her room to yell at him some more, tears be damned. And then making a joke, yet another wisecrack that surprised him into laughing, him, the original stone-face, except with Derik. And Ashley.

“Please, please forgive me. This has been. . .I’ve ruined everything today. I couldn’t stand it if the day ended with you mad at me.”

He was holding her so tightly, she could hardly wriggle. Not that she wanted to. But the feel of his long, hard body against hers was distracting. It was extremely difficult to remember why she’d been so mad. She told him so.

“Thank God for that, because I made a real jackass of myself.” For the first time since Derik had nailed him, his headache faded and he forgot about feeling sick as he realized Ashley’s delectable body was pressed against his. His hands wanted to reach down and pull her more tightly against him. He fought the urge. “Ashley, you’re so important to me. I never want to mess that up. Never.”

She blinked up at him solemnly. He felt so good against her, so solid and strong. And he smelled terrific. “I appreciate that, Vic, and I’m grateful you feel that way. I don’t want to mess things up between us, either.” She paused. “I shouldn’t have come down so hard on you. You just wanted to help, and I’m oversensitive about some things, especially my childhood.”

“That’s very generous,” he said, but it was muffled because his lips were pressed just below her ear. It tickled, and at the same time her nipples hardened. “More generous than I deserve. Incidentally. . .” Now he was kissing the nape of her neck, long, slow, wet kisses that made her shiver, that made her knees weak—it wasn’t just a cliché, she realized. Her knees really did feel shaky. “. . .your mother could only have let you go if she had no other choice. She’d never have willingly given you up.”

“No?” Ashley felt the tears start again and ruthlessly willed them back. Crying, she had discovered by age eight, never solved anything.

“No. She couldn’t have. You’re too special, too beautiful and loving and marvelous. Maybe she thought you’d go to a good home. Maybe she got sick and the state made her give you up. It was something like that, I know.”

“You can’t know something like that.”

He stopped kissing her neck and she was vaguely sorry, and then he was looking at her, his deep black gaze filling her world. “I know *you*, Ashley, my dearest one. And so I can know something like that. I’d never give you up without a fight. And your mother would have felt the same way.”

“Victor. . .” Stupid damn tears! Damn tears never solved anything, never solved *anything*, did nothing but waste time and make her face feel funny, and she wouldn’t cry again, twice in one day was twice too many, she would not, would not, *would not* . . .

“Oh, sweetheart. It’s all right.” His thumb was there; gently catching a traitorous tear as it spilled down her face. Then he leaned forward and kissed it away, and then kissed her eyelids, slowly, reverently. She clung to him, wondering who was making that silly whimpering noise—and realized with a start that it was her. Then his mouth was on hers, his tongue gently parting her lips, and she gasped into his mouth. He

kissed her deeply, kissed her as she longed to be kissed, and his hands were sliding up under her shirt and resting on her waist, and she could feel his fingers trembling and knew they wanted to go further, knew he wasn't letting his hands roam all over her, though he desperately wanted to.

She opened her shirt. *Thank God for snaps*, she had time to think before he groaned and leaned forward to kiss the tops of her breasts. Her bra suddenly felt much too tight, too restraining, and she longed to be rid of it.

“Victor...”

“Oh, Christ, you're so beautiful.” He nuzzled her cleavage; she brought her fingers up, into his thick dark hair, and locked them there, desperate to touch him, to know him, as he was touching and knowing her.

“Victor...I can't...stand up...much longer.”

“You mean I'm affecting you as much as you're affecting me? Good to know. I didn't want you to have *that* much power over me.” He stepped back and held her shirt closed with one hand, theatrically covering his eyes with the other. “Very well. Clothe yourself if you must.”

She did, with fingers that felt thick and clumsy. She was glad they had stopped—and not glad. She wanted him badly, and was thankful he had discipline enough for both of them. It wasn't right. Not yet. It was too soon for her, for one thing—so said her mind, though her body was vigorously protesting—and he was sick, for another. She should be watching for dangerous symptoms, not flashing her breasts in his face. *You tart!* she told herself with grim humor. *You're molesting him in his own hallway. For shame, for shame.*

“Thanks,” she said shakily, running her fingers through her tangled curls, pushing them back from her face. “I'm lucky. I can feel safe with you. You're strong enough to know when to stop. Because I...well, I don't know if I could have. But I would have been sorry in the morning.”

He smiled at her. “That's right. You can count on me, Ash. Always.”

“That's—”

“Excuse me, I have to use the bathroom.” He spun away from her and tottered down the hall, actually running into a small table and bouncing off it like a pinball. Such clumsiness in a usually graceful man was startling; wide-eyed, she watched him stumble into the bathroom. A few seconds later, she heard the shower start up, and blushed with understanding.

* * * * *

Victor came out of the shower feeling better than he had all day. His head still ached dreadfully, pounding in exact rhythm with his heart, but the nausea was gone and he felt like he could actually eat something. And the cold shower helped cool him off, figuratively and literally. He'd been too warm for the last hour or so, and it had nothing to do with Ashley.

He smiled at the thought. Boy, she was something. Gorgeous even in the midst of a rage. And so passionate! She said she wasn't sure she could have stopped, well, he could relate to that. Another minute and he would have lowered her to the floor and had her. Or let her lower him to the floor so she

could have him.

He towed his hair and frowned, thinking about her parents. Dead, quite possibly. . .but maybe not. He could probably find them for her, he had P.I.s on the payroll at the shipyard. Their job was mostly limited to background checks on all future employees—big business practiced more espionage than the government—but he could set them another task. He made a mental note to ask Ash if she wanted him to try.

She must have had an awful childhood. Never knowing who she was, where she came from, but worried about where she was going. How did she get the money for journalism school? *By working like a dog and saving every penny, that's how*, he answered himself. His respect for her, high from the beginning, went up a few more notches.

He left the bathroom, hair still towel-damp, and found her in the kitchen making dinner. “You know what I like about you, Ash?”

She plopped a spoonful of butter in the frying pan. “My clean close shave?”

He shook his head. “You’re really amazing, you know that?” he said.

“It’s just an omelet. Boy, are you easily impressed.”

“That’s not what I—yuck, don’t put tomatoes in!”

“If you don’t like it,” she said with ruthless cheer, “then don’t eat it. Besides, this is mine. I’m just your baby-sitter tonight, not your chef.” She then proceeded to make the most disgusting egg dish in creation. On top of the eggs in the skillet, she threw gross quantities of chopped ham, tomatoes, green peppers, mushrooms, and mozzarella cheese. When everything was bubbling and oozing and melting, she expertly folded the omelet, cooked it a minute or so longer, then slid it onto a plate. He saw with horror that the bottom of the omelet was burned almost black, while the inside was still runny with raw egg and melted cheese, and so big it flopped over one end of the dish. She poured herself a large glass of milk, found a fork, and appeared ready to devour the thing with gusto.

“Oh. . .my. . .God,” was all he could manage.

“Yeah, Jeannie hates my omelets, too. And the weird thing is, this is the only way I can eat them. I hate restaurant omelets—they cook them all the way through, bleah.”

“Bleah,” Victor echoed, kissing his temporarily returned appetite goodbye. “Did you see any saltines while you were in here?”

Incredibly, she ate the whole thing, and then went looking for dessert. He managed to half-heartedly nibble on a few crackers and drink a glass of ginger ale. All he could think about was going to bed. He hoped Ashley wouldn’t mind if he turned in early, but hell, he’d had a hard day, and—

“You should go to bed,” she informed him, popping the last bite of the ice cream sandwich in her mouth. “You’ve got these incredibly ugly circles under your eyes, and I didn’t think anything about your face could be ugly.”

“Are you sure you don’t—”

“This isn’t a date, Victor, remember? I’m here to make sure you don’t get really sick. You’re actually making my job easier if you go to bed now. But you know, I’ll have to keep waking you up every couple hours or so.”

“It’d be a lot easier on you,” he said seriously, “if you slept in my room.”

“But Victor,” she said innocently, “where would *you* sleep?”

“Ouch.”

“Nice try, though. Mind if I have another ice cream sandwich? You’ve got a great freezer.”

“Uh. . .thanks.”

“No, really. Nothing worse than mushy ice cream. This stuff is nice and hard. Besides, the alarm would keep waking you up.”

He was having trouble following her, and he didn’t think it was because of the blow to the head.

“Pardon?”

“The alarm,” she said patiently, as if speaking to someone mentally impaired. “Every time it went off, it’d wake you up.”

“Just so I understand, you won’t sleep with me because the alarm which tells you it’s time to wake me up, would wake me up?”

“Well, yes. That, and I wouldn’t be able to keep my hands off you.” She said this so matter-of-factly he gulped. “I mean, you’re sick, for God’s sake. You should be worrying about getting better, not about me molesting you.”

“*You* have permission to molest me whenever you like,” he told her, getting up. “I’m off to bed, then, gorgeous. I’ll see you in the morning.” He bent, which made his headache come back, and kissed her on the mouth, once, twice, three times, and then on the forehead. She giggled like a child and snatched at the belt holding his robe closed. He jumped back, avoiding her—not trying very hard, in truth—and went to bed, stopping on the way to drink a tall glass of water. It was too damn hot in here, that’s why he felt so lousy.

* * * * *

The first time she woke him, he grumbled good-naturedly but obediently reported his name, his mother’s name, his birthday, and the name of his first pet. The second time, closer to midnight, he was not so good-natured, but still answered her questions. Then he asked if she’d mind getting him a glass of water, and turning down the heat. “It’s kind of warm in here,” she said, and did as he asked.

Her alarm went off again at 2:30 in the morning and she stumbled down the hall, yawning, more asleep than awake. *This must be what it’s like to have a baby*, she thought. *Up every couple hours to take care of it.* Well, only a few more hours of this and then Vic was officially out of the woods—and really, he’d been a pretty good sport so far, considering how he must feel.

She saw at once that he had kicked off the sheets and blankets, and taken off his flannel shorts as well. She stopped short in the doorway, her eyes adjusting to the room's gloom—what little light was given off by a soft light on the dresser, and she could now see him quite clearly. She was once again struck at his handsomeness... he had called her gorgeous on more than one occasion, and she supposed someone who looked like he did might know.

Knowing she shouldn't, and not much caring, she stood in the doorway and looked her fill. His limbs were long and lean with corded muscle, his forearms, chest, and legs lightly covered with crisp black hair. He slept with one arm thrown over his eyes and even from here she could see the bulge of his biceps. His stomach was taut, flat, smoothly muscled. His chest was broad and he had powerful shoulders. His cock was laying against his thigh, and she could see he was quite long, even though he was soft in sleep. Even if he never spoke a word or acted on a thought, she would have been content to simply look at him until the end of her days.

But it wasn't just his looks, he was intense, intelligent, had a marvelous sense of humor (though he claimed only she and Derik could make him laugh—surely that couldn't be the strict truth), and cared about her. He had shown in dozens of ways that he cared. She was *very* glad for this, because she had the lovely suspicion she had fallen in love with him. Suspicion, nothing—she'd known, from the moment Derik struck him into unconsciousness. She wouldn't have been so afraid if she didn't love him.

That was all right, though. A little scary, sure, but he seemed to like her well enough, weirdo that she was. He claimed to enjoy her idiosyncrasies, and that was a definite first. She hoped in time, when the hurt from the Crys-dull years faded a bit more, that he could love her back. She hoped, yes, but she was fairly confident, too, and wasn't that something to be happy about?

Yes.

She crossed the room and pulled the sheet over his lower body. She didn't know if he was tremendously modest or not—if he was it was too bad, because she'd just drunk the sight of him in like a good wine—but this might make him a little more comfortable. Then she shook his arm.

He came awake fairly quickly, which surprised her. Maybe he'd just been dozing. "What is it now?" he snapped.

"This is the concierge with your 2:30 a.m. wake-up call," she said in a too-smooth operator's voice.

"Oh, it's you," he said, peering at her in the gloom. "Come down here."

She bent over him, thinking he was going to ask for another glass of water—and squeaked in surprise when he hauled her down beside him. She was suddenly aware that the only thing separating them was one of Victor's T-shirts, which he had kindly loaned her.

"What are you up to?" she asked as he rolled her over onto her back.

"That's got to be one of the all-time stupid questions," he remarked.

"What, were you lying in wait for me?" she teased. He seemed quite lucid, and she'd get around to the questions in a minute. It was actually kind of fun, so far. At least he wasn't growling at her. "Like a hungry wolf?"

"Of course I was waiting for you," he said reasonably. His hand slipped beneath her T-shirt and rested

on her stomach, then moved up and caressed the tender undersides of her breasts. She sucked in breath, previously unaware that the skin there was so deliciously sensitive.

“I love that sound,” he sighed when she gasped again. He slowly pushed her shirt up, past her breasts, and then she could feel the warmth of his mouth where his fingers had just been.

She arched beneath his touch, thinking frantically. *Decide*, she told herself, *before he gets you too hot to care*.

“Victor...”

“Yes, sweet?” His voice was muffled against her flesh.

“Are you sure you’re up to this?”

“Quite sure.” He paused in his delicious ministrations and looked at her. “Are you?”

“Yes. I’ve wanted this for so long...since we met, it seems.”

“It has been a long time,” he agreed. She puzzled that one over for a moment, and then his mouth was on her, kissing and licking, and she put it out of her mind, assuming he meant it had been a long time for him. Since his divorce.

“You are beyond divine,” he said, his voice muffled against her nipple. His hand was cupped around one breast, rubbing, stroking, while he lavished attention on the other one. She noticed for the first time how warm he was. It should have been a pleasing, sleepy-warmth, but it worried her for some reason.

He left her breasts and settled on top of her, holding her face in his (*warm, too warm, he’s too warm*) hands and kissing her. She opened her mouth to ask him if he was sure he was all right, and his tongue thrust inside her mouth, startling her and overwhelming her at the same time.

“Get rid of this thing,” he growled, tugging at her T-shirt.

“Yes,” she panted, fairly ripping it off in her desire to press her flesh against his.

His hands were everywhere, and everywhere was delicious warmth, heat...one of his hands slipped between her knees, and then he was caressing her inner petals with gentle fingers. Now he was kissing her chin, her neck, nuzzling her collarbone, and meanwhile his fingers were busy, busy between her legs, and she moaned and bucked against him, wanting more of him, wanting all of him.

He bent to her and she felt his hot lips close over her nipple, felt his tongue rasp against the swollen peak, and squirmed beneath him. She wasn't the most experienced woman in the world, but she knew a maestro when she heard one. Or, in this case, felt one. She would have done anything he asked. She'd die if he stopped.

“Now? Yes?” he whispered in her ear, and she nodded frantically and gasped an affirmative. He eased over her, she could feel his hands beneath her buttocks, lifting her toward him, and then that hot, hard, thick part of him was nudging, nuzzling, entering her with delicious slowness.

“Oh, God, Victor...”

“Crystal,” he breathed, and she froze beneath him. “You’ve locked me out for so long...but this proves...this...”

“No! It’s Ashley, *Ashley!*!”

“Don’t go cold on me again,” he groaned. “I can’t bear it. We can be a true husband and wife...have a family...this proves it...”

Suddenly, his warmth made sense. He was feverish. He thought she was someone else. *He thought she was Crystal, goddammit!* In his mind, he was making love to his ex-wife. And suddenly his size, his strength, where before they had comforted her, now terrified her.

“Victor, no! I’m not—”

His tongue thrust past her teeth, stifling her protests, and pleasure swamped her; her body was slow in catching up with her brain, it seemed. She tried to twist away, but it was like a tree trying to pull free of the ground. And he wasn’t hearing her, his mind was too fogged with fever. She couldn’t reach him and certainly couldn’t fight him. There was nothing to do but endure. Wait it out. It would be over soon.

The hell with *that*.

He broke the kiss and she slapped him with all her strength, then grabbed his nose and twisted, Three Stooges style. He groaned and said, “Please don’t, Crystal, none of your games tonight, let’s just love each other...please...”

Now he was thrusting, surging back and forth, and he was so hot, so big, she was too full, invaded, penetrated, and the heat of him was intense, she wondered distractedly how high his fever was, and to her horror she could feel her body’s response. God, no! It was sick, it was depraved...she might have started out a willing, even eager, participant, but now she was being forced, and gaining any pleasure from this was wrong, terribly wrong.

“Please get out,” she gasped. “You’re invading my personal space, dammit! And it hurts!” But that was a lie, it didn’t hurt at all. Her traitorous body, which always reacted to his, was loosening, allowing him to do as he liked, she was easing his way, and her mouth felt swollen; her breasts ached for his touch. This betrayal hurt worse than Victor’s invasion—at least *he* was out of his head. She had no excuse, except that she loved him and wanted him to love her.

Wimp. Worthless wimp. Your mother should have drowned you instead of dumping you.

Now he was kissing her, murmuring endearments, stroking her hair, easing out of her a bit, then gently settling back in, then out a little more, and his tongue slipped into her mouth just as he entered again, slowly, sweetly. She was still begging him to stop but now she was arching against him. His hands were in her hair, fondling the rich curls, and he was soothing her: “Shhhh, it’s all right, shhh, Crystal...” and his mouth was on hers, and he thrust, thrust, thrust, his body against hers was hot, hard, infinitely pleasurable—even in her distress, she noticed they fit perfectly.

“Crystal,” he breathed again.

“Stop calling me that!” she shrieked, even as she bucked against him, even as, incredibly, horribly, she felt her orgasm near.

“Crystal, sweet, I’m so close. I’ll pleasure you any way you like in a few minutes, but for now…” He stiffened against her, flung his head back and shouted his release at the ceiling, then collapsed over her with a sigh.

She freed a hand and smacked his shoulder, hard enough to make her fingers hurt. “Get off me,” she hissed. “You’re in a lot of trouble, buster. Just wait until I find something heavy to hit you with. Repeatedly!” She shook with sexual frustration and rage, and clung to one thought: *at least he didn’t make me come*. That would have been too humiliating. She hit him again. “Vic? You got yours, now get off. Victor?”

Well, that’s just perfect, she thought, trying to wriggle out from beneath him. *The perfect end to a perfect day. Pretty soon I’ll smell smoke and know the building is burning down on top of us.*

It took a while, but she finally freed herself. It was a little like being born, she figured, all that wriggling and squirming to escape the confines of her snoring lover.

Attempts to rouse the man proved futile, and she began to get really scared when she peeled back his eyelids and saw his pupils were different sizes.

She called an ambulance, dressed while the paramedics were on the way, and held his hand all the way to the hospital. He was unconscious and a dreadful grayish-pale color, and from the terse words of the EMT’s she knew he was very sick indeed. She held his hand on the way to the Emergency Room and wondered why she bothered. One, he didn’t know she was there, and two, it was pretty damned pathetic, considering what he had just done to her.

But she couldn’t bring herself to leave him, unconscious and alone, without family, wife, nor friends to be with him and worry about him. So she held his hand and tried to pray for him, despising herself as she did so, but unable to stop.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Derik Mann stepped inside Victor’s hospital room just in time to see his friend pulling up his jeans.

“Leaving so soon?” he asked wryly, shutting the door behind him.

“Soon my ass,” Victor growled, bending over to put his socks on.

“This is going to be a civilized conversation, so let’s try to leave your ass out of it. And could you stop wagging it in my face? I just ate.”

Victor ignored all the attempts at humor, though he usually found Derik hilarious—as funny as Ashley. “I’ve been here almost a week. A week! Jesus, they don’t let women who have babies stay in the hospital this long.”

“Your contribution to Carlson-Musch made the papers,” Derik pointed out, “and these guys weren’t too cool on letting you go once you fell into their clutches. I’m sure they’ve got tours lined up for you.”

“I’m leaving.”

“You’ll have to sign out AMAM.”

“What?”

“Against Medical Advice, Moron. That means when you leave against their wishes and you drop dead in the elevator, they’re not liable.”

“Whatever,” Victor grunted, standing on one foot to slip a loafer on. “I’ve got to get out of here. I have to find Ashley. I haven’t seen her since the night I got sick.”

“She hasn’t been here to visit?” Derik was honestly surprised. He thought that stunning honey had been big-time gone on his pal. And he was usually right about people. For instance, he’d despised Crystal from the moment they’d met. The feeling—once she’d discovered he had been the one who had spiked her Chardonnay with liquid soap—had been mutual.

“The doctor downstairs, the one who admitted me, said she came with me in the ambulance, and handed a bunch of my clothes to one of the nurses, and as soon as they told her I was out of danger she left. And that’s the last I—”

“Wait a minute,” Derik interrupted. “She offered to spend the night with you, keep an eye on you in case you got sick—”

“Which I did! Christ, Derik, do you realize the woman saved my life?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll give her one of my trophies. Listen, something’s weird. She offered to spend the night with you, woke you up every couple hours to make sure you were okay, called the ambulance when she saw you *weren’t* okay, packed you a bag while she waited for the paramedics, went to the hospital with you, and when the docs told her you were going to be cool, poof! Houdini. And she didn’t visit you once?”

“When you put it like that,” he admitted, stepping into his other loafer, “it sounds extremely weird. I’ve got to see her right away. I’ve left about a hundred messages on her machine but she hasn’t—”

Derik was getting an idea, which made his eyes widen, then narrow to speculative slits. Victor had a healthy respect for the man’s thinking process; Derik, 4.0 at Harvard Business School, was no dummy. “What exactly was wrong with you again?”

“Dr. Hautenan—she’s the attending—said I had a mild concussion, but I came in with a temperature of 104o, raving and totally out of my head. That’s how she—Ashley, not Dr. Hautenan—saved my ass, Derik.”

“Oh, here we are on your ass again.”

Victor pretended to punch the smaller man, and Derik obligingly fell onto the bed, groaning in feigned agony. “Ashley saved me by getting me to the hospital before my brains fried in my head, or whatever the medical term is.”

“Well, there’s your answer, Vic,” Derik said reasonably.

“Huh?” Victor was shrugging into his jacket now, barely listening. He was mad to get to Ashley. Maybe she’d caught something from him and was too sick to leave her apartment. Sure, that sounded ridiculous

when you thought about it, concussions weren't contagious, but something had to be wrong. She could be in big trouble right now, and he was dicking around in a hospital room when he should be going to her. "What?"

"Victor Lawrence, self-made-millionaire and all-around hotshot, is not quite with it today. I said there's your answer. If you were delirious and irrational—more so than usual, I mean—you could have thought she was anybody. What if you thought she was La Cold Fish and picked a fight? Or Dan Gott from Harvard B.S.?"

Victor grimaced.

"To your sizzling, feverish brain, she could have been anyone—the baby-sitter you hated or the girl in third grade you had a crush on. You probably said some really horrible things, maybe chased her around the apartment until you passed out. Probably rattled her, big-time. That's why she's keeping her distance."

"For someone with the reflexes of a tree sloth, you're pretty sharp," Victor said, inwardly relieved at such a simple, logical explanation. "I'll bet that's exactly it."

"So let's go find her. You can apologize, promise you're back to yourself, buy her a really gaudy ring, something that looks like those candy rings we used to get when we were kids. Remember the big gross purple ones?"

"I'll never understand how your mind works," Victor said, clapping his friend on the shoulder. "You can explain it to me on the way to Ashley's place."

"I'll use small words. Brought your car, by the way. You can return the favor by chauffeuring me around in the manner to which I've become accustomed."

* * * * *

"This isn't so good," Derik admitted half an hour later. Their arrival coincided with the mailman's, who was trying unsuccessfully to jam more mail into Ashley's already overflowing box. "She hasn't been around for a while."

"Clearly." Victor was starting to get a bad feeling. What could he have said to her? What if he had confused her with Crystal and roared at her in a rage? He had never struck a woman in his life, but if he was out of his head with a fever, might he have tried to hurt her? The thought was beyond appalling; big, brawny stupid him bruising adorable, funny, sweet Ashley. "Let's head to my place. Maybe she left me a note or something."

"Or maybe she's there," Derik said hopefully. "You never know, maybe her place is being fumigated or painted or something. She can get in, remember—you told the doorman to let her in anytime, whether or not you were home."

"Maybe." Victor allowed himself to feel hopeful. Without further discussion, the two men left the building and walked back to the car.

"Jeez, I hate this car," Derik complained, climbing in. "You've got the bucks, why don't you get a

stretch limo?”

“That’s convenient when I need to run to the store for milk,” Vic said dryly.

“For God’s sake,” Derik grumbled, trying to move the seat back and merely lowering it so he was practically prone. “You’re the richest person I know, but you live like a college student.”

“I just like driving and shopping for myself, that’s all. Having money doesn’t necessarily mean you have to, or want to, give up living like a real person.”

“At least get a Porsche, or a ‘Vette.”

“I like Saturns,” he said defensively. “And if you didn’t have legs like tree trunks, you wouldn’t be uncomfortable.”

“Tree trunks! You’ve got nerve—what are you, six foot ten?”

A familiar argument commenced, which wound down by the time Victor unlocked his door and stepped inside, Derik right on his heels.

“Place looks okay,” Derik said.

“Worse than that. It looks like no one’s been here.” A quick walk-through confirmed what he already knew; no one had been here for days. “Dammit! Now what?”

“Now,” Derik said, carefully un-taping the envelope on the fridge, “you read her letter. Observant, you are not. You can be Watson, I guess...I’ll be Holmes.”

Victor practically sprinted across the living room and snatched it out of his friend’s hand. He fished the letter out and started reading, turning so Derik could read over his shoulder.

Victor,

By the time you get this, you’ll be out of the hospital and, presumably, well. That’s terrific, because I was pretty worried about you.

“Awww,” Derik said affectionately. “She’s so nice.”

“Quiet. Let me read.”

Anyway, that’s the good news...you being better. The bad news is, I never want to see you again.

“Maybe she’s kidding around,” Derik said doubtfully.

This is no joke, Victor, I’ve never meant anything more. We were getting to be pretty good friends, which I liked a lot, and maybe it was going to develop into something else...

“Maybe, hell!” Victor cried.

...but that’s never going to happen now. As you know by now, that night in your apartment you said and did some things that I can never forget, though I’ll eventually be able to forgive. That’s not really the

issue, you know...forgiveness. It's forgetting that I'm going to find impossible. Even if we could be friends again (friends andNOTHINGmore), *that night would always be in the back of my mind, as I'm sure it will always be in the back of yours. So I guess we're done, which is tremendously disappointing and hurtful, but it's better than trying to make a house out of splinters.*

Please don't try to find me to apologize. I'm sure you're sorry—who wouldn't be, after what happened? But, I don't want to hear it, and I don't want to listen to your excuses and your promises that it will never happen again. You would probably be right, it wouldn't happen again, but once was enough. And it's obvious who's really on your mind these days. You never got over your ex-wife, and it's painfully clear that you've been using me as a substitute. I truly do not want to see you again, ever, and I hope this finds you willing to go along with my wishes. I'm dreadfully sorry, Victor—sorry you got sick, sorry it happened, sorry I have to be this way.

Ashley

Unbelieving, Victor read the letter again. And again. He could feel Derik's hand on his shoulder. "That's tough, man," he said sympathetically.

"What the hell did I do to her?" he whispered, crumpling the letter in his shock. He immediately tried to smooth out the wrinkles so he could read it again. "I must have hit her...*something*."

"Yeah, something," he said quietly. "Vic, why don't you go count your condoms?"

Victor gaped at Derik for a long moment, then his mouth fell open in horrified understanding. He turned and ran for the bedroom, fell to his knees beside the bed, and fumbled for the drawer in the end table. At last he jerked it open so hard the drawer flew all the way out, and dumped it upside down. Paperback books, old plane tickets, a half-full bottle of cough syrup, a pack of tissues, and a box of condoms fell onto the carpet.

"Well, there's a good sign," Derik observed from the doorway. "That's a brand-new box."

"Yes," he said, his relief so great he closed his eyes. "It hasn't been opened. Hell, it's almost six months old."

"Pathetic. Remind me to bug you about your monkish ways once this is over. And none of this answers the question of what happened up here. Ashley didn't seem to me to be the type of woman to, you know, fly off the handle for no reason."

"You're right about that. She's had a tough life. And it's made her tough. Whatever it is, whatever happened...it had to have been pretty bad. And it was all my fault," he admitted.

"What are you going to do?" Derik asked, concerned. "She made it pretty clear she didn't want to see you anymore."

Victor, still on his knees by the end table, looked up at his friend with a gaze so full of anguish Derik nearly stepped back. "I have to find her. She could be hurt. Even if she's not, I have to make it up to her. Whatever it was."

"But Vic..." Derik trailed off doubtfully, then asked with clear puzzlement, "How are you going to *find* her?"

Victor stood. "I'm sure one person knows where she is, and I'll bet that same person knows what happened."

"That sounds mysterious."

"That's one way to describe her," Vic said grimly, already on his way out the door. He dropped Derik off at his dojo, then put the car in gear and drove too fast to the Carlson-Musch Institute for Mental Health.

CHAPTER NINE

Jean studied her toenails, which were painted an interesting pale blue. This clashed nicely with her hair and eyes. Perfect.

There was a brisk knock at her door and then Victor Lawrence walked in, exactly as anticipated. A few days later than she calculated, but even she couldn't be right all the time. He stood there, too tall, too darkly handsome—it was really disgusting the way comely men flocked to Ashley—and too pale. Worried, then. Or scared. Good.

"What's going on, Jeannette? Where's Ashley?"

"Fine, thanks, and you?"

"I can't find her anywhere, she's not returning my calls, and something awful happened which I have to fix right away. So where is she?"

"Yes, I agree, the weather has been unseasonably warm today." She plucked a box off her end table and extended it toward him. "Triscuit?"

Victor shrugged out of his coat, flung it over the heater and sat down in the chair opposite the bed.

Hope it catches on fire, she thought petulantly.

"I have nothing more important on my agenda than finding Ashley," he informed her, raking his fingers through his black hair, "which means I literally have nothing better to do than sit in this chair and stare at you until you tell me what you know."

"Well," she said, helping herself to a Triscuit, "you know what they say. To the Victor go the spoils."

"You're not funny."

"Actually, I'm extremely funny. You're just too dim to get my jokes."

He arched his eyebrows at that. "You're angry with me."

"Why would you say that?"

"Please, Jean. You're not nearly as subtle as you think you are." He ignored her unbelieving snort and continued. "And if you're mad at me, then you know what happened between Ashley and me." He

leaned forward suddenly, hands on his knees. “Please, Jean! I’ve got to find her, to help her.”

“She doesn’t want to see you again,” Jean said, unmoved. “She made that clear enough to me, and I’m sure she made it clear to you, as well. I’m certainly not going to reward her trust by betraying her whereabouts.”

“Then give me a phone number,” he begged. “I’ve got to talk to her. She’s not at her apartment—”

“My apartment,” Jean said.

“What?”

“It’s my apartment. Ashley lives in it for me when I’m indisposed. That way I don’t have to pay rent on an empty place, and it saves her money, too.”

“Where does she go when you’re home?”

“That’s none of your business. Please leave, or I’ll have security come and throw you out on your good-looking butt.”

“Security isn’t going to touch the guy who just gave this place half a million dollars. Grow up, Jean.”

She glared at him, silently fuming, and got off the bed. “Sit there until you rot, then, it doesn’t much matter to me, but if you won’t leave, I will.”

“My God, this isn’t a game of one-upmanship! Or if it is—fine, you’ve won, you’re wonderful and I’m scum.”

“Why, thank you. Would you mind embroidering that on a T-shirt and wearing it four days a week?”

“Now tell me where she is! At least tell me if she’s okay.”

“She’s not,” Jean said stonily. “She’s very far from okay.” She was starting to feel a little—just a little—sorry for the big lug. She crushed the emotion. This man had hurt her best friend, emotionally, if not physically. Ashley claimed it hadn’t hurt, but she tended to gloss over unpleasantness—and so destroyed her confidence, the woman was still hiding. And Ashley never hid. She’d survived a loveless childhood, had grown into a beautiful, sensitive, intelligent, funny woman, and this man had used her.

“Jean, whatever it was, whatever I did—”

“You don’t remember?”

“Hell, no, I don’t remember! The last thing I remember was kissing Ashley goodnight and going to sleep. Next thing I know, I’m in the hospital, Ashley’s gone, and you’re treating me like I clubbed a bunch of baby seals on my lunch hour. Now, please, Jean, you’ve got to tell me.”

His hands were on her shoulders, gently holding her in place, and for the first time she noticed how dark his eyes were, black, actually, and very intense. It was obvious he was suffering. *Good*, she thought uneasily. *He deserves to suffer*. “You’ve got to tell me how I can find her,” he said again, more urgently.

“I don’t have to tell *arapist* anything,” she said, but it didn’t give her the pleasure she thought it would.

For one thing, she couldn't shake the feeling she was kicking a man already down. For another, instead of the heated denial she was expecting, he let go of her shoulders and practically staggered back. He paled, then color slammed back into his face and he sat down, cheeks burning, mouth open, eyes wide with shock and horror.

He dropped his head into his hands and sat, unmoving and unspeaking, for a long time.

She let him sit like a lump on her chair for almost half an hour before deciding enough was enough. She coaxed him into eating a Triscuit, then made him wash it down with a glass of water. She got him on his feet and they walked up and down the halls together, her in hospital pajamas and robe, him in street clothes.

"I can't believe it," he kept saying, clearly distraught. "I just can't believe it."

Jean silently agreed, but there was no need to beat him over the head with it. She tried to think of something to say and after a moment's thought came up with, "There, there."

He shook his head. "I just don't know how—" Then a thought seized him because he turned to her and said anxiously, "Was she badly hurt? Did she have to go to the hospital? Oh, God, did I—did I tear her or—"

"No, oh no! She wasn't even bruised," Jean assured him.

"Jean, I'm begging you. Tell me where she is."

"Forget it, Victor," she said crossly. This encounter hadn't gone at all as planned, which pissed her off. She hadn't anticipated his grief and horror at what he'd done, and neither she nor Ashley had imagined he would have no memory of the encounter. No wonder he felt entitled to find her and explain. "No matter how nice or mean you are, no matter how much you grovel—and cut it out, it's embarrassing—I'm not telling. She doesn't want to see you again, and that's it."

"Jean, you misunderstand."

"Unlikely."

He ignored that. "I don't need you to find her. I can do it myself, but it'll be easier if you help me."

"Oh, sure, Victor, no problem. Because making your life easier is what *I* live for."

"What I'm saying," he went on with deadly patience, "is that I'm *going* to find her. So maybe you want to tell her I'm looking. I don't want her to think I'm going to crawl away like a coward and never take responsibility for what I did."

"Tell her?" she asked sharply. "Don't you mean warn her?"

He looked at her sorrowfully. "If you like. I won't hurt her, Jean. I'd never hurt her."

"Again, you mean?"

He flinched. "Yes. Again. You must have know that if I'd been in my right mind I'd rather break my own arm than force any woman... especially someone as dear to me as Ashley. I have to find her and tell

her this. I can't just let her walk out of my life. If you had done something to Ashley, and knew she was afraid and suffering alone, could you just let things lie?"

She almost weakened, but forced herself to stay impassive. "Whatever, Victor."

He started to walk away. He was different, now, she realized uneasily. Gone was the despair, the near-tearfulness, the rage at himself. Now he was calm. Now he had a purpose and would not rest until it was fulfilled. "Tell her, Jean," he called over his shoulder. "Tell her I'm going to find her and, once I've found her, spend the rest of my life making up for what I did."

"Leave it alone, Victor!" she shouted after him. "Just let it be!"

"I can't," he said, and his voice cracked on the last word. "Tell her, Jean. And thanks for your help."

She stuck her tongue out at his retreating back. It helped, but only a little. Well, she'd cut up his jacket into clothes for her doll collection—the Dork With A Mission had forgotten it.

CHAPTER TEN

Monday, Ashley went to the office for the first time in over two weeks. Although she could do most of her assignments out of the office, she had never stayed away so long. It was past time to put in an appearance. Her boss might start to worry about her otherwise.

She sat down at her desk, called up the story she had been working on, grabbed her phone, and got to work. The next time she looked at the clock, she was startled to see it was one-thirty.

"No wonder I'm starving."

"You're thinking out loud again," her cube-mate, Todd O'Halloran, said, never lifting his gaze from the monitor or missing a beat in his typing. "Knock it off; some of us are trying to work."

"That's your novel," she pointed out, "not your assignment." Todd wrote romance novels under the pen name Rebecca L'Fleur and made a tidy bundle. He wrote only while at work at the newspaper, and cranked out three books a year. Ashley knew the only reason he worked at the paper at all was so he wouldn't have to pay for office space or computer time. He was so smart, and such a fast typist, he could do both jobs—reporter and novelist—without ever pulling overtime. She was inclined to dislike him because of that, though she was always cordial. "It's more like I'm interrupting your personal time."

"Work is work," he said, still not looking up. "Bring me back a Diet Coke, willya?"

"Since you asked soooo nicely," she replied good-naturedly, heading for the elevator, "I will. But it's going to cost you." Plus she'd bring him back a regular Coke. She chortled at the thought. *That ought to fix him*.

On the main floor, she went to Burger King (she had been boycotting McDonald's since they blew off the Special Olympics) for her usual burger and fries, and bought two Cokes. Balancing the bag on top of the cardboard cup holder, she walked toward the elevator. Among other things, this building housed a law firm, the newspaper, and a temp agency, so there were plenty of people around. The main floor was a food court, and because it was almost two o'clock it wasn't obscenely crowded.

She felt him a half second before she heard his voice: a light touch on her elbow, a firm, “Ashley.”

She whirled and the Burger King bag went flying. Victor was standing there, wearing a dark suit and his black dress coat, and she figured—amazing, the ridiculous thoughts a person had at a time like this—he’d been to his office that morning.

She tried to speak but was so rattled at his sudden appearance she could only stare at him and stammer. “Wh—wh—”

“I was hoping you’d have lunch with me today.”

She noticed he spoke softly, calmly, and moved not at all. *He’s afraid he’ll spook me and I’ll run*, she realized, then figured it was a valid concern. She *felt* like running. She felt like a cornered rabbit, if truth be told.

“I think we have some things to talk about. Yes?”

“Leave me alone,” she finally managed, and turned on legs that felt like overcooked noodles. She started walking to the elevator. One step, two steps, three steps, four. The elevator was getting closer, which meant he was getting further away. That was all right. She kept walking, willing her heart to start beating again, willing her breathing to slow down. He’d startled her, but she was cool. She’d handled the situation okay. She’d been cool. Too cool for school, she dazedly assured herself. Told him to leave her be and then walked away. That was good. That was very—

“Ashley?”

“Leave *mealone*!” she cried, whirling and throwing Todd’s Coke at him in one motion, so quickly she couldn’t believe she had done it, even as she was doing it. Inertia forced the plastic cap off the cup; Victor ducked, but not quite fast enough. Coke rained down on the tile and while he was wiping his eyes she turned and ran.

She didn’t think about where she was going, just dropped the remaining Coke and darted through the first door she saw. She realized at once she was in the building management suite, and just as quickly realized her mistake—like a true idiot, she’d left the safety of crowds for the solitude of an empty hallway.

Well, there was nothing to do but keep going. Which she did, ignoring the door opening behind her, ignoring Victor’s urgent, “Ashley, please wait!” She was intent on the far door, one that led who-knew-where—any place would be an improvement—and she was only a few feet away from it when she felt an arm circle her waist and swing her off her feet.

She kicked back, hard, and was rewarded with a grunt of pain. Her back was getting sticky-wet as he pulled her against his chest—the Coke, she realized with murderous joy. *Should have drowned you in it!*

“Let me go!”

“I will, if you give me just thirty seconds of your time.”

“What are you, a deranged long-distance salesman? I told you to leave me alone!” she shouted,

struggling. “Do you listen as badly as you read? Now put me down and go away!”

“In a minute,” he said, right into her ear, and she gasped as all the hairs on her left arm stood up in response to his voice.

Great, just great, Ash. After everything that happened, he still turns you on. Get help. Seriously.

“In a minute, sweetheart. Calm down first. I just want to talk to you.” She kept trying to pull free, panting with the effort, and he held her with easy strength and kept talking softly into her ear; he just wanted to talk to her. He wouldn’t hurt her, not ever again. He wouldn’t have cornered her but she left him no choice. If she would just relax a little he’d put her down and they could talk. It wouldn’t take long and then he’d go away. But first she had to calm down. It would be all right.

At last, exhausted, she quit struggling and went limp against him. After a moment he carefully set her down—she realized he’d been holding her almost a foot off the ground. *My God, he’s strong. I never had a chance that night. Or today.* She took a weary step toward the door when he put his hand on her elbow and gently pulled her back.

“Wait,” he said quietly.

“What do you want?”

“To fix things.”

“Do you have a time machine? That’s the only way to do it. Make it so it never happened.”

“Oh, Ashley.” He looked at her with such sorrow she was afraid she was going to cry, and that would be very bad. She didn’t want to cry in front of him. “How can I say it? I’m so very sorry. The words are inadequate, stupid and not worth anything, but they’re all I have. I’m sorry,” he said again.

She was prying his fingers off her elbow, one by one. “Apology accepted, go away now.”

“I can’t.”

“Sure you can,” she said through gritted teeth. “Just turn around and walk out that door.”

“I can’t leave things like this. And I can’t let you go. You mean more to me than anyone.”

“How can you say that?” she cried, honestly shocked. “And what am I supposed to say? ‘Oh, gee, Vic, that makes it all better, I’ll forget the whole thing and we’ll live happily ever after, please pass the Cheese Whiz.’?”

He blinked at Cheese Whiz, then replied, “Well, what about me? Do you really expect me to live with the knowledge that I hurt someone who showed me nothing but kindness and generosity? Someone who saved my life? Do you expect *me* to say, ‘Sure, Ashley, I’ll respect your wishes, I’ll never see you again, even though I’ve got this horrible thing to make up for, even though I fell in love with you.’?”

Silence, while she rubbed her arm and thought. So funny—three weeks ago, his words would have made her soul sing. Now they just made everything worse. Finally she shook her head and said, “Those are just words. They don’t solve anything.”

“But they *mean* everything.”

“I want you to leave me alone,” she said slowly, deliberately. “I never want to see you again.”

He paled. “Please don’t.”

She struck him, then. Not with her fists. With words. “I asked you the same thing. That night. I begged you to stop.”

He was shaking his head. “Don’t do this.”

“But you did as you pleased while you called me by your wife’s name, and there was nothing I could do about it. *Nothing* .”

“Stop it, Ashley.”

“I’m really not interested in your requests!” she shouted. “Now go away and *leave me be* !”

“As you wish,” he said, deathly calm, but his eyes were bright, brimming. He turned and walked away.

She silently watched him go.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

One week later, Ashley walked into Jeannie’s room, not sure what she was going to say. Fortunately, Jeannie was in a heated telephone conversation with an unfortunate Dr. Ebert. The woman’s fair, freckled face was blotched with outrage and her strawberry-blonde hair was in wild disarray. She looked like a pixie on the rampage.

“—and another thing, you head-peeping, no-talent, under-analytical, over-Freudian peasant! If I tell you a new medication is giving me unacceptable side effects, that means they’re unacceptable! Not mildly annoying. *You’re* mildly annoying. . . except for days like today, when you’re extremely annoying. This stuff isn’t working for me, and I’m not taking it anymore.”

“You’re mad as hell,” Ashley suggested, smiling, “and you’re not gonna take it anymore.”

Jeannie grinned, then went back to yelling at her psychiatrist. This went on for another minute or so, until Jeannie hung up with a satisfying bang. “Lord, give us strength. That man couldn’t oversee therapy for someone who *didn’t* need it, much less someone like myself, delicate, with special needs.”

“Uh-huh.” Ashley had heard it all before. She wouldn’t take it seriously until Jean fired Dr. Ebert. He was the fourth psychiatrist in five years.

“What are you doing here? And on a work day, no less? Not that I’m not delighted to see you, because I am—it’s been exceptionally dull around here lately.”

Not for much longer, kiddo. “I took the afternoon off,” Ashley replied absently. “I had a doctor’s appointment.”

“Oh?” Jean raised her eyebrows. “Everything okay?”

“That depends on what you mean.”

“What I mean is,” she said patiently, “are you healthy?”

“Yes, perfectly. A perfectly healthy pregnant woman.”

Long silence, broken when Jean said cautiously, “Pardon?”

“I’m pregnant.”

Longer silence. Then Jean sat up very straight, pasted on a smile, and said, “Well, that’s—uh—congratulations?”

Ashley laughed and, just as suddenly, started to sob. Jeannie ran to her and hugged her, holding her as best she could, while over and over Ashley asked through her tears, “What am I going to do? What am I going to do?”

“We’ll think of something,” Jean said, desperate to soothe her friend. “We’ll figure something out, Ash. Please don’t cry.”

* * * * *

“Okay,” Jean said a little later. They were eating ice cream in the cafeteria. “Let’s talk about this.”

“Talk about what?” Ashley asked with *faux* brightness.

“Very funny.

She swallowed her bite of Rocky Road. “I’m due August first.”

“And there’s no question about who the—”

“*No* question.”

Almost a minute passed while Jean tried to figure out a tactful way to ask the next question. She finally gave up and came out with it. “Have you considered...ah...not being pregnant?”

“You mean an abortion? Yeah, I considered it.” Ashley smiled crookedly. “For about two seconds. I always thought I was pro-choice, but the thought of—no. It’s not the baby’s fault I didn’t want to be pregnant. And I can’t *eventhink* about adoption...what if the baby ends up like me? Never knowing who she belongs to, always wondering if there was something wrong with—” She cut herself off, looking away from the sympathy in Jeannie’s gaze. Then she took a deep breath and finished, “I’ll have him, or her, and do my best by him or her.”

“Okay. I just wanted to—okay. That’s what I figured you’d say, anyway. You’ve always liked little kids and babies. Remember when you used to baby-sit those horrible Hemze children? I swear, the five year-old drank blood, not milk...and the *dog*. The *dog* !”

“Yes, I remember. And they weren’t as bad as you think. Except for the dog, you’re right, she was a monster,” Ashley added under her breath. She smiled again, and it looked—and felt—a little more real on her face. “You know I’ve wanted a baby for a while. My big dream was to have my own family. I think, once I get over the shock, I’ll be pretty excited. I hope it’s a girl.”

“Jeannette’s a nice name,” she said, putting her hand over Ashley’s.

Ashley squeezed her fingers. “A very nice name,” she agreed, and they ate in contented silence for a while.

“So when are you going to tell Victor?”

Ashley choked as a walnut went down the wrong way. “Never,” she croaked, finally clearing her throat. “I’m not telling him.”

“Ashley.”

“I *mn*ot .”

“Ashley, he’s going to be a father.”

“And he fixed it so I’m going to be a mother. Well, I have to live with that, and with the baby, but—my God, Jean, you *know* I never want to see him again! How can I do that if we’re raising a child together? I don’t want him in my life at all, much less as the father of my only child! Besides,” she added bitterly, “if it’s a girl he’ll probably want to name her Crystal.”

Jean just looked at her.

“*No*.”

Jean knew the signs, and decided to drop it. For now. Sometimes there could be no arguing with her easy-going pal. “All right, Ashley. I hope you change your mind once you get used to the idea. I know you hate what he did, but he’s the father, and he’s got a right to know.”

“He’s rich,” she whispered, so low Jean almost didn’t hear it. “And I’m not. He might have very specific ideas about how his son or daughter is raised. He might try to take the baby away from me and raise it himself.”

“Ashley, you know better than—”

“I don’t know any such thing. I can’t tell him.”

“You’re afraid.”

“Yes,” Ashley said simply.

“You’re going to do this by yourself?”

“I have to.”

“I think,” Jean said thoughtfully, scraping the last of the vanilla ice cream from her bowl, “it’s time I bid *adieu* to our friends at Carlson-Musch. I’ve overstayed my welcome, and besides, we have a lot of work to do in the next—what? Eight months?”

“What do you mean, *we*?” she asked suspiciously.

“Well, we’ll need a bigger place. You’re sure not staying by yourself, and the apartment I’ve got now is too small.”

“Jean, I can’t afford to live your life of luxury.”

“I have a feeling we’ll find a place that’s very reasonable,” Jean said with a confident smile.

“Jeannie. . .”

“Trust me. Shouldn’t you have a big glass of milk with that instead of iced tea? Caffeine, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” Ashley said dryly, but felt better, just the same.

* * * * *

Ashley nodded and smiled and pretended to listen carefully to the obstetrician, but she knew as soon as she saw the location of the office it wasn’t going to work. In a gruesome ironic twist, this medical office, one of the city’s finest, was directly across from Derik’s dojo. When she’d realized that, she had almost turned around and walked out, but the secretary had called her name, and the doctor (Sharon, her nametag read, with a blue smiley face in the ‘o’, how’s that for a big bleah?) had been waiting for her, smiling, and she couldn’t bring herself to walk out on them.

So here she sat, trying to be enthusiastic to a woman she’d never see again, about an office she’d never return to.

“Well, that’s it. Do you have any question, Ashley?”

“No.” She forced a smile. “You’ve answered them all, Doctor—uh—”

“Opitz. But please call me Sharon.”

“Right. Well, I don’t have any questions, and I’m running late. . .”

“Say no more. I’ll walk you out.” Sharon rose from behind her desk. She was a tall, blue-eyed blonde with high cheekbones, so fair-skinned her skin was almost translucent. The only flaw Ashley could see—if you could even call it a flaw—were the laugh lines around her eyes. Her lab coat was forest-green, which was something Ashley had never seen before—she thought it was a national law that doctors had to wear white coats. Sharon had been pleasant, even cheerful, and generous in information sharing. Ashley had liked her immediately. Too bad. “May I recommend Dr. Ammentorp’s group across town? They’re in Cambridge.”

“Huh?”

Sharon patted her shoulder. “I get the feeling you might still be shopping around for an OB. I don’t think we clicked.”

“Oh, no! No, it’s not you. It’s the location.”

“The reasons don’t matter,” Dr. Opitz said kindly. “If you’re not comfortable here, that’s good enough for us—and you shouldn’t think for a second that you have to justify anything. To me, or to yourself. When it comes to what’s best for your baby, you’re the boss. We’re just advisors.”

Ashley shook the woman’s hand. “I wish you *could* be my doctor,” she said truthfully, “and I’m sorry I wasted your time.”

“Oh, go on, now,” Dr. Opitz said with a giggle. Strange, to see a woman in her forties giggle like a teenager. Ashley couldn’t keep the smile off her face as she left the office. It really was too bad, but she couldn’t take the chance of running into—

“Oh my God! *It is* you!”

Resigned, she turned and saw Derik Mann, who had just stepped out of the bagel shop next to the OB’s office. He was holding a dripping bagel sandwich, and had gripped his drink so hard the plastic lid popped off.

She sighed. “Hello, Derik.”

He ran the ten feet separating them, spilling soda all over the sidewalk. “I saw you go in from across the street, but figured it was someone who looked like you. How are you?”

“Fine.”

He screeched to a halt in front of her. “Listen, I’m really glad I ran into you. Can I buy you lunch?”

“No. I’m late.”

“Then I’ll walk you to your car. I’ve got to talk to you.”

She was well and truly trapped. “If you like,” she said, resigned. “It’s a bit of a walk, though. Parking around here stinks.”

“That’s Boston for you,” he agreed. “Give me your license plate number and I’ll post it behind our front desk. Anytime you’re in the area, you can park in my lot for free.”

She smiled at him, not intending to ever be in the neighborhood again, but touched by his offer. “Thanks, Derik.”

He grinned back. “If you talk to Victor, I promise I won’t have you towed.”

She felt the smile slip away. “Not funny, Derik.”

His face fell. “Sorry. But listen—that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Victor’s really taking this hard.”

“He’s taking this hard?” I’m pregnant and he’s taking this hard? Excuse me if I don’t cry a river.

“Yes,” Derik said simply. “He’s really broken up about it. I’ve never seen him so upset, not even the day he walked in on Crystal and—”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“Good enough, that’s not one of my favorite mental pictures, either. But I was hoping you could be persuaded—or bribed—to give him a call.” He offered her the soggy bagel sandwich and she bit the insides of her cheeks so she wouldn’t smile. “Aww, come on,” he coaxed. “You know you want it. A freshly baked garlic bagel, rare roast beef, honey mustard, big juicy tomato slices...”

“Yuck, get it away from me.”

“Pleeeeeease call him? He really misses you.”

“Cut it out,” she said, beginning to be angry.

“I will as soon as you stop acting like he meant it,” Derik said, a little edgy himself now. “Like his having a concussion was all part of his big plan to seduce you!”

“*Seduceme!* Ha!”

“Ha, yourself. If you knew anything about him you’d know he’d never hurt a woman, especially not someone he likes as much as you. He was sick, don’t you get it?”

“The fever didn’t give him any emotions, any feelings, he didn’t have already buried,” she argued, “and just because it happened once doesn’t mean—” She stopped and then said slowly, “How did you know about what happened?”

“Uh...”

“Victor told you.” It wasn’t a question. She went crimson from mortification, turned, and began walking abruptly to her car.

“For God’s sake, we’re friends!” he yelled after her. He stuffed his lunch into a trash can, wiped his hands on his thighs, and caught up to her. “He had to talk to someone about it, Ash. You don’t know what it was like for him.”

“I don’t know what it was—do you *hear* yourself?”

“He is devastated,” Derik went on stubbornly, more than a little annoyed. Sure, he felt sorry for Ash, but couldn’t she see it was the karmic equivalent of a car crash caused by brake failure? Nobody’s fault? “He really fell for you. I was telling myself that very day that I hadn’t seen him so happy in years, and then this had to happen. It’s a mess, but if you guys try...if you give him a chance, just one chance, I know you can fix it.”

Ashley shook her head. She was tired, and she didn’t want to fight with Derik, and tears were threatening. “I can’t. It’s over. We’re done.”

Derik opened his mouth to plead on Vic’s behalf some more when comprehension hit him like a punch.

He'd been so excited to see Ashley he hadn't immediately realized she'd been leaving the doctor's office. A clinic for women, in fact.

"Why were you at the doctor's?" he asked, and he could see the abrupt change of subject startled her.

"Mind your own beeswax," she snapped, feeling childish, but unable to help it.

"You're not the boss of me," he snapped back, relieved to see a ghost of a grin. He held his hands out placatingly. "You're right, it's none of my business. Listen, I'm sorry I upset you. I'll see you later and I meant what I said about parking for free, okay? Especially when you have a doctor's appointment."

She was so anxious to get away from him, he saw with amazement, that she barely nodded before getting into her car and closing the door with a firm 'chunk'. He jumped back before she could back over his toes, and watched her drive away. Then he sprinted for the doctor's office, skidding to a halt in front of the receptionist's desk.

"Hi," he panted, while she watched him, amused. "My friend was just in here and she thinks she might have left her purse. Ashley—" For a terrifying second he couldn't remember her last name, then recalled it sounded just like Vic's. "Lorentz," he finished. "I offered to run back and get it for her."

"How far did you run?" she asked with a smile. "Five miles? Hold on, I'll check." She picked up the phone and dialed two digits—calling one of the exam rooms, Derik figured. "Hello, Dr. Opitz? It's Yvonne. Your last appointment, Ashley Lorentz—did she leave anything behind when she—uh-huh. Okay. Thanks for checking." She hung up and shook her head. "Sorry, she didn't leave her purse here."

He was looking at the neat stacks of business cards on the left side of her desk; spotting Dr. Opitz's, he reached out and took one. There it was. Sharon Opitz, MD. Specializing in Obstetrics and Pediatrics.

"Oh my God," he breathed.

"Sir?"

He tucked the card into his wallet and ran out without so much as a goodbye.

* * * * *

Ashley trudged up the steps to her and Jean's apartment. Jeannie was apartment hunting from Carlson-Musch, a frightening prospect, and wouldn't allow Ashley to help. "You've got enough things to worry about and besides, you've never cared where you lived." True enough, and Ashley was glad to leave the details to her friend, but she wondered if Jean would be so foolish as to take an apartment without seeing it first. Well, as Jean had wisely said, she had other things to worry about.

Like packing. Not that she had a lot of things, but the thought of picking them all up and stuffing them into boxes was daunting. If only she weren't so tired. Tired and sad. . . it seemed she was always on the verge of tears these days. And she was lonelier than she had ever been in a life that had been, for the most part, nothing *but* lonely.

It would be perfect if you and Victor were together, planning for the baby, her stupidly sentimental side whispered, but she had to admit that there was some truth to the thought. Maybe that's why she felt so

sad and kind of achy-empty—because there was a big hole in her life that Victor had occupied, however briefly. Instead of sharing the news with him and watching his eyes light up. Instead of discussing birth plans and the merits of colored mobiles versus black and white, she was scuttling around town, desperate to avoid him. Terrified he would find out her news and force himself further into her life, as he had forced himself into her body not quite a month ago.

That was her big fear, and she knew it was legitimate. Because if someone had *her* child, nothing would stop her from being part of the baby's life. How could Victor feel any differently?

She let herself in and was surprised to see Jean waiting for her. *Must have signed herself out a day early*, she thought, pleased. It beat hanging out here by herself all night.

Across from Jeannie, standing with his back to the living room window, was Victor. She stared at him in shock—had he ignored her wishes *again*?—and tightened her grip on her purse, in which were several brochures on pregnancy.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, not bothering to hide her anger. She glared accusingly at Jeannie, who looked entirely too guilty. “Both of you?”

“You weren't supposed to be back so soon,” Jean said by explanation. That was, Ashley knew, the closest thing to an apology she was going to get. “He wanted to meet with me and I agreed. That's all. No big conspiracy.”

She turned to go, already groping for the doorknob, but Victor was already moving forward.

“Not yet, Ash,” he said, catching her by the elbow and pulling her gently into the room. “Jean's right, this wasn't planned, but *I am* glad to see you.”

“I don't want to talk to you,” she said abruptly. Especially not now. Not when she'd just gotten back from trying to find an OB to deliver his baby. Not after running into Derik and trying to ignore his pleas that she talk to Victor. Not after feeling so lonely and wretched, after wishing things could be different. . .no. “I told you to go away.”

“Stop acting like a child,” Jean said sharply, and Ashley's mouth dropped open in wounded surprise. “You're smart enough to know that running away only makes everything worse.”

“This, from your therapy group's biggest procrastinator,” she snapped.

“Exactly, so I know what I'm talking about.” Jean flashed her a look: *Tell him*.

Stay out of this, Ashley flashed back. She turned to Victor. “I am getting sick and tired of everybody telling me that *I'm* behaving badly, that you're hurting, that you're devastated, that *I* have to grow up and get over it!”

Victor looked surprised. “I'm not telling you that. I don't think that's true at all.”

“Ah-ha! See?” she said triumphantly to Jeannie. Then, confused, she turned back to Victor. “Uh, what?”

He nodded seriously. “I think you've been through a terrible ordeal, and it will take more than four weeks to ‘get over it’.” He turned to frown at Jean. “And anyone who indicates otherwise is an insensitive idiot.”

“Well! I like *that* .”

Ashley snorted back a laugh, and Victor almost smiled at the sound. “What did you mean by everybody?” he asked while she worked on frowning again.

“What?”

“You said, ‘I am getting sick and tired of everybody telling me that *I’m* behaving badly.’ Who’s everybody?”

Ashley waved a hand in dismissal. “Oh, I ran into Derik today.”

Victor’s eyebrows shot up. “Really? Where?”

Suddenly very uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation, Ashley shook her head. *Well, I ran into your best friend after talking to another woman about delivering your baby. Triscuit?* “It doesn’t—I was in the neighborhood—he walked me to my—it doesn’t matter. I don’t want to talk about it. And you can’t make me!” She shook a finger under his nose, then backed up a step.

“All right.” She was clearly tensing up and he had no idea why. Best not to push his luck. He truly hadn’t come to see her, but to talk to Jeannie about how Ashley was doing. Ashley walking in on them had been a bonus. “I’m hoping I can talk to you later.”

“You’re leaving?” She looked so hopeful it made his chest tight, drew his mouth down in a sorrowful bow. If she wasn’t afraid of him, she was at best extremely tense around him. The thought was enough to break his heart. “Goodbye, then.”

“Yes,” he said. “Goodbye.”

As soon as the door had shut behind him Jeannie had her hands up. “Don’t even start with me. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You know I don’t want to see him! So you invited him to where I live?”

“I live here too, sometimes,” she amended. “And you’re over an hour early. I didn’t plan on running into you, and neither did he.”

“I didn’t feel like interviewing the last OB,” she admitted sulkily.

“And another thing. You’ve got no business keeping that to yourself. You had a golden opportunity to tell him and you kept your mouth shut.”

“I’m not telling him, *ever* , so get over it.”

“Oh? And if he accidentally runs into you when you’re in your eighth month, how are you going to explain that? Too many eclairs?”

Ashley swallowed her angry retort. Incredibly, this hadn’t occurred to her. She had counted on Victor being so ashamed and embarrassed by what he had done, he’d gladly agree never to see her again. Well, he might very well be ashamed and embarrassed, but he wasn’t letting that stop him from trying to make

things right, dammit.

“I don’t know,” she said, tossing her purse on the couch. “I haven’t had a lot of time to think this out. Three months ago I hadn’t even met the man, and now...”

Jean softened. “I know. I’m sorry to be so hard on you. Let’s forget about all this for now and just stay in tonight, okay? We’ll go rent a couple of truly awful movies. I’ll even let you pick them out.”

“Ooooooh, tempting,” she said through a yawn. Then, with studied casualness, asked, “Why did Victor want to meet with you?”

“The usual.” Jean matched her friend’s casual tone. “Would I tell you he’s sorry? Would I tell you he wants to see you? Are you okay? Would I tell you he thinks about you all the time? Would I tell you he’ll meet with you whenever you say, for as long as you say? Would I tell you he feels terrible and wants to make it up to you? Blah-blah-blah.”

“How awful for you,” she said tartly, but she could feel herself weakening, just a little. She was frightened and lonely and she loved him. She was having his baby and she knew it was wrong to keep that knowledge from him. And yet, she was having so much trouble getting past *thereason* she was having his baby. Was there a way to get through this? Would her pride allow her to let him back into her life? “I don’t know how you managed it.”

Jean threw a couch pillow at her, breaking her train of thought. *No matter how mixed up and sad you are*, she thought grimly, groping for a pillow of her own, *no way are you letting her get away with that*.

Their neighbors, long used to volleys of shrieks and screams coming from their apartment, didn’t even bother to hammer on the walls. Just turned up the TV and waited for the pillow fight to be over.

CHAPTER TWELVE

A week passed with no word from Victor. Ashley was surprised at the strength of her disappointment. He was doing as she asked, wasn’t he? With this thought firmly in the front of her mind, she used the time to catch up at work, pack her things at the apartment, and do some discreet checking on the newspaper’s maternity leave policy. Unfortunately, while by law they had to offer time off, they didn’t have to pay her. And they wouldn’t. She could take up to twelve weeks off without losing her job, all of it without pay.

“So?” Jean asked, expertly taping shut a box full of back issues of *Psychology Today*.

“So, I can’t afford not to make any money for three months,” Ashley explained patiently. Most of her packing was done, so she was content to watch Jean. “I don’t have any savings, and I’ve got a gigantic credit card bill. I can try to build my savings over the next seven or eight months, but I won’t be able to save enough to take three months off.” She frowned. Oh, goody, another big problem. Just what she needed. “I guess I’ll see how much I can put into savings, and as soon as the money’s gone, I’ll go back to work.”

“What about an advance on your credit card?” Jean suggested.

Ashley grimaced. “That’s how I got in this mess. I make enough to live on—barely. When things get

low, I dip into my credit line. Bad idea.”

Jean kept her mouth shut, knowing better than to try to offer Ashley money.

“Um...Ashley...how are you going to afford daycare if you’re living paycheck to paycheck as it is?”

“I’ll think of something,” she replied with a sigh.

“I know!” Jean said brightly. “Tell Victor he’s the father of your child, and ask *him* to pay for daycare. He might even give you a loan. At a reasonable rate of interest, of course.”

“You’re as funny as a plane crash.”

“And you’re being silly and prideful...and for what? So you can scrimp and save for the next eight months? So you can do without the very few pleasures you allow yourself? So you can work until the day the baby comes, stay home with her for a few days, and then back to work? So you can dump her in substandard daycare because that’s the best you can afford?”

“Shutup!” Ashley shouted, then burst into angry tears. “I’m doing the best I can, all right? It’s hard enough without you always telling me what a dumbshit you think I am.”

“I don’t think you’re a dumbshit,” Jean protested. “I think you’re a very smart shit.”

Ashley started laughing even as the tears were running down her cheeks, and Jean closed her eyes in relief. Getting Ashley mad used to be quite a trick...but not anymore.

After a minute Ashley wiped her eyes, stood up, and said brightly, “So! What’s for dinner?”

“What the hell *wasthat*?”

“Technically? I think that’s what they call your basic mood swing.” She wiped her tear-stained face and smiled. “Don’t look so appalled, Jean. It’s not the last one you’re going to see.”

“As long as you’re so chipper, why don’t we give ole Vickie-Vic a call and share the happy news of his impending papa-hood?”

“Leave it alone for now, Jean,” Ashley said, kindly enough, and Jean nodded, thinking, *Okay. For now.*

She pretended to change the subject. “Did you know Victor’s putting his condo up for sale?”

Ashley stopped short on the way to the kitchen and slowly turned. “Why?”

“Why do you think?” Jean retorted. “The place has terrible connotations for him. He doesn’t want to keep a tangible reminder like that around. He told me that even though he doesn’t remember what happened, he can’t stand to sleep in the bed.”

He didn’t remember. She’d been shocked when Jean had told her. But, in the end, she decided it changed nothing. He had done it. He had that capacity within him. He was dangerous and to be avoided at all costs. “It doesn’t matter if he sells the place or not, because I won’t be setting foot there again. So if he’s doing it on my account—”

“Not everything is about you, Ash. Most things are about me. A very, very few are about you.”

“Right, sorry I forgot. And this is—he’s selling his home because it’s a reminder of what he did to me, yes? What if he knew about the child?”

“That’s what I was wondering,” Jean admitted. The temptation to tell Victor was growing daily. Only her fear of creating a permanent break in her friendship with Ashley dissuaded her.

Ashley’s good mood evaporated as quickly as it had appeared. That really said it all, didn’t it? He didn’t want any reminders, so he was selling the condo. She didn’t want any reminders, so she refused to see him. But what about the baby? Were she and Victor just fooling themselves? Was it possible to jettison belongings like so much bad cargo, all in an effort to put the past behind them? Was it even worth it, with their baby on the way?

* * * * *

“Jeannie, I can’t,” Ashley said regretfully. They were doing a walk-through of the apartment Jeannie had picked for them. It was, to use a one-word description, splendid. “It’s too expensive.”

“No, it’s quite reasonable,” Jean said seriously. “Your share is only two hundred dollars.”

Ashley raised an eyebrow. “Two hundred? For a three-bedroom-plus-den, sixth floor, ocean-view, two-deck, hardwood floor, gourmet kitchen, two bathroom apartment? With a walk-in closet for each bedroom?”

“And that includes utilities!” Jean said enthusiastically. “What a bargain, eh?”

“Stop. Even for you, this is—”

“Crudely obvious? Nuh-uh, Ash! You’ve got it all wrong,” she said earnestly. “You’re doing me the favor, it’s not the other way around.”

“Oh, puh-leeze!”

Jeannie, well into lawyer-mode, started pacing back and forth, punctuating each point with a fist in her palm. “Who hates to live alone? Me. Who makes sure I take my medication? You. Who cheers me up when all I can think about is jumping off the roof? You. Who cooks for me when it hasn’t occurred to me to eat in thirty-six hours? You. *I* should pay *you* to live with me.”

She started to protest. “That isn’t—”

“*It’s* true, and you know it. You’re just too nice to look at it that way. The fact is, I can’t live by myself. So either we share a place, or I take up permanent residence at Carlson-Musch.”

“Yuck.”

“*Exactamente*. So enough with the protests, okay? You like it? You think you can live here and not hate it?”

“The place is gorgeous and you know it.” Abruptly, she wished she could sit down. She’d been feeling a bit light-headed all day—was this morning sickness? Just as quickly, the feeling passed. “What can I say? It’s beyond great.”

“So quit saying you can’t afford it. You can afford it. And there’s room for the baby, too. *And* there are a couple of women in the building who do daycare out of their apartments. I got their names and numbers for you.”

“For heaven’s sake!” Ashley said, very surprised. “When did you find time to do all this?”

Jean smiled crookedly. “Story of my life, dear. I’m much better at running other people’s lives than tending to my own. I’m going to check out the den, see how I can convert it into my writing-slash-sewing room. You want to run down to the manager’s office and tell her we definitely want it?”

“Sure.”

“I already put the deposit down, but I told them you had to see it before we could figure out a move-in date. Does next Saturday suit you?”

“Very well, thank you.” She blew Jean a kiss and walked out, taking the elevator to the ground floor. She held the railing as dizziness again swept over her. She fought it off grimly; she had never in her life fainted and she wasn’t going to start now. How embarrassing for anyone in the manager’s office trying to show an apartment: “And here’s the lobby, and the elevators. And the unconscious woman who lives in 5A, who likes to sleep in the elevators.”

Luckily, with reassuring quickness, the feeling passed and she was able to give some thought to the new place. She would eventually have to figure out a way to pay her fair share of the apartment and incurring expenses, but for now it appeared to be set. And what a lovely apartment! By far the largest place she had lived in, and the nicest.

Her pleasant musings were interrupted when she saw Victor standing in the management office, nodding at something the manager was saying. At first she thought it was her eyes playing tricks again, so she took a tentative step forward, but her bravery fled as soon as she got a look at his profile. It was him. No mistake.

Feeling like the star of *The Fugitive*, she very quietly turned and walked out, letting her breath out in a relieved whoosh as soon as the door closed behind her. What was he doing here? Could he be looking for an apartment? That would be a horrid irony—he sells the penthouse to forget about the rape, and ends up being her next-door neighbor. She could see it now: “Hi, Vic, can I borrow a cup of sugar? Don’t mind my belly... I’m not pregnant, I just really like drinking chocolate sauce by the gallon.”

Rattled as she was, that was enough to get a shaky laugh out of her, which cut off as soon as the office door opened behind her.

“I thought it was you.”

She jumped, though she’d been half-expecting him to come after her. Her luck just wasn’t running well these days, and soon she’d have the stomach to prove it. She turned, resigned. “Hello and goodbye, Victor.”

“Wait.” He didn’t touch her, but she couldn’t turn away and leave him. Her feet were rooted in place as

firmly as if he had planted her like a tree, and she stared at him as he looked at her so intently, it was as if he was searching for something. He didn't appear to find what he was looking for, because he said, with just a touch of impatience, "Well?"

"What?"

"When were you planning to tell me?"

"I—" *That I was moving here? That I miss you and I hate missing you?* "I don't know what you mean."

He stepped forward and put one hand on her back, holding her in place, and then rested his other hand on her stomach. His black gaze bored into her. "The baby," he said quietly. "When were you going to tell me about the baby?"

She felt the color drain from her face, felt the dizziness rush back. "Oh no," she whispered, unable to look away from him. "No, it—you can't know, you can't, you can't..." The thought, the denial, followed her down into darkness as the room tilted away from her, as she felt herself pitch forward. His arms came around her to catch her, and she knew no more.

* * * * *

She stayed away—not long, she thought, but someone was shouting, and she swam back to find out who was making all the noise. She opened her eyes to find herself stretched out on the couch in the manager's office, her head pillowed on Victor's lap, his fingers curled around her shoulder, holding her in place. Jean was yelling into the phone.

"No, we aren't going to drive her to the hospital, you drone! We're not going to move her! We need an ambulance right now!"

"Tell them she's pregnant," Victor interrupted.

"Noooo, now means *now*, not twenty minutes from now."

"Tell them they have to be very careful with her," he said, ignoring Jean's shushing gestures. "Tell them—"

"What's going on?" Ashley asked fuzzily, honestly confused by all the commotion. She tried to sit up but Victor's fingers tightened on her shoulder and he held her in place.

"Don't try to get up yet, honey. How do you feel?"

"Tremendously embarrassed. What's all the noise? And let me up, I'm fine now."

"No," he said stubbornly. "You're not getting up until the EMT's get you on the stretcher."

"Hang up, Jean," she said loudly. Jean glanced over and Ashley was touched at the naked relief on her friend's face.

“Never mind,” she said, and hung up with a bang. She rushed around the counter and knelt by the couch. “Oh, Ashley, how do you feel? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, or I will be as soon as Vic lets me up.”

“She needs an ambulance,” Vic said loudly, and was ignored by both women.

“Ashley, what happened?”

She opened her mouth to answer and then she remembered exactly why she had fainted. Her gaze flashed back to Victor, whose jaw was tight with worry. She wrenched her shoulder out of his grip and he let her; she sat up very slowly. “I had a surprise, that’s all,” she muttered. “And I haven’t had lunch yet. When did you tell him?”

“Tell him what?”

“Shame on you,” Victor said quietly. “Jean would never betray you to me. Derik told me, of course.”

“Told you what?” Jean asked, exasperated.

But Ashley was nodding in tired resignation. Yes, of course Derik had told. Had she really thought she’d fooled him?

“I’ve known for over a week,” he went on, and she wanted to clap her hands over her ears so she wouldn’t have to hear any more. She resisted the urge. The time for willful denial was finished. “I kept waiting for you to call... come to see me... something. But you didn’t call and you didn’t come. You never told me. Did you do it to punish me?” The question was almost offhanded, but oh, the look in his eyes.

“Oh,*shit*,” Jeannie said, finally catching on.

The manager poked her head in. “Is the ambulance coming?”

“No,” the three said in unison. Ashley tried to stand; Victor stubbornly caught her hand and pulled her back down.

“Victor! Enough.”

“Rest,” he said implacably.

“I’m feeling better now, thanks,” she explained to the manager. “I’m just hungry.”

“It was the amount of the security deposit, that’s what did it,” Jean said loudly. “She couldn’t take it.”

“Quiet,” Ashley said sternly. She turned to Victor. “You want to talk?”

He gave her *A Look*, then abruptly stood and scooped her up. “Give me the key,” he told Jean, ignoring Ashley’s surprised squawk. “We need some privacy.”

“Thehell! Put me down!”

"I'll go with you," Jean said hurriedly, opening the door. Victor strode through, and Ashley was so astonished she let herself be carried. "Sort of like a chaperone."

"Terrific," he muttered. They waited for the elevator in silence. Ashley kicked futilely, but he didn't put her down.

* * * * *

They stood in the living room and looked at each other. Jeannie was outside, her ear doubtless mashed flat against the door. *The better to listen in on you with, my dear*, Ashley thought wryly.

Victor broke the silence first. "I made you pregnant." It wasn't a question.

"Actually, I prefer the term 'knocked up'." He didn't crack a smile and she regretted being flip. "Yes."

"What are you going to do?"

"Wh—" My, my, the questions were certainly coming thick and fast. She shook her head to clear it. "Keep the baby, of course."

He smiled, clearly relieved. "That's—I'm glad. Thank you. When are you due?"

"August." She sat on the floor, cross-legged. He looked down at her for a moment, then did the same. They were ten feet apart.

"Ashley, why didn't you tell me?"

"How could I? 'Victor, I never want to see you again and by the way, I'm pregnant with your child.' Ha!"

"You were *never* going to tell me?" He sounded horrified, which made her feel small. Which made her mad.

"No. I wasn't."

"But *why*?"

"Because it was *my* problem, that's why! And I didn't need you in my life trying to fix things, trying to run my life with your money, trying to make everything *easier* on me." She spoke with vicious sarcasm and he flinched from her tone. "Like you wanted to before."

"But it's my child, too," he said stubbornly. "I can appreciate that the... circumstances... might have made things difficult for you, but that was no reason to keep me out of it. To deny me my own child."

"I did what I thought I had to. Just like you did." The words fell like actual weights, and Victor bit the inside of his cheek so he wouldn't speak right away. He didn't want to frighten her, though at that moment he could easily have strangled her. She had been planning on bearing his child in secret, raising it the same way, when she knew he wanted children more than just about anything. It was hard for him to believe she could be so cruel.

“Victor, what happens now?”

More than a little startled at her brusque tone, he asked, “What do you mean?”

Her gaze was clear and her face was expressionless. “Nothing has changed, Victor. I still won’t see you. We aren’t going to be together. I had hoped never to see you again, but the baby makes that impossible. So how do we deal with this?”

“Stop it!” He heard the pain in his tone and was furious to give so much of his feelings away, furious but helpless against it. “Ashley, I love you. We’re going to be parents. I want to marry you and raise the baby with you.”

Her eyes, coolly blue, opened wide. “*Marry?* How can I marry someone I won’t ever have sex with?”

“You’re not going to let that one time dictate—”

“One time was plenty,” she assured him bitterly. “I won’t marry you. It’s unfortunate that despite everything you did, I’m still attracted to you.”

“It’s not just attraction, it’s—”

She went on as if he hadn’t spoken. “But that’s just physical, I can deal with that. Join a support group, take a pill, something,” she muttered.

“I’m not a disease,” he said dryly.

She ignored that. “We aren’t going to live happily ever after. I’ll share custody of the baby with you, but that happens after he’s born. For now, everything in my note still stands. I don’t want to see you, I don’t want you to call, I don’t want anything to do with you, or your money.”

He could feel his eyes welling with tears but forced them back with sheer willpower. “Ashley,” he said, and for a wonder his voice was perfectly steady, “I’m telling you I love you and I want to marry you, raise a family with you.”

“God, Vic, will you *stop*? Why are you making me say these things? Believe it or not, I don’t want to hurt you, but you’re *remaking* me hurt you. We’re done, you and I. Find Crystal, see if she wants you again. God knows you were calling her name enough that night. It’s clear who’s really on your mind these days. Goodbye.”

She ran out, slamming the door and nearly knocking Jeannie into the wall. It was done, it was said. And if that didn’t send him away, her spoiled bitch-brat impersonation, nothing would.

My job now, she told herself grimly, is to try to never recall the look on his face when I said those awful, awful things.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It took him the rest of the day to recover from the conversation. It was strange how he had gone from

being so happy to so utterly miserable.

He would just have to prove himself to her, he knew. He had shattered her trust and that would have to be remedied. It might take years. And it wouldn't happen at all if she didn't let him into her life. Now he had to make up for an event he had no memory of. He had to prove that he wouldn't try to take over her life, her baby's life, that he cared nothing for Crystal, and he had to prove that she had nothing to fear from him physically.

"I don't see how you can do it if she doesn't want you around," Derik said.

They were working out at the dojo, and had been going hard at it for almost two hours. It was the only thing that helped. If his body was physically numb, he was too tired to feel the pain Ashley was willfully causing him.

Willfully—he pushed that thought away. She was protecting herself as best she could, as she had all her life. If she saw him as something of an enemy now, that was his fault, not hers, and his mistake to rectify.

"I've got an idea," he told Derik. They were dressing with the slow care of men who were so exhausted they could barely stand. "About the only thing I've come up with. I think she'll go along with it, but it will just make her more wary of me, at least in the beginning."

He told Derik, whose mouth was hanging open by the time he finished. "Victor, you can't! She's only afraid of you now, a little spooked around you, but if you do that, she'll *hate* you. Hell, I might hate you!"

"What choice do I have? She won't let me into her life at all right now—every time I've seen her it's been an accident or because I sought her out. It's never been the other way around and it's *nevergoing* to be the other way around. It's worse now than it was a month ago. It's almost as if..." He trailed off. It was almost as if she was frightened all over again by their chemistry, by the fact that they made each other burn. Did she see lovemaking as a surrender of pride, of face? Did she feel that if she was in a sexual relationship with him that would mean he'd won?

Perhaps she felt ashamed, physically wanting the man who had forced her and called her another woman's name. He could understand that.

"It's the only thing I can try," he said again. "And...beyond everything else, she doesn't have any money. She'll need help and she won't ask for it. If the baby gets sick, she can't afford...I can't let the baby...I have to help her. Have to make her let me help her."

Derik shook his head in commiseration while they finished dressing. Derik looked distinctly unhappy, and Victor empathized. Derik had probably hoped the happy ending would have happened by now.

He remembered how he'd felt when Derik told him he was pretty sure Ashley was pregnant. Shock, then tentative happiness. He was going to be a dad! It was, literally, a dream come true. And, almost as good, here was a way back into her life. Here was a way he could prove to her that she had chosen wisely, that he could be a worthy husband. He waited a week, hoping she'd call, more hurt and disappointed as each day passed with no word from her. Running into her at the apartment complex was pure chance—or was it? Jean had recommended he check there for vacancies, he remembered with growing excitement. He had told her he was selling the condo and she had mentioned Stormgarden Estates.

He smiled and shook his head. All along he'd had an ally, and he'd never realized.

Despite Jean's possible assistance, the dilemma of how to deal with Ashley's fear and distrust remained. As Derik pointed out, his plan would make her even more wary of him, but time was his enemy, and he couldn't let Ashley hide herself away out of pain.

"How are you going to get her to even meet with you so you can lay it all out for her?" Derik asked, unlocking his car.

"I've already set it in motion. She'll come to see me, all right, and she won't be pleased."

"At least you'll start off on the right foot," Derik said, rolling his eyes. He gave thanks for the hundredth time that he wasn't in love with any of his lady friends.

He dropped Victor off at his office and went home, wondering what Vic had pulled in order to get Ash to lower her shields and agree to see him.

He found out the next day. Ashley was waiting for him outside his dojo, pacing back and forth on the sidewalk. He was pleasantly surprised but, as he got closer, saw she was well and truly pissed. She stomped up to him and growled, "When does Victor get here?"

"I don't kn—"

She grabbed his collar and pulled him down so their faces were about three centimeters apart—a good trick since he was quite a bit taller and heavier—and snarled, "You know, all right."

"Aaggh!" *Jesus, she sounds just like the girl in Exorcist*. "Let go of me or I'll scream."

She didn't seem terribly worried. Nose to nose, she bit off each word. "Thanks to our mutual pal Mr. Lawrence, there's precious little you *don't* know. And thanks so much for ratting me out, by the way. My pregnancy was none of your damned business."

She released him carelessly and he coughed, rubbing his throat, looking at her with new appreciation. Petite, drop-dead gorgeous, strong as an ox, and not afraid to kick ass on occasion. What a woman!

"He's my friend," Derik said simply, swallowing hard to make sure she hadn't ruptured any blood vessels in his throat. "That made it my business."

"Whatever. I'll wait for him out here."

"What's up?" he asked curiously.

She gave him a look of such sizzling scorn that he had to fight the urge to step back. "Like you don't know all about it."

"*Idon't*."

"Whatever."

He dropped his gym bag and spread his hands, trying out his most disarming smile. "Look, you're not just going to hang around out here, are you?"

Immune to his charm, she didn't even look at him. "Go away."

"It's only forty degrees. Come inside where it's warm. I'll even buy breakfast."

"Leave me alone. Don't you have some other woman's life to meddle in?"

He held on to his smile. "How about we put on head gear and I'll let you slap me upside the head for a while? Inside where it's warm?"

She looked awfully tempted—he imagined she'd like to do it without the protective clothing. "Go away. I'm not speaking to you."

"We've been talking for two minutes," he pointed out.

"Will you just go inside and let me alone?" she cried. "I don't want to talk to you, all right?"

He shook his head. "And tell Vic I let the woman carrying his kid stay out here and freeze to death, while I was toasty warm inside? Do you think he'd let me get all the words out of my mouth before he stomped me like a roach?"

That brought a ghost of a smile to her face. He wondered if his words, or the visual image of him getting stepped on, had amused her.

"Look, I'm going over there..." Pointing to the Bagel Bar. "...to get us some hot chocolate and bagels for breakfast. And we can either eat them outside or go in where it's warm. But either way you're stuck with me, so you might as well be comfortable."

"You'd have to buy me bagels for the rest of my life to make up for what you did," she said stonily.

"Done," he said promptly, and laughed at her startled look. "Don't go away, okay?"

She sighed. "Wait up, I'll tell you what I want. You'd probably buy me something vile like a Veggie Surprise." She fell into step beside him.

He groaned. "Tell me you're not one of those barbarians who puts slices of fish on their bagel."

"Ah, smoked salmon. Otherwise known as orange gold," she said, and almost smiled again.

* * * * *

When Victor got to the dojo twenty minutes later, he was pleasantly surprised to see Ashley and Derik sitting on one of the workout mats, eating breakfast. He nodded inwardly. So, Ashley wasn't holding a grudge because Derik had, well, 'tattled', for want of a better word. That was promising. If she wasn't the type to hold grudges under normal circumstances, maybe she—

She saw him and hastily swallowed what she was chewing, the better to start yelling at him. "I don't understand you!" she cried by way of greeting, wadding her napkin and throwing it at him, then jumping to her feet. "You*know* I want to be left alone, but you persist in all this—this patented Victor Lawrence bullshit!"

“What’s wrong now?” Derik asked, appalled.

“Do you want to discuss this in priv—”

“He paid off my credit card balance,” she said accusingly, in the tone of someone saying, ‘He shot my dog’. “Eight grand! Imagine my surprise when I saw the balance due section and saw *abigblankbox* staring up at me!”

“Whoa,” Derik muttered, gathering up napkins and cream cheese. “I’ll leave you two alo—”

“I am telling you for the last time,” she said through gritted teeth, “that I don’t want to see you, don’t want your money, don’t want—”

“I don’t care,” he said pleasantly, which brought her up short. Not for long; a few seconds later she was yelling again.

“Take the money back!”

“Nope.”

“Do it, Victor.”

“*You* do it if you think it’s as easy as that. They’ve got their money, they’re not going to give it back. It’s a done deal, Ashley. By the way, they were getting ready to sic a collection agency on you. Tsk, tsk.”

She could feel herself flush with humiliation, and for a moment she thought she would faint from sheer rage. Derik noted this with some alarm and stood up and took a step closer to her. When she spoke, it was through gritted teeth; he could barely understand her. “Cancel. The. Check.”

“Can’t. It was a wire transfer.”

She took a deep breath and both men could hear the forced calm in her voice. “I’m telling you for the last time, stay out of my life. You can be part of the baby’s, but not mine, not anymore.”

“Sorry,” Victor said carelessly. “You and the baby are a package deal.”

“Leave me be, Victor.”

“Can’t.”

She took another breath and forced the lie out. “If you don’t, I’ll get an abortion. Then you won’t have any claim on me at all.”

He smiled at her, a cold grin that made her heart twist in her chest. “Nice try.”

“Don’t underestimate the lengths I’ll go to in order to be free of you. If that’s what it takes, I’ll do it and consider myself lucky to be quit of you.”

His eyes narrowed. When he spoke, his voice was very calm, almost pleasant. “No wonder I mistook you for Crystal that night.”

“Aw, jeez, Victor,” Derik moaned.

Ashley refused to show him how much he had just hurt her. The comparison with his ex-wife smashed the dwindling sympathy she felt for him. It was the only way she could do this last thing, play her trump card, be free. She opened her billfold and pulled out Dr. Opitz’s card, holding it up. Victor Rich-Boy had no idea what a superb poker face she had. . .wards of the state learned the skill early. “See?” she said sweetly. “Here’s my appointment. Whether or not I actually go and get it done is up to you, Vic.”

His control broke. He started across the floor to her, slowed only when Derik flung himself in front of Ashley. “Staaaaawwwwwpp!”

He stopped. Ashley peeked at him over Derik’s shoulder. She waved the card at him, but it was no good—he had himself under control. And in an absurd way, he was grateful to her. This would make a distasteful task much easier.

Derik blew out his breath. “Okay, that’s enough of watching you two maul each other.”

“So leave,” Victor said evenly.

“Hey, it’s *my* dojo, okay? When I agreed to meet you for an early workout, I didn’t know you were planning on having me host the duel of the century. If you two want to act like prideful, stubborn jackasses, take it outside. Oh, forget it!” he yelled before either one of them could speak. “I’ll leave. Try to leave the place in one piece.”

“Well,” Victor said when they were alone.

“What now?” she asked abruptly.

“Now I strangle you for threatening to do away with my unborn child,” he replied coldly.

“I wouldn’t have had to do it if you weren’t such an overbearing, arrogant, control freak.”

“Let’s stop this, all right? Derik’s right, it’s beyond ridiculous. Here’s the thing. You’re going to marry me.”

She kicked the desk. Hard. “You hear, but you don’t *listen* ! I don’t want you!”

“That,” he said, eyes gleaming, “is a lie.”

“You know what I mean,” she replied, flushing.

“I do, and I don’t care. I did an awful thing, Ashley, but I love you and I think you love me. If neither of those things were true, maybe I could let this go, could let you out of my life. But *they are* true. How can I walk away from you? >From the baby? Remember when you told me your mom abandoned you?”

She nodded, her gaze wary. He knew she was sorry she’d confided in him. It broke his heart a little, but he didn’t let it show on his face. “I told you then I’d never give you up without a fight. Did you think that was a lie?” He spoke with gentle intensity. “I meant it then, and I’m fighting for you now. Fighting *you* for you, and your bad memories of one horrible night.”

She was already shaking her head. "It's done, Victor, we can't un-do it.

"But we can move past it. Try to see some good in what happened." Her eyes widened at that. "I'm very excited about the baby. I've already been through *What to Expect When You're Expecting* twice."

"You have?"

"Yes, I'm building quite the pre-natal library. The baby isn't the problem, don't you see? The *baby* is the one good thing that came out of that night. It's the action behind the conception that we have to work through." *Please listen*, he prayed. *Please give me a chance. Don't make me do it. God, I don't want to do it.*

"You make it sound so easy," she said wistfully. "But we're too different."

"It isn't easy," he admitted, "but I know we can get through this if you give me a chance. You say I can't be trusted, but step outside yourself and look. In the last few weeks you've done nothing but run away, and you were determined to keep my child a secret, to raise him on your own with never a word to me. Then when I tried ease your financial burden, you threatened to get an abortion." She flinched, but he was relentless. "Now who can't be trusted?"

"I only—I only did what I had to."

"I know."

"Go away, Victor. All you've got for me are words. That's never going to change what happened. Leave me alone." She forced hardness in her voice. "Leave me alone or you'll regret it."

She waited for him to back down, to walk away. It would prove to be a long wait.

God help me. Help me do this. "You've proven that you'll stop at nothing to be away from me, even threatening the life of your child. Which is why you're going to marry me."

"I don't—"

Her bluff was the key to this. He didn't for a minute believe she'd really get an abortion, but she had to think he *did* believe. In a weird way, she had done him a favor. "I found out about your record," he said, flipping the first domino in a chain.

"My—what?" But her eyes were wide with fright; she knew.

"Your juvenile record," he explained patiently. "Good thing you were only fifteen, or you would have done some hard time."

"But the records were sealed. They—"

"Sealed doesn't mean destroyed."

"But I didn't *do* anything!"

"No?" His tone was politely curious, no more. She couldn't bear it.

“Listen. You must listen. The father at my last foster home was a little too interested in me, get it? So I ran away and fell in with some bad kids.”

“Except they weren’t kids, weren’t they?”

“No, they were all eighteen and over. But they took me in and didn’t bother me, try to have sex with me, you know? It was a place to go, it was people to talk to. I didn’t know what they were up to until they told me about the muggings, until they started showing me the jewelry and wallets they were taking. I left that night, but I didn’t tell anybody what they were up to. So they kept up the bad work.”

“And one of their victims died.”

She bowed her head. “Yes. Jenny Hildegaard, age thirty-seven, wife and mother. She fought hard, wouldn’t give up her wedding ring. And they killed her for it.”

“And you got picked up with the rest.”

“They told the cops that I knew about it from the beginning, which was a lie. And they said I didn’t do anything about it, which was the truth. Victor, I was fifteen! All I could think about was getting away from them. I thought that would be enough.”

“So they nailed you as an accessory.”

“Yes.”

“But you didn’t do any time.”

“No. Probation. The judge was sorry for me. And she promised to seal the records when I grew up.”

He wished he could take her in his arms, tell her it was all right, that she had been a child, that she had done the best she could. That she wasn’t responsible for Mrs. Hildegaard’s death, those rotten punks were. But he couldn’t do any of those things. He had to hurt her, and dreaded it as he had never dreaded anything.

“Well. That’s nice. An accomplice to murder, raising my baby.”

She didn’t defend herself. Just looked stricken.

“Here’s the thing, Ashley. You’re going to be my wife, or I’ll go see a judge and explain my extreme concern regarding my unborn child’s welfare. You’ve got a record, and you still show poor judgment in choosing your friends—as I’m sure Dr. Langenfeld at Carlson-Musch will testify. He’ll also testify that you are a constant, disruptive influence on his patients. As much as you don’t like him, he’s a prestigious psychiatrist and he owes me some favors—five hundred thousand of them, as a matter of fact. And judges don’t like working mothers, if you haven’t been watching the news. They hate moms who put their kids in daycare fifty hours a week. I’ll probably have full custody by the time the baby’s born. Even if I don’t, I’ve got the money to drag this out for years and years. You’ll be bankrupt in no time, just paying lawyer fees.”

“You—you said whatever my...my secret was, that it didn’t matter.”

He forced a shrug. “I changed my mind.”

“This is how you treat someone you profess to love?” she whispered.

“You’re not giving me any choice,” he told her honestly. “What’s it going to be, Ashley?”

“Surprise, Victor.” A little bit of fire now, which was much better than her whipped-hound impersonation. He almost smiled in relief. “The answer is still no.”

“Bad judgment, Ash. That’s pride talking. If you marry me, the baby will have the best of everything, always. If you don’t marry me, not only will you be wasting the first few years of his life in court battles with me, when you’re not working sixty hours a week at the paper to pay your lawyers, once I win—and I *will* win—you won’t be able to see him at all except at my convenience. Assuming the judge lets you have any custody visits at all. They’ll probably be supervised visits at first.” She was gripping the desk, her face ashen, and he stuffed his hands in his pockets so he wouldn’t put his arms around her, take it all back, agree with her wishes, promise never to see her or the baby again if only she stopped looking so betrayed and horrified. “Further proof I’m right to be doing this, Ash—you’re not making this decision in the baby’s best interests. You’re refusing me so you can save face, and for what?”

“What kind of a marriage would this be?” she said in a shocked whisper. “You would have blackmailed me into it.”

“You left me no choice. I can be a good husband and a good father, but you’ve got to let me prove it. And you won’t. So here we are. I’m sorry.”

The hell of it was, she heard the honest regret in his voice. He probably thought he was doing the right thing, the bullying goob. His words roared through her head and she gripped the edge of the desk, willing herself not to faint in front of him... again. She looked for a way out of the box he had so cruelly led her into, and could see nothing.

Victor watched her struggle with the decision. She looked ghastly, but if she started to go down he could catch her before she hit the floor. He hated having to do this, but he hadn’t lied about one thing; he truly believed she’d left him no choice. Ironically, while he never believed Ashley’s bluff, he could see she didn’t doubt his. It never occurred to her to call him on it, which was good for him, but it saddened him, too. She really believed he was capable of committing such monstrous injustices against her. She never doubted it for a second. This proved as nothing else did how much their relationship had changed.

“All right.”

Her voice was so low he barely heard her. “What?”

“I said all right. I’ll marry you.”

Any triumph he might have felt vanished as Ashley slowly sank to the floor, buried her face in her hands, and wept as if she had just sold her soul. He watched her, horrified, and took a step toward her. Without raising her face, she screamed at him to get out, to go away, just leave her be and *goaway*, so he slowly turned and walked out.

He couldn’t comfort her this time; he was the cause of her pain. Nor could he stand to watch. So he left, and by the time he got to his car he was shaking all over. He made his vow then and there: never once, *never once*, was Ashley going to regret marrying him. He would treat her like a queen, she would want for nothing, ever. Someday she would tell him she was glad she had married him. Might even tell him she

loved him. Then he would explain how it had all been a lie, a cruel trick to get her to give him another chance. He would apologize as fervently as he knew how, and promise to never, ever do such a thing again.

With this thought in mind, he started the car and drove to the town clerk's office to begin paperwork for the marriage license.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

They were married three days later, in secret. Ashley was afraid if Jean attended, her friend would see that she was a most reluctant participant in the wedding and do something Jean-like. This could be anything from trying to have the groom arrested, to calling the minister a Cossack and throwing a naked Barbie doll at him. For his part, Victor was embarrassed that he had blackmailed his bride-to-be, and just wanted to get the whole thing over with so they could get on with the business of being married. Thus, a justice of the peace married them, and they pulled two strangers off the street to witness it.

Victor handed her a plain gold band, then slipped his own band on his finger. "Was this Crystal's?" she asked, but he didn't rise to the bait; just shook his head. He'd bought the rings the day before yesterday.

When the judge announced he could kiss the bride, the only sound was Ashley's firm, "Do not touch me." As a vow of undying devotion and newlywed fervor, it left a lot to be desired. Victor sighed but said nothing, thinking, *Well, you deserve it.*

They walked to the car in silence, which was finally broken by Ashley's sarcastic, "Dum-dum-da-dum...dum-dum-da-dum...that's what we were missing. An organist. And, of course, *my desire to actually be married!*"

"Sorry," he said, for about the thousandth time. "Thanks for not spitting on me during the vows."

She snorted, then forced her face in a frown and asked, "Where will we live?" *Not the condo. Please don't let him have taken the condo off the market.*

"Wherever you like."

"Really?"

He turned, surprised. "Sure. Do you want a house?"

"That would be..." *Too good to be true.* "...nice."

"So. Pick one you like and we'll go live there."

She chuckled, and he smiled in response. "I don't think it's quite as easy as that."

"You'd be surprised."

She fell silent. True, his money had certainly let him put the screws to her, and with cool efficiency. If he'd been some poor schmuck without a job, would he have been able to dig up her past? Unlikely.

“What about Jean?”

“Oh, the apartment. If she wants to live there alone, we’ll pay your share of the rent each month. What is it, about a thousand?”

“Two hundred.”

“Ah-ha.”

“She’s not very subtle, sometimes.”

“So I’ve noticed. Anyway, we’ll pay your share as long as she wants to live there, and if she doesn’t, I’ll reimburse her for the security deposit and first month’s rent.”

“You’ll have to do that. She hates to live alone. I wish—”

“What, honey?”

Honey. Ha! Blackmailing creep. “Nothing.”

“Don’t lie. What is it?”

“I was wishing she could live with us.”

“Oh.” He thought it over for all of three seconds. Here was a golden opportunity to start making up for the past. But it was a heavy penalty to pay, and so soon, too. He mentally sighed and committed himself. “Why can’t she?”

“You mean you wouldn’t mind?”

“Why would I?” he lied. Living with Jeannie ought to put thirty or forty gray hairs on his head in no time. “We’ll get a big enough place so we’re not in each other’s way. She can stay with us as long as you want.”

“Really?” She sounded stunned.

“Sure.”

“Oh.” She started to thank him, then changed her mind. She shot him another look of disbelief.

“Did you think,” he asked quietly, “once I’d gotten you to marry me, I wouldn’t want you to be happy?”

“I don’t know *what* to think,” she replied. “About any of this. I keep expecting to wake up. And where are we going to sleep tonight?”

“Marriott Longwharf,” he replied casually, and saw her tighten up just a bit. Well, this was a hurdle he’d have to jump sooner or later.

“Separate rooms?” she squeaked.

“One room, Ashley, and one bed.”

She stopped short, right there on the sidewalk. “Oh, no. Victor. I can’t.”

He took her hand and gently pulled her forward, so she started walking with him. “You will,” he told her quietly, and she jerked her hand out of his grasp.

“I said *I can’t*! How can you expect me to, after—after—”

“It will be all right,” he told her, still quiet, still trying to soothe her without touching her.

“No, it won’t,” she said, trembling.

The rest of the day she was pale and drawn, barely speaking to him except to answer a direct question. He tried to coax her to eat, and only reminding her of the child she carried had any inducement at all.

“I’m just not hungry,” she said, picking at her food. “And if you keep bugging me to eat, I’ll throw up.”

They were eating supper in the Longwharf restaurant, having already checked in. Tomorrow they would go house-hunting. That was the only thought getting her through the day. Living in a house, her own home was a dream she’d had since she was old enough to dream. And Jean could live with them! She still couldn’t believe Victor had gone along with *that*. He must be feeling tremendously guilty. Good!

“Have you been having a lot of morning sickness?” he asked, bringing her out of her thoughts.

“Only when I’m with you,” she said brightly. Then, at his sober expression, she added, “Actually, every day, almost. But it goes away when I eat. Usually.”

“When will you see the doctor again?”

“Next week.” No reason not to see Dr. Opitz now; the thing she had feared most had happened. “I found a really nice lady to be my OB. And you’ll never guess where her office is,” she added sarcastically.

Victor had the grace to flush. “I’d like to come with. I can clear my calendar whenever you have pre-natal appointments.”

“You would?” She thought about it for a few moments, then nodded. She had to say yes—it involved the baby, and she had promised him involvement in that one area of her life. “Not much happens,” she warned him. “She just feels my belly, weighs me, and asks if I have any questions. Then I pee in a cup and make an appointment for next month.”

“Not at the same time, I hope.”

She snorted out a laugh and dropped her soup spoon, then bit her lip, hard, to stop.

“Please don’t cut yourself off, Ashley. I love the way you let yourself go. You’re emotionally fearless and that’s a gift, it truly is. It’s not a bad thing to be able to smile and laugh with me.”

She shrugged sullenly and the mood was broken. They finished their meal in silence.

“Let’s go upstairs,” he said after he had signed for the bill.

“Can’t we have dessert first?” she blurted.

He raised an eyebrow at her. “*Now* you’re hungry,” he said wryly. “Nice try, Ashley. Come on.”

She trudged after him, a noblewoman on the way to the guillotine, and when they were in the room he opened his mouth; she closed her eyes, bracing herself.

“Would you mind if I watched a pay-per-view movie? I haven’t seen it before.”

“Dammit, I’m just not—what?”

“The movie. I’d like to watch it, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh. Oh! No, I don’t mind. That’s perfectly fine. No problem. None. I don’t mind.”

He shook his head at her, sliding out of his jacket, and she turned and practically ran into the other room. She’d take a nice long shower, get into her nightgown, and read in bed for a while. A two hour reprieve! What a gift!

Except when she entered the bedroom, she saw Victor was already in bed, mesmerized by the latest James Bond movie. He was dressed in navy boxers and a wristwatch.

I can’t do this.

Yes, you can, she argued with herself, furious at her cowardice. *It’s a done deal, like he said. He’s my husband now. I can’t spend the rest of my life afraid to be in the same room with him, the same bed. Now get over there.*

She got over there, scurrying under the covers and yanking them up to her chin. He turned to her and opened his mouth; she cringed, waiting.

“You knocked the remote control on the floor. Mind picking it up?”

Feeling like a moron, she did so. And now she was a little, just a little disgruntled. Obviously, sex with her could wait. He wasn’t in any sort of hurry. Hardly the actions of a supposedly loving husband on his wedding night.

Annoyed, and annoyed at herself for being annoyed, she settled herself with much fluffing of pillows and straightening of blankets, carefully ignoring the man next to her.

Beside her, Victor slowly relaxed. He was rigid with the strain of appearing to be involved with the movie. Pretending to be interested in anything but making slow, sweet love to his bride was maddening beyond belief. His bride. His wife. God, what a lovely word.

He fidgeted during movie’s climax, very conscious of Ashley’s soft weight beside him. She was wearing a plain cotton nightgown, two sizes too big, in a clear attempt not to appear alluring in any way. He could have told her it was a lost cause. She could be wearing a dirty baseball uniform and he would still want her.

The movie, finally, ended, and he clicked it off. He turned to Ashley and saw she had dozed off, her

book, Dante's *Inferno*, open across her breasts. He watched her sleep for a long moment, finally able to gaze at her without making her nervous about his intentions. Her breasts rose and fell with each soft breath, and her face was peaceful, relaxed in sleep. Even in the room's dim light, her hair had a rich gleam that made him wonder what it looked like in moonlight.

He itched to touch her, but made his hands stay still. A thought occurred to him—here was a wonderful opportunity to show Ashley he could keep his desire in check. He would let her sleep. It would almost certainly kill him, but he wouldn't make love to her tonight.

Are you nuts? It's your wedding night, and she's your wife. Go for it!

He sternly told the inner voice to get lost, picked up Ashley's book and put it on the nightstand, then carefully leaned over her and shut that light off. He shut his own light out, then lay back, resigning himself to a long night.

* * * * *

Ashley woke to a familiar sensation, known since childhood: *Where am I? Whose house is this? Is it safe here?* In a few seconds she remembered where she was, and got up to use the bathroom. She had only taken a few steps when nausea overwhelmed her and she had to run. She barely made it to the toilet in time.

She was resting her forehead against the cool porcelain, trying to muster the energy to get up and brush her teeth, when she heard Victor pad into the room and put a warm hand on the back of her neck. She was too exhausted to jump. His voice in the dark was rough with sleep and concern. "Are you all right?"

"Morning sickness," she mumbled.

"Well, it's morning, so that makes sense. Three a.m., in fact. Shut your eyes, I'm turning on the light." She did so, and heard the click as he switched on the small light over the sink. She heard running water, and then he was crouched beside her, pressing a wet cloth to her face.

"Victor?"

"Mmmm?"

"When I'm sitting here feeling sick and miserable, with everything I ate heading into the sewer system, slapping a cold, clammy washcloth on my face doesn't help. Okay?"

He stopped immediately, feeling like an idiot. She saw the look on his face and said, without having any idea what would come out, "But thanks for trying. It's scary to be in strange places. It was brave of you to hear me making those awful noises and come after me in the dark."

He gave her a funny look, understanding mixed with compassion and possibly a little pity. She shook her head irritably at him. "Please, no more lectures on why it's silly to fret about being a foster child. I don't want to throw up again."

"I wasn't going to do that. I was just wondering what you were like when you were a little girl."

“Ugly and quiet,” she assured him.

“Doubt it,” he said, smiling. The moment stretched between them and they were both afraid to speak, to shatter the fragile connection. Finally he said, “I’m going to call room service, have them bring up some soup and crackers for you.”

“Vic, I just threw up, I couldn’t eat a—”

“The books say you’ll feel worse when your stomach’s empty,” he said stubbornly. “I read it in at least four places. Stay there and rest. I’ll be right back.”

“I wasn’t thinking of getting up and running a marathon,” she called after him rudely. Childish, but she felt better for it.

When he came back he helped her stand, ignoring her protests that she was fine. He steadied her while she brushed her teeth, then helped her back to bed. He was carefully tucking her in when room service knocked.

“That was fast,” she said, surprised.

“Penthouse Suite, so they try hard,” he said carelessly, leaving to let them in. He returned with a breakfast tray and placed it on her lap. She saw chicken soup, toast, a large bowl of oyster crackers, and a glass brim-full of clear carbonated liquid; she tasted it and deduced it was ginger ale. She realized with startling suddenness that she was thirsty and ravenous. He watched contentedly while she polished off everything on the tray, leaving a few crackers to nibble on in the morning.

“That’s better,” she said, lying back with a sigh. He silently removed the tray. *Good service here*, she thought wickedly. When he returned, straightened the blankets and pulled them to just under her chin. “Victor, cluck-cluck.”

“Sorry. I never shared a room with a pregnant lady before.”

That made her realize something, and she almost sat up with the shock of it. “You didn’t—I mean, we didn’t—we didn’t do anything last night.”

“No.” He leaned over and shut off the light, then lay down.

“Why didn’t you?” She couldn’t hide the relief in her tone. “You seemed pretty determined before.”

“You fell asleep and I didn’t want to disturb you,” he said simply.

“Oh. Well, I appreciate that,” she said formally, feeling slightly silly. This had to be the oddest wedding night on record.

“Thank you,” he replied, equally formal. Then, gently: “Go to sleep.”

Oddly disappointed, and annoyed to be feeling that way, she did.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“I’ve seen happier brides,” Jean admitted as Ashley took a left and drove toward her new house. “Those poor mail-order brides, for example. The ones who can either marry an American or hang out in Siberia for the rest of their lives. They look a little chirpier than you do.”

“Stow it, Jean,” Ashley said, not unkindly. “What’s done is done.”

“That’s the spirit,” Jean deadpanned, and Ashley giggled.

“This is it. Victor’s money guys took care of all the details this morning, and the movers should be here any minute.” Ashley parked in the three-car driveway and got out. She had trouble believing this was her new home, the place where she and Victor would live and raise their children. She expected to be met by a snarling Doberman and escorted off the property at any moment.

Jean whistled in appreciation. “Grotesquely expensive, but not ostentatious,” she said approvingly. “So few can pull it off.”

See? There are compensations, Ashley told herself. *No one’s kicking you out of here if your rent check bounces, that’s one thing. And the house is plenty big enough so you can keep out of Victor’s way, that’s another .*

“I like it,” she said shortly. “I hope you will, too. Victor said you could stay here as long as you liked.”

“I don’t even want to think about what you were doing to him at the time he agreed to this,” Jeannie said, startling another laugh out of her friend. “Ah, that’s more like it. For a while, you were looking more like a death row inmate than a newly wed rich lady.”

“I’m not rich,” Ashley said, surprised. “Victor is. I’m just...” What? His roommate? His brood mare? His sex toy? What?

“How about a tour?” Jean said quickly, clearly sensing her friend’s riot of emotions.

Up, down, up, down... Ashley wondered how much of her state was due to her pregnancy, and how much was due to all that had happened in the last two weeks. “Let’s start with one of the nine bedrooms.”

“There are only six. I think,” she admitted, then grinned. “I quit counting after four. Race you to the foyer.”

* * * * *

“Ashley, I swear to God, if I see you lift one more box, I’ll—”

“Force me into marriage?” she replied sweetly, dropping the box full of clothes on the floor with a decisive thump.

“Cute. I hired movers to take care of this stuff. You’re supposed to take it easy.”

It was late, and they were in his, *their* , bedroom. Ashley had been unpacking for hours, stalling the

inevitable. But she finally gave in and dressed for bed, except when she saw Victor in bed already, she had grabbed the first box she could get her hands on. It didn't help that he was bare to the waist, the sheets puddled around his midsection. The man had a ridiculously splendid build, and that was a fact.

"I've rested enough," she said shortly, trying not to stare at her husband's flat stomach.

"Ashley. Quit unpacking and come to bed. It's late and you've been working like a dog all day. That's another thing—you've got to start taking better care of yourself."

"You just want me to lie around and eat bon-bons all day."

"That's not true," he said. He slapped his book shut, *So You're Pregnant!*, and put it on the nightstand next to *And Baby Makes Three!* and *The Best New Baby Book*. "I just don't want you to work so hard, and that includes unpacking and moving boxes."

"Ha! I know for a fact that all of those books told you exercise was very important when you're pregnant. Not sitting in a corner while strangers put all my stuff away. Ex-er-cise."

"So go for a walk," he said, still looking stubborn. She slipped into bed beside him, pleased they were arguing. It would keep his mind off...other things. "A nice, slow, gentle walk. That's all the exercise you need."

"You're an idiot," she informed him.

He pretended to wipe away a tear. "I remember the first time you told me that," he mock-sobbed. "It was in the elevator at Carlson-Musch, when you were trying to prove that you weren't a patient."

She laughed, pleased. "I remember that!"

"Of course you do, it wasn't even three months ago."

"What a weird day, huh?" she asked seriously. "Who would have thought..."

"That so much would happen," he finished, "and that we would be so blessed." He rested a hand on her stomach and she was so surprised she let him. "When do you think you'll start to show?"

"Not for a couple more months." Her voice sounded too high, but his warm fingers on her stomach were extremely distracting. Thank God for the sheets and blankets. And her nightgown. "Then I'll get so fat you won't be able to stand the sight of me."

"That will never happen," he said softly. He leaned forward to kiss her and she pulled back.

"Don't do that."

"Yes," he said firmly, leaning back to look into her eyes, "I will do that. You're my wife, you have my name, my property, and my money, but the flip side means you have to be a wife."

"But I only married you because—"

"I know why you married me. But that doesn't mean you and I aren't going to live as husband and wife."

She was trembling, and hated herself for it. “I don’t think I can.”

“Yes, you can. I’ll help you.” He smiled at her. “I’ll even do all the work.”

“Just like last time?”

He froze in the act of reaching for her, then carefully pulled the blankets away. “I deserved that. If you feel the need to say such things to me, do so whenever you wish. I’m in no position to cry mercy. But it’s not going to stop me from making love to you.”

Furious that she hadn’t distracted him, she tried to yank the blankets back up but he pulled them out of her reach. “If you can just give me a little time,” she said, hating the pleading note in her voice, “if you can wait until I’m ready for you—”

“You’ll never be ready for me,” he said gently, sadly. “If we had done things your way, I wouldn’t even know you were pregnant. I’m not saying these things to hurt you. Do you think I like scaring you? But you didn’t give me any choice. I don’t willingly choose this kind of relationship. I want us to love each other.”

“It’s impossible!”

“That’s the spirit,” he said wryly, sounding, to her ears, eerily like Jean. He leaned over and shut off the lamp, plunging the room in darkness.

She felt him take her by the arms and cried out, then bit her lip, hard. She wouldn’t do that anymore. It was too humiliating.

“Ashley, Ashley,” he murmured, stroking her hair. “I promise not to hurt you. Don’t be scared.”

“Don’t draw it out, for God’s sake! Please, Victor, if you insist on this I’m not strong enough to stop you—”

“Don’t say that! It’s not a question of who is stronger. You promised to be my wife in all ways. I’m only holding you to your word.”

“Yes, all right, I did promise, but please, don’t be all night about it. Can’t we just get it over with?”

He sighed. “I suppose ‘can’t we just get it over with’ is a slight improvement over ‘don’t touch me’. Stay put, I’ll be right back.”

She heard him rummaging around in the nightstand drawer and wondered how he could see a thing in such dark. Then he was tugging at her nightgown. “Off with this, sweetie,” and then she shivering in the middle of the bed. He pressed her down against the pillows, stealing a kiss before she could pull away, and then she was flat on her back and he was easing her hips up to remove her panties.

“Just close your eyes,” he murmured, “and think of England.”

She bit her lip, hard, so she wouldn’t laugh. There was nothing funny about what was going on in this bedroom, and she wouldn’t give in to her weird sense of humor.

“Aren’t you ashamed?” she asked. She felt his hands on her knees, gently parting them.

“Not especially. We made a deal, remember?”

She blew out her breath in irritation. Did he have to keep reminding her? “I mean about marrying twice, and neither time for love. You *should* be ashamed.”

“But this time I did marry for love.”

She nearly sat up in her outrage. “That’s a lie!”

“No. In time you’ll come to believe it.” She felt his warm fingers between her thighs, and then slowly, but insistently, he pushed up inside her. In a flash she understood what the rummaging in the drawer meant—his fingers were slick with lubricant. He gently worked a finger in and out, paused—she assumed he was getting more lubricant—and then worked more of the gel into her soft woman’s flesh. Her humiliation was extreme; her traitorous body was liking this very much, and she began to feel very warm.

“God, you feel good,” he said softly in the dark. “So soft and sweet.”

“Hurry...up...” she grated, fists clenched at her sides.

She felt his tongue lap at her nipple, a touch so light she could barely feel it. Her nipple stiffened instantly and she was grateful for the dark that hid her blush of shame. Bad enough to be made pregnant against her will. Bad enough to be blackmailed into marriage. But then to enjoy his touch, *crave* his touch—what on earth was wrong with her? She never used to be such a masochist.

Now he was stroking her clit while his breath tickled her nipple. She had to clench her fists hard enough to drive the nails into her palm to keep from reaching out to him. “I asked you not to draw this out,” she gasped.

“Sorry,” he said sadly. “I was hoping—never mind.” Suddenly he was right there, his chest settling against hers, and she gasped and shrank back as far as she could, and her legs tried to snap together without any prompting from her brain. She felt his knee nudge between, gently forcing her legs apart, and then his mouth was on hers.

She twisted her head away. “Don’t *do* that!” she practically shouted, her tears very close. “Please, Victor, leave me alone, I’ve changed my mind. I don’t want to be married...” She spoke faster and faster, conscious of his silence, conscious of his hands on her hips, of his body, long and hard, against hers. “I don’t want to be married...don’t want you to do that...don’t want you to don’t, don’t, *don’t*...” Then he was sliding inside of her, and it didn’t hurt but he was so big, he was still pushing inside her, would there never be any end of him? “Don’t,” she managed on a gasp, and then he was seated fully within her, she was pinned beneath him like a butterfly to a board, and for the first time she noticed he was shaking so hard the bed trembled.

“God, God, God,” he was groaning against her neck, and she could feel how tight the muscles of his jaw were against her throat. “Don’t move, Ash, whatever you do. Oh, Christ. You feel incredible. Am I hurting you? Don’t move or I won’t be able to—am I hurting you?”

“No,” she said. He sounded like he was in terrible pain. “This is going to sound like a dumb question under the circumstances, but are you all right? Do you regularly see a cardiologist? You seem kind of...”

“Overwhelmed,” he moaned, rising up so he could look at her. Her eyes had adjusted to the dark and she could make out his silhouette above her. “I’m sorry, Ashley, but *I am* going to draw this out. You feel so good and I love touching you and I can’t bear for this to be over yet, especially since you won’t let me near you once morning comes.”

“No,” she said decisively, and brought her legs up, which seated him deeper within her. The bolt of pleasure that action brought surprised a gasp out of her; she fought to remain impassive. “I want you finished and *out* of me. Think of me as a landlord, kicking you out for a bounced rent check.”

“Ashley,” he said pleadingly, then groaned when she deliberately wriggled beneath him. “Don’t...do...that.” Then he seized her with shocking suddenness and pulled out, almost all the way out, and then surged back in. She swallowed a moan, wanting nothing more than to wrap her legs around his waist and thrust back at him, to welcome his caresses, his kisses, until they were both spent.

Instead she closed her eyes and forced herself to remain still. He didn’t deserve a willing, active partner. He was forcing her to this...again.

Oh but that sounded like a lie. Two lies.

It was over in moments; his grip tightened and she saw him throw his head back, groaning at the ceiling as he found his release. *Now he’ll collapse over me and go to sleep*, she thought, annoyed, *just like last time. Wheeee!* Instead, he wrapped his arms around her and rolled over, bringing her on top. “That was sweet,” he said against her neck, and kissed the hollow of her throat. “But I wish you would have let me bring you pleasure.”

“I don’t want your pleasure,” she said rudely. “Let go of me.”

He did so at once. “Do you want some help cleaning up?”

“No.” She started to climb off the bed when he reached out and caught her arm. “What is it now?”

“Did I hurt you? I was a little...frantic, toward the end.”

The memory made her cheeks warm. “No, it didn’t hurt. This time.”

“And never will again.” “We’ll see,” she informed him, then walked into the bathroom.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

He left her alone the next night, but gently insisted on lovemaking the morning after. “I want to be able to see you clearly,” he explained, and she found that distressing to the extreme.

Except for the sunlit room, it was a replay of the other night: he gently stretched her with lubricant, applied a generous amount to himself as well, then slowly entered her, watching her face the entire time. She didn’t bother with struggles or protests: he had been right, damn him—a deal was a deal. Instead she tried to wriggle again, and brought her legs up, tricks that had worked quite well the other night, but he just shook his head at her and smiled, and kept thrusting in and out of her with gentle insistence.

It was almost more than she could bear, feeling that hot, hard length nudging in and out of her, looking

up into his intense black gaze while his body did things to hers which were beyond her control. He lowered his head and tried to kiss her, but she turned her face away. He finished quickly after that and withdrew, pulling her against him and holding her for a time. “I love you,” he said. “I’m sorry it has to be this way.”

She said nothing.

When they went to the kitchen for breakfast, Jean was already there. She waved her cereal spoon in amiable greeting and immediately returned her attention to *Vogue*.

“Don’t forget about your appointment,” Victor said, loading his briefcase with the paperwork he finished the night before.

“Of course I won’t forget—I’m the one who’s pregnant.”

“And a more radiant mama-to-be never existed,” he said, ignoring her tone and gifting her with a warm smile. “I’ll meet you at Dr. Opitz’s.” He bent and brushed a kiss across her cheek; she allowed it, and had to force herself not to turn around to watch him walk out.

Jean put her magazine down the moment she heard the front door close. “He apparently enjoys it when you’re mean to him,” she said, arching her reddish gold eyebrows. “The boy’s got it bad. How’s your sex life?”

She shivered, remembering. “Awful.”

“He’s mean? Beats you with his belt? Smears applesauce on your toes? Makes you dress up like a dog and bark for him?”

She giggled. “No, even worse.”

“What could be worse than the dog suit?”

Abruptly, Ashley started to sob. “Being with him. I hate him! I wish I’d never met him!”

Suddenly Jean was there, her arms around Ashley, patting her, soothing her. “Honey, why don’t you give it up? Who are you trying to fool? You’re crazy about him, you have been since you met him.”

“I hate him,” she said, crying harder.

“If I really believed that, I’d help you pack your bags. Hell, I’d hire someone to break his legs. Hell, I’d break his legs. But it’s no use, Ash. You love him. And he thinks the world of you. I heard him telling the gardener that he was newly married and his wife was expecting, and you should have heard him—he was so proud of you, Ashley.”

“Eavesdropper,” she said, blowing her nose on Victor’s cloth napkin. *So there, Vic*, she thought meanly.

“Don’t change the subject. You’ve no reason to be so unhappy, you silly twit. You’re married to a man who practically worships you, you’re pregnant—and you’ve wanted a baby for *how* long?—and you happen to be desperately in love with the baby’s father. Oh, and now you have more money than the Queen of England.”

“But it’s wrong,” she said desperately. “He did that—to me—and I shouldn’t still love him. I should be able to hate him, I shouldn’t think about him all the time, and I shouldn’t enjoy how he—he—”

“Oh-ho,” Jean said quietly.

“It’s sick.”

“No, the dog suit thing would be sick. This is just...well, it sounds an awful lot like two people falling in love.”

She made a sound that sounded awfully like a gag, but Jean—deep in lecture mode—ignored it.

“It would be sick if forcing you was his *modus operandi*, as it were. If calling you Crystal was an everyday thing. But it was a fluke, Ash, a one-time thing. He was out of his head. Hello, near death? How long can you hold it against him?”

“Forever,” she said stubbornly. “I can’t put it out of my mind. When he’s...inside me, it’s all I can think about, and then when he gets me excited I get *somad*, at him and at me.”

“Give yourself more time,” Jean advised, sitting down across from her. “You’ve only been married a week. Four months ago you hadn’t even met your husband, and you sure weren’t planning on getting pregnant. Once you get your equilibrium back—”

“I’ll come to my senses and divorce the bastard,” she said sourly.

“Either that, or you’ll finally stop being stubborn and accept the fact that you love him, he loves you, so shall it be, forever and ever, amen.”

“Thanks, reverend.”

“In the meantime, let’s go toilet paper Crystal’s shrubs.”

Her mood lifted after that. For one thing, for the first time since she could remember, she didn’t have to work. She had quit her job the day after deciding to marry Victor, promising her boss she would be available for the occasional freelance assignment. Best of all, she had almost two weeks of vacation pay coming to her, and she had nothing to spend it on but Christmas presents.

Christmas—with all that had happened in the last couple months, she had completely forgotten about the upcoming holidays. Christmas was only a couple weeks away, and for once she had the money for presents.

Smiling, she punched the Speakerphone button on the telephone and called her bank, wondering if the check had been credited to her account yet. Two whole weeks of pay, and she didn’t have to spend a penny of it on rent, food, or utilities!

“Want to go Christmas shopping?” she asked Jean, punching in her account number.

“That’s more like it,” she said approvingly, slapping the magazine closed. “Might as well take the good with the bad, and his money definitely falls under the Good category.”

“I’m not touching his money,” she said stubbornly. “I’ve got my own.”

“Oh. Sure, that makes sense,” Jean said, in a tone that indicated she thought the exact opposite. “Say, have you been helping yourself to my medication again?”

Ashley stuck her tongue out at her just as the robotic voice of the automated attendant came on the line. “Your balance...as of...December...fourth...is...thirty... thousand...seven... hundred...sixty...two...dollars...and...thirteen...cents.”

“What?” Ashley shouted.

“Exactly how much severance pay did they offer you?” Jean asked.

“Oh, that—there has to be some mistake.”

But a quick call to her banker confirmed that there was no mistake. Her last paycheck had indeed been deposited...and thirty grand had been wired in on her wedding day.

She stabbed the speed dial button for Victor’s office. “Lawrence Associates,” his secretary sang.

“Could I speak to Victor, please?”

“May I tell him who’s calling?”

“Tell him it’s Ashley Lorentz.”

“Well, hell-o, Mrs. Lawrence!”

“Lorentz.”

“Er...yes. Such a pleasure to speak with you, but you*must* come to the office so the staff can see you in *person* .”

“I’ll do that, now can I please talk to Victor? It’s urgent.”

“At once, ma’am.”

There was a click, a split-second of hold-music, and then Victor was on the line. “Ashley? What’s wrong? Is it the baby? Are you all right?”

“Hell, no, I’m not all right!” she shouted. Across from her, Jean, in the process of pouring herself a bowl of cereal, spilled the milk. “I was going to do some shopping today so I checked my account to find out how much money I had. Imagine my surprise to find out my bank is apparently paying six thousand percent interest!”

He made an impatient sound. “Is that all? For God’s sake, you scared the hell out of me. Look, my accountant is on the office phone speed dial. His name is William Along. Just tell him how much money you want and he’ll cut you a check. That’s—”

“I don’t want*more* money, I want you to stay out of my personal account!”

“Why?”

She closed her eyes at the honest puzzlement in his tone. *Think tranquil beaches, think golden sunsets. Calm, be calm.* “Because it’s my account. If you keep dumping money in there, you’ll be sorry.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Spend it!” she yelled, slamming the phone down. She drummed her fingers on the table for a moment while Jean watched her nervously. Finally she jumped to her feet. “Get your coat,” she snapped, and Jean scrambled to obey.

* * * * *

“Here you go, pal.”

“Thanks, Cherry.” the homeless man, the one she had jumped over on that long-ago day to meet Victor for their first lunch date, took the offered check docilely. He glanced at the amount and his eyes widened, then narrowed. “This a joke, cute stuff?”

“Nope.”

“It’s not made out to nobody.”

“That’s because I don’t know your name. Come on, let’s go open an account for you. They’ll give you a cash card and you can take out the money whenever you want.”

She seized the slack-jawed man by the elbow and hauled him up off the sidewalk.

“This ain’t real,” the man, a former construction foreman, confided to Jean as they walked to the bank. “I figure I ate some bad chicken or somethin’, because I’m having this incredibly weird dream.”

“It’s not a dream,” Jean informed him, “it’s revenge. You’re a tool, sir, used by my friend to punish her husband.”

“Cool!”

Things were arranged at the bank in less than twenty minutes. The homeless man—who wasn’t likely to remain homeless much longer—was Dan Mitchell. He proved more suspicious of a trick than grateful, until it was proved to him that, yes, “Cherry” had just given him thirty grand, and yes, it was his to use however he liked.

“Who do I haveta kill?”

“Nobody,” Ashley protested. “It’s a present, that’s all.”

“Hey, this is like that movie, the one with Redford and what’s-her-name.” Dan nodded sagely and tipped Ashley a wink. “Hey, no problem, doll. For thirty grand, I’ll sleep with ya.”

“Keep your pants on,” Ashley told him, not unkindly. “I’m an unhappily married woman.”

“But ya gotta want somethin’ for it,” he hollered after Jean and Ashley as they left the bank.

“I do,” she said without turning around. “Buy something warm with the money. It’s too cold out here for a windbreaker.”

Ashley was so pleased, she was still chortling over lunch. “That’ll teach him to think he can buy my affection.”

“Oh, yes, you gave away thirty thousand dollars for spite, but *he* ’s a real bastard.”

She put down her fork. “Jean, who’s side are you on?”

“Yours, of course, because I don’t think *you’re* on your side. You’ve been acting like a child ever since you were—um—”

“Raped by my husband,” she asked sarcastically.

“His past bad behavior,” Jean said stubbornly, “is no excuse for your current bad behavior.”

“You *are* on his side!”

“No, Ash. I’m on yours, like I said. Because you’re not on yours.”

They finished their lunch in silence.

* * * * *

Ashley showed up for her appointment half an hour early, only to find Victor waiting for her. The big man, dressed in a tailor-made suit and topcoat, looked out of place in a room full of pregnant women. Ashley noticed quite a few of the women were eyeing her husband, and the cow sitting next to him was actually *flirting* with him.

“...I’m sure your husband wouldn’t mind if you elected to breastfeed,” she heard him say politely. “I’m hoping that’s what my wife decides to do. I’ve read it’s best for the baby.”

“Oh, I’m so glad to hear you say that. I just, you know...” She wriggled in her seat and crossed her legs, flashing Victor a blatant come-hither look. “Wanted *aman*’s opinion.”

“Well, what does your husband think?”

“Oh, him. He’s never around...travels so much...and I get soooo lonely.” She sighed disconsolately, and peeked up at Victor to see if he was appropriately sorry for her.

“Darling!” Ashley shouted, causing everyone in the room to jump. Victor turned his head, spotted her, and started to stand. She foiled him by marching over to his seat and sitting down in his lap. Hard. “I’m sorry to have kept you waiting.” She threw her arms around his neck and smacked his cheek loudly. “Have you been here long?”

“...can’t...breathe...”

She shifted her weight and Victor gasped for breath. “Good thing you’re already pregnant,” he muttered into her ear, “because I don’t think I’ll be able to father more children. And how about a real kiss?”

She smiled across him at the hussy. “Who’s your new friend, darling?”

“This is...er...I’m sorry, miss, I didn’t get your name.”

“It’s Elinor,” the woman sniffed, clearly put out to see physical evidence that Victor was not a free man. “Elinor Pohl.”

“It’s just *lovely* to meet you, Miss Pohl.”

“It’s Missus.”

“Yes, of course it is. So nice of you to keep my Victor company while he waits. How can *weever* repay her, darling?”

“I’m sure *we’ll* think of a way.”

Ashley shifted her weight again, trying to get up, but Victor tightened his grip. “I like you there,” he said. “But I haven’t figured out how someone so little and thin can weigh so much. Do you have antimatter for marrow?”

“No, and it’s not nice to comment on my heaviness. You think it’s bad now, wait another couple months.” She leaned against his chest, comfortable. She felt so good about her triumph, making Dan Mitchell un-homeless, that she could afford to be generous with her affection. He was going to be so mad when he found out what she’d done! She chuckled to herself, picturing the scene.

And frankly, not that this was relevant, because it absolutely was not, but she didn’t care for the way Elinor Pohl was ogling her husband. *At all*.

And...he was being awfully sweet. She might not care for him as a husband, but he was going to be a marvelous father.

Further conversation was cut short by Dr. Opitz’s arrival on the scene. “Ah, Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence!”

“Actually,” Ashley said, peering up at Dr. Opitz from Victor’s lap, “I’m hyphenating my name.” Beneath her, Victor made an odd sound, obviously trying not to laugh. “So it’s Ashley Lorentz-Lawrence.”

Dr. Opitz blinked, then continued without missing a beat. “Anyway, I just had a cancellation, so I’ll pull you two in now, and then I’m outta here.” Dr. Opitz mimed a racquetball swing. “Time to show those idiot men what a real player looks like. Come on back, you two.”

“You are evil incarnate,” Victor informed his wife as they walked to the examination suites. “Truly a wicked creature.”

“I was just curious about your new friend,” Ashley protested. “I didn’t—hey!” Victor had picked her up, kissed her neck, and then set her down. “What was that for?”

His black eyes twinkled at her. “For being jealous.”

“I *wasnot* —”

“Ashley, if you’ll slip into this gown, Victor and I will wait outside.” Dr. Opitz gestured toward the exam table, on which was a neatly folded gown. She shut the door and turned to Victor. “Will you be attending all the pre-natal exams, Mr. Lawrence?”

“All I can, yes.”

“Very well. Do I meet with your approval?”

He looked at her warily. She was almost as tall as he was, which was, frankly, a little intimidating. And with her cool, blonde good looks, she reminded him of Crystal. *Evenmore* intimidating. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’ve been checked out pretty thoroughly in the last week or so. People have been checking my references all the way back to medical school. I assumed it was you, since Ashley’s my newest patient.”

“Oh.” Victor had the grace to look embarrassed. “I was just... I’m sure you’re a good doctor, but Ashley’s very important to me, and this is our first child.”

“I understand, Mr. Lawrence, and I’m not angry. I just wanted to make sure I meet with your approval.”

“You do,” he assured her. “And now I have a favor to ask.” She raised her eyebrows at him and he continued meekly. “Could you not mention this to my wife? She’ll be furious if she finds out I was checking up on her OB.”

Well, well, Dr. Opitz thought, watching the large man practically shuffle his feet. *Guess we know who wears the pants in that family. And she’s such a tiny thing, too.* “No problem,” she said, grinning. “Let’s go in.”

It was a routine pre-natal, and Sharon Opitz had done hundreds—no, thousands—of them. But she never tired of them. And she had never seen two people more excited or happy about becoming parents. The husband had a hundred questions, and Ashley listened hard to every spoken word. The woman was in excellent health, but Sharon was a little worried at the size of her pelvis. Her patient was a pretty thing, with those big blue eyes and that amazing hair, but petite and delicately formed, with narrow hips. The husband was a big guy; delivering their baby might prove tricky. She decided to wait and see before mentioning some possible concerns.

Interestingly, when she took out her big tube of lubricant to smear it on Ashley’s belly, the woman tensed up, and Victor looked away. Odd. Sharon mentally shrugged and smeared the lubricant on Ashley’s belly, then flicked on the fetal monitor.

“Okay, let’s see if we can find a heartbeat today,” she said brightly, and the words dispelled the sudden tension in the room.

“Isn’t it a little early?” Victor asked.

“You’ve been doing some reading,” she said approvingly. “And we’re right on the borderline. I think we’ll get lucky today.” She placed the small mike against Ashley’s abdomen and swirled it around.

Ashley started giggling. “Stop, that tickles.”

“Sorry,” Dr. Opitz said. “I’ll stop as soon as I find the little rascal.”

“Hurry!” she begged through giggles.

“My God, can you hear that? He’s huge!” Victor said, eyes wide.

Ashley laughed harder. “That’s *my* heartbeat, moron.”

“Oh.”

Suddenly the booming *thud-thud-thud* of Ashley’s heartbeat faded, to be replaced by the delicate *whoosh-whoosh-whoosh* of a fetal heartbeat. Ashley stopped laughing, eyes wide. Victor had his head down, listening intently. Dr. Opitz let them listen for a few more seconds, then shut off the monitor.

“Sounds great,” she told them.

“Wonderful,” Ashley murmured. “She sounds wonderful.” Victor just nodded, too overcome to speak.

“Well.” Dr. Opitz smiled at them and handed Ashley a paper towel. “I’ll leave you to get dressed.”

Ashley blotted lubricant from her stomach and sat up. Her face was glowing. “Did you hear that? Did you hear the baby? Wasn’t it wonderful? Oh, Vic, we’re going to *beparents* ! Oh, I wish she could be born tomorrow! How are we going to be able to wait until August? We have to get ready! We have to plan!” In her exuberance, she stood up and threw her arms around her husband.

Victor closed his eyes and forced himself not to tighten his grip, not to pick her up and pull her against him and kiss her until she was dizzy with it. Ashley had come to him, had put her arms around him because she wanted to touch him, and he wouldn’t ruin it by asking for more than she wanted to give at that moment.

She pulled back and looked up at him, her blue eyes dancing. “You said ‘he’. When you thought my heartbeat was the baby’s, you said ‘he’s huge’. Do you want a boy?”

He tapped the tip of her nose with his finger and smiled at her. “I don’t care what you have, as long as it’s healthy. But it’d be nice if it was a girl who looked just like you.”

“Isn’t that funny? I hope it’s a girl who looks like me, too. Boys, yuck. Especially boys who look like you,” she added slyly.

He mock-growled and squeezed her until she squeaked.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

All the good feelings she’d had toward Victor vanished when she saw him take the lubricant out of the drawer. In a flash she remembered why she was here, why she was pregnant, and that if she hadn’t

married him he would have taken the baby away from her. How could she have forgotten?

Because you're a sniveling ninny, that's how, she told herself grimly, trudging toward the bed.

"I have a great idea, sweetheart," he said, reaching for her. She glared at his outstretched hand like it was a dead rat and he let it drop. "Let's make love without extra help." He tossed the tube on the floor and smiled at her hopefully.

"It'll hurt," she said flatly, climbing in beside him.

"Not if you let me—"

"I won't."

"Oh." Victor wasn't sure he was up to another session of coming inside Ashley's lush body while she lay rigid beneath him, eyes closed, silently enduring. Unfortunately, she was so beautiful and felt so good, he wasn't sure he was up *tonot* making love.

Ha! Making love. It was a damned clinical coupling, as far from making love as a child's wagon was from a Mercedes.

Where do you get off being impatient, he scolded himself? *It's your fault she doesn't like having sex with you. Just be patient. Keep at it. Eventually she'll loosen up, as long as you keep proving to her that you can stay in control and won't hurt her. Please God.*

"Damn!" Ashley said, just as he bent to pick the tube up off the carpet.

"What?"

"I forgot to ask Dr. Opitz when we could—I mean, when we have to stop having sex."

"You know perfectly well it's safe to have sex well into the ninth month."

She scowled. "It might hurt the baby."

"You know that's not true."

She was silent for a moment, doubtless plotting, then burst out, "Why did you have to read so many books on pregnancy?"

"Because they were all out of books on knitting."

That earned him a ghost of a grin. Of course, she stiffened up as soon as he touched her, but when she asked softly, he said of course she could keep her nightgown on. He gently pulled the hem up, inch by inch, until her dark woman's triangle was exposed, framed between her creamy, sleekly muscled thighs. He bit back a moan as he stroked the soft, smooth skin, as his palm brushed across her downy softness.

He glanced up and saw she was staring at the ceiling, hands in fists at her sides. For a moment his eyes welled with tears and he had to fight not to sob like a child. He had done this, taken a lively, passionate, vibrant woman and turned her into a mannequin who did not glory in lovemaking, but only endured it. One dark night, and their lives had changed forever. He wondered if he would ever be able to turn the

clock back for her, if she would ever trust him again, ever welcome him to her bed with open arms and an eager smile.

His hand tightened around the tube and suddenly he couldn't bear it; he flung the lubricant across the room. She sat up, startled, even more so when he pulled her nightgown down, covering her. "Forget it," he told her abruptly. "I'm not in the mood."

He wanted to weep at the relief on her face.

"I would like to hold you, though," he said, and she readily agreed. *Anything*, he thought bitterly, *to avoid my lovemaking. I could have asked her to stand on her head in the corner and she would have said yes.*

For her part, Ashley was more than a little confused, and thought about asking him if he felt all right. He was snuggled up behind her now, his forearm beneath her breasts, the tops of his thighs against the backs of hers. She could feel his hardness, a hot throbbing beneath her bottom, and she wondered why he hadn't taken her when he so obviously wanted to. *Because he knows you hate it*, she answered herself. *He's not up to another session with the Ice Maiden, that's all. Who could blame him?*

She should have been delighted, crowing with happiness. Instead she felt almost tearful. Why couldn't her pride let her forget the past? Why couldn't she be the wife he so badly needed?

Because even if you had been able to put what happened behind you, how could you forget how he blackmailed you into getting married? All that stuff about never wanting to hurt you, it was all bullshit. As soon as things weren't going his way, he hurt you, all right.

The words were true, she knew they were the truth as he had told her, but they didn't *ring* true. He had shown in a hundred different ways how he cared about her. Almost like he was trying to prove something to her. Almost like he'd wanted to marry her so he could set about making her life as easy as possible. Letting her pick out the house. Agreeing to have Jean move in. Thirty thousand dollars for spending money.

Could it be... might he have been bluffing about taking the baby away? Those words, that threat, didn't jibe with the picture of the man she was living with.

Troubled, but feeling as though she was on the verge of something very important, Ashley drifted off to sleep. She tired easily these days, and usually slept hard, but tonight was different. It felt as if she were drifting along, floating in a warm sea, and the water lapping at her bare skin felt wonderful. She shifted, the better to offer more of her flesh to the waves. *What an excellent dream*, her unconscious self observed happily, but she gave up the rest of herself to the sensations.

After a while the water felt like hands running up and down her legs, tickling her inner thighs until she willingly parted them, rubbing so gently across her stomach, stroking the tender skin beneath her breasts. Then she felt warm wetness on one nipple. Then the waves were lapping there, but only at one breast. How odd. She squirmed, her limbs feeling thick and heavy. She was tangled in something, something that interfered with her pleasure-taking, and she thrashed about to be rid of it.

The waves murmured comfortingly and she was still; the warm wetness left her breast and trailed down her stomach, and down lower still, until she could feel the warmth directly between her legs, lapping at her sensitive folds. Except she was pulling away from the water, or the water was leaving her. She was being jettisoned out of this lovely dream, she could feel the sheets around her, knew she was in a bed,

her bed, not in some erotic ocean, but for a wonder, the marvelous sensations weren't fading, they remained sweetly constant.

She opened her eyes and knew several things at once: that her legs were wantonly spread and Victor was kissing and licking between them. That his hands were on her inner thighs, his thumbs spreading her open for him, that she ought to scream and kick and fight. That she couldn't bear for any of the sensations to stop. The conflicting emotions were expressed by her strangled gasp, and she felt Victor's grip tighten, ever so slightly.

"Shhhh, sweetheart, it's all right," he murmured, then blew lightly on her swollen women's flesh. "Let me finish, okay?"

"You—you—" Her breath was coming in hitching gasps; she tried to sit up, only to have Victor gently tug her thighs until she was flat on her back again. Before she could muster the strength for more resistance, she felt two sensations at the same time: his tongue, flicking quickly across her clitoris, and his finger, thrusting inside her at the same moment. She was more than ready for him; his finger was met with no resistance at all. Her hips jerked in response and she moaned at her body's betrayal.

His finger was twisting and stroking, now joined by another. His mouth was busy, so busy, licking and kissing and sucking and even biting, very, very gently. Her clit throbbed and she squirmed, ready to rip through the bedspread. She could sense the change in him immediately, knew what he knew: now that she was awake, there was no more need for gentle stealth.

She began to feel intense warmth in the pit of her stomach, it was as if his mouth and fingers were banking coals deep within her. She wanted him in that moment, more than she had ever wanted anything or anyone, and hated herself for it.

"No, Victor," she groaned, "don't." But even as she said this, she hooked her legs behind his neck and urged him closer. She had to have more of his mouth on her, his tongue. Had to.

What are you doing, you stupid, stupid bitch?

She groaned again, feeling torn in two. Somehow she mustered the will to inch backward and he stopped at once, his mouth and fingers left her, her body throbbed with need and she bit back a frustrated sob. He was beside her at once, lifting her into his embrace and kissing her deeply; she tasted herself on him and cried out into his mouth.

She found herself leaning against the headboard, and then he was pulling her nightgown over her head, catching the weight of her breasts in his hands as they bounced free. Then he was leaning down and kissing first one nipple, then the other, then easing her breasts together and tonguing the valley between them while his thumbs rubbed slowly, sweetly across her stiffened nipples. Her head rolled back on her shoulders and she stared at the ceiling. Her arms stole out and crept around his neck.

"Don't," she moaned, too conscious of his body, so near hers, of its length and hardness, the easy power in the muscles, the warmth of his hands.

"Hurts?" he asked, his word muffled by her flesh. He pulled a nipple into his mouth and sucked hard, then gentled his touch and lapped delicately, like a cat. Her hips jerked again and she swallowed a groan.

"P-please. Victor. Don't." Her body proved her a liar; she clutched at his hair with both hands and arched her back until she was curved against his body.

“Don’t stop? Don’t leave you like this? Don’t come inside you?” He raised his head and in the dark, his eyes gleamed. “Don’t make you want me?”

“*Id-don’t* . Want you.”

He touched her between her legs, slid a finger deeply inside her. “You do,” he whispered, stroking, stroking. She shuddered against him and sucked in a ragged breath. “You do want me. And you hate it. It’s a lot easier to play the martyr if you feel forced, isn’t it?”

“Please,” she said, and her eyes welled with tears.

He softened at once. “We’ll stop right now, if that’s what you want. Is that what you want, sweetheart?”

She shook her head, then nodded, and then the tears spilled down her face, making her confusion, her helplessness in the face of her physical needs, clear. He kissed her tears away while his thumb found the sensitive nub between her legs. He stroked the impudent bud with exquisite gentleness, occasionally pausing to rub a small circle around the area; Ashley could actually feel herself straining toward him. The now-familiar warmth uncoiled in her stomach just as his mouth covered hers, his tongue swept inside her demandingly. She gasped into his mouth just as explosive heat raced down her limbs, as she found her release and came so hard she actually felt her uterus contract.

Without a word, Victor broke the kiss, eased her on her back and came down over her, catching his weight on his elbows. He looked at her, wanting her so badly she could feel him shaking, but waiting for her assent. She nodded quickly, giving herself up to her deepest needs, ignoring her pride’s silent shriek of dismay.

She could feel his long hot hardness ease inside her and she moaned and pulled him to her. His tongue thrust past her teeth just as he seated himself firmly within her, and she was coming again even before he pulled back for the first stroke. He shuddered against her and she murmured into his mouth, “Do that again.” His groan was very loud, and then there was nothing but his long, sweet strokes. His mouth on hers, his hands in her hair, and each time she again found her release he shuddered above her, as if he could feel it. As his own release approached, he began to clutch at her and tell her things in a hoarse voice—he loved her, he wanted her, she felt terrific, oh, Jesus, she was so...she...he had to have her again, he was...was...

He stiffened and then slowly relaxed atop her, but she could feel his furious heartbeat against her breasts. He eased out of her and rolled to his side, then pulled her toward him.

“Are you all right?” he asked anxiously.

“No,” she said lazily, “I’m in agony.” She yawned. “You used me so roughly, I’m ready to cry over it.”

He kissed her throat, then tenderly traced one of her eyebrows with the tip of his finger. “You were wonderful. So responsive and passionate. I didn’t dream it—I hoped if you relaxed you would like it, but I never thought it could be so...”

“You tricked me,” she said flatly. “You waited until I was asleep.”

“Yes,” he replied simply. “Are you sorry?”

“...I don’t know.”

“Fair enough.”

“And I’ll hate you again tomorrow,” she warned. “It’s on my schedule.”

He shrugged, and she couldn’t read his face, didn’t know what he thought about that. Her pride insisted on a small amount of blood-letting before she could go to sleep, so she added, “Also, I was faking it.”

He laughed so hard the bed shook.

“What?” she said, disgruntled.

He pulled her against him and kissed her, one hand cupping her chin, the other arm curving around her waist, snuggling her up against him. “That’s a lie,” he murmured. “When you come, your muscles tighten.”

“So?”

“*All* your muscles.”

“Oh.”

“I thought I was going to have a heart attack. Several times.”

She giggled.

“It was wonderful. *You’re* wonderful. It’s never been like that for me.”

She rolled her eyes, inwardly in complete agreement with him. It had never been like that for her, either. “Please, Victor. You’re embarrassing yourself.”

He didn’t rise to the bait. “It’s true. The difference is in loving the person you’re with, I suppose.”

Now she was the one who shrugged, and neither of them spoke again that night. She tried once to turn away, get out of his embrace, but he merely tightened his grip until she quit wriggling.

They fell asleep that way.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jean didn’t even wait until Ashley sat down at the table before pouncing. “Well, well! Don’t you look the radiant bride this morning.”

“It’s the healthy glow of pregnancy, creep,” she replied amiably, slathering honey on her toast.

“Ha! Sleep well?”

“Very.”

“I’ll bet,” Jean leered.

“Grow up.”

Victor entered, dropped a careless kiss to Ashley’s cheek, waved to Jean, and walked out, jauntily swinging his briefcase and humming. Jean watched him suspiciously, then returned her stare to Ashley. “Soooo,” she said casually, “what’s our plan this morning?”

“We never did get any Christmas shopping done yesterday.”

“Are you going to buy Mr. Lawrence a present, Mrs. Lorentz-Lawrence?”

It took every ounce of willpower not to laugh; Ashley managed—barely. She probably shouldn’t have hyphenated her name. “I haven’t decided yet.”

“You haven’t decided yet,” Jean repeated. “The true spirit of Christmas.”

“Well, I already gave him a pretty big present,” she said irritably.

“Oooh, you slut! So you *did* enjoy yourself last night.”

She glared at her meddling friend. “I was referring to my agreement to marry him.”

“Oh, sure. Next you’ll say the baby is his *birthday* present.”

“Well...”

Jean dramatically threw up her hands. “I give up. You’re hopeless. You’re a grudge-holding child.”

“This, from the woman who fired her psychiatrist because he said she was immature and vindictive.”

“Well, where does he get off being so judgmental?” she asked reasonably. “I didn’t want a Freudian, I wanted a Jungian. And we weren’t talking about me, we were talking about you. It’s exceedingly shrewish not to buy your husband a Christmas present.”

“Got any suggestions?” she asked tartly. “He’s a millionaire. What could I possibly buy him that he doesn’t already have?”

Jean tried another leer; on her exceedingly cute pixie face it looked like an attack of indigestion. “How about a loving bride, welcoming him into her embrace?”

“He already has one of those,” Ashley said, and blushed to the roots of her hair.

Jean crowed in triumph. “I knew it! I knew the two of you were in too good a mood this morning. God, he was practically break-dancing on his way out the door. So how was it?”

“We’re not going to talk about it.”

Jean’s face fell. “We’re not?”

Ashley laughed. “No, you pervert. Would I bug you about the intimate details of your married life?”

“No, but that’s because you have an appalling lack of curiosity. A terrible quality in a reporter, by the way, I don’t know how you kept that job for so long.”

“I guess I don’t have to worry about such things anymore.”

“Good,” Jean said fervently. “You worked too hard. You have as long as I’ve known you. You were the only freshmen in high school who worked thirty hours a week.”

“House rules,” she said with a shrug. That foster family had been big believers in the benefits of hard work and no play. “Besides, I got to save a lot of money for college.”

“Where you worked *forty* hours a week in addition to going to school full-time. I don’t know why you drove yourself so hard, my parents offered to—”

“Let’s not go into that again.”

“Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.”

“How come you only quote the Bible when you can’t base your arguments on logic?” Ashley smiled to soften the rebuke, and sipped her tea.

Jean watched her thoughtfully. After a moment, she spoke. “I have a dandy idea for a present for Victor.”

Slurp, slurp. “Umm?”

“You could tell him you love him.”

Ashley spit out her tea. “What, *lie*? What kind of a present is that?”

“You’re lying now. It wouldn’t be a lie, and it would make him so happy.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

“That’s an interesting instruction, coming from you. Do you realize—”

“Enough, Jean,” she said warningly. “I mean it. No more.”

Jean subsided. The phone rang, startling them both, and Ashley picked it up.

“Hello?”

“Mrs. Lawrence, this is William Along, your accountant.”

“I don’t have an accountant,” she said, puzzled.

Jean giggled while Along coughed in her ear. “Your husband’s accountant.”

“Oh. He’s not here, sir, should I have him call—?”

“No, Mrs. Lawrence, you’re the one I need to talk to.”

“What’d I do?” she asked suspiciously.

A puzzled silence on Along’s end, and then he said, “Nothing, that I know of. I mean, your husband didn’t—look. Let’s start over.”

“Okay,” she said, entirely mystified. She slapped Jean’s hand as her friend brazenly reached for Ashley’s toast.

“I just wanted to let you know that the thirty-thousand is back in your account, for you to draw on whenever you wish.”

“Thirty—aw, nuts!”

“Ma’am?”

“You mean Dan Mitchell gave it back?”

“No. I mean, I’ve replaced what you spent yesterday. I was also calling to see if you required more funds, with the holidays coming up.”

“*More funds?* What am I going to buy, Holland? Stop dumping money into my account!” she said frantically.

“He’s just following orders,” Jean said, figuring out what had happened by listening to Ashley’s end of the conversation.

“Never mind,” Ashley said into the receiver, “I’ll be talking to my husband. Thanks for letting me know.” She hung up and hit the speed dial for Victor’s car phone.

“Use the speaker phone,” Jean begged, and Ashley ignored her. Victor picked up on the first ring.

“Lawrence.”

“It’s Lorentz-Lawrence, Lawrence.” Jean put her head down and began to laugh helplessly. Ashley ignored her.

“Ashley!” He sounded pleased. He wouldn’t for long. “What do you need?”

“Your head,” she shouted, “buried in six feet of sand!”

“Owww,” he complained. “Not so loud, I damn near drove off the road. What have I done now?”

“What you always do! Will you stop putting gobs of money into my account?”

“No.”

“Whynot?”

“Because I know you—you won’t ask for money,” he said. “This way you don’t have to ask. It’s

always there.”

She was stunned that he had anticipated the problem of her pride. It was true; she had even been thinking of getting a part-time job so she could have spending money, and not have to ask him for any.

“I threw your money away yesterday,” she boasted. “Gave it to a homeless man.”

“That’s nice.”

“Don’t you *care* ? You—you dumped that money on me and I threw it away!”

“Well, have fun again today. Listen, is there anything else?”

“I’m going to withdraw it all and set it on fire!”

“Whatever. Bill Along will wire more into your account tomorrow.”

“You’re impossible.”

“I love you, too, sweetie.”

She slammed the phone down, and from four feet away Jean could hear Ashley grinding her teeth. She wisely kept her mouth shut.

* * * * *

When Victor got home that night he was so annoyed Ashley *forgot her* annoyance, and asked him what was wrong.

“They want me to go to Greece for two weeks,” he said, hanging up his coat so violently that the coat rack swayed back and forth. “But it’s not happening.”

She deftly caught the coat rack before it crashed to the tile, and righted it. “Who’s ‘they’? I thought you were the boss.”

“I am, which is why I have to inspect the facility, see if the company wants to put up the nine-point-two mil asking price.”

This made little sense to Ashley; what was really interesting was how clearly angry Victor was. “Well...Greece in December,” she said tentatively, trying to soothe him, “that sounds pretty nice.”

His face lit up. “Do you want to come with me?”

“Uh...no.”

“Right.” His features hardened. “Of course you don’t. So I’m not going.”

“But why not?”

Heading for the phone, he paused to give her an incredulous look. “*Whynot* ? Because you’re pregnant!”

“I am?” She felt her stomach, made her eyes widen in exaggerated surprise. “Oh my God! *I am* !”

“Very funny. I’m not leaving you alone for two weeks.”

Her mouth fell open, and this time she wasn’t feigning surprise. “*That’s* why you don’t want to go?”

He didn’t answer, just gave her ‘*A Look*’ and started dialing. She crossed the room and gently took the phone away from him. “Victor. Go. I’ll be fine. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“Husbands,” he said stubbornly, “do not go flitting off to Greece when their wives are pregnant.”

“I’ve never known you to flit,” she said solemnly, trying to coax a smile. She stopped teasing and adopted a brisk tone. “Besides, it’s only, what? Two weeks? Big deal. You won’t even miss a pre-natal exam.”

He was weakening; she could sense it. “But if things run late, I might not be back in time for Christmas.”

“So?”

He stared down at her in astonishment. “So?*So* ? Husbands do not miss their first married Christmas when their wife is—”

“All right, enough with the Sacred Husband Rules. What difference does it make if you’re back on the 23rd or the 27th? You said yourself just the other day that your parents are in the Bahamas until January, so you wouldn’t have seen them for the holiday anyway.”

He was giving her a very odd look, and she wondered what the problem was now. He said slowly, “What exactly did you do at Christmas time, growing up?”

She shrugged and tried to move away; he caught her hands and held them. She could see he wasn’t going to relent until he had what he wanted, he was like a pit bull that way, so she said, “It depended on where I was. If I was with a foster family they usually tried to include me in their celebration.”

“Usually?” he said sharply.

She ignored that. “And if I was in a state-funded home, I would...go to the Christmas party.” Cheap paper decorations in a smelly gym. Presents which were almost always second-hand clothes. Watery punch. A big man in a shabby Santa suit, pretending to be cheerful. Rich families “helping”, but really using her and her peers as object lessons for their children: ‘See, these are the poor people, and we’re helping them. Isn’t that nice? Aren’t *we* nice?’

Their pity and charity was bad enough, but Christmas was a dreaded event, mostly because it was quite clear that most of these people couldn’t be bothered the rest of the year. *Where were you in February*, she had wondered at five, at eight, at ten, at fifteen. *And August? Why do we only see you when Salvation Santas are on street corners and the stores are stocked with candy canes and holiday cards?*

She forced the memories away. “Christmas wasn’t a big deal,” she said firmly, not liking the sudden

understanding she saw in his eyes. “And if you’re a couple days late, it won’t matter.”

“Thanks very much,” he said dryly. “So glad to know my presence is neither required nor appreciated.”

She shrugged.

“If I do go, won’t you miss me... just a little?” he teased.

“No,” she said coolly.

He hung onto his smile. “Not even at bedtime?”

She sniffed and quickly moved away before he could see her blush. Every time she thought about last night, she was alternately thrilled and terrified. Thrilled it had been so good. Terrified for the same reason.

Victor allowed himself to be persuaded, especially after Jean swore up and down never to leave Ashley’s side for even a nanosecond. “*Halfa* nanosecond,” she promised. She and Ashley watched him pack and Jean generously offered Ashley’s driving services. “She’ll be glad to take you to the airport.”

“No thanks, I’ll have a car pick me up. Any requests, ladies?”

Jean chirped, “Oh, anything grotesquely expensive and hand-made will be fine.”

“I don’t want anything,” Ashley said quickly.

“Ah, the joy of marrying a cheap date,” he said, snapping his travel bag closed. Ashley stuck out her tongue and he pretended to grab it on the way out the door.

The house seemed too big and too quiet after he left. Ashley was annoyed that she thought so. She was even more annoyed to find that she missed him dreadfully.

What, exactly, did she miss? The fights? Her cruel insults? His gently forced, excruciatingly patient lovemaking? The passionate, abandoned sex the night before he left? The daily squabbles?

Just him, she reluctantly decided, well into the second week of Victor’s departure. She missed seeing him, touching him, being touched by him. She missed his body next to hers in their king-sized bed, which all but swallowed her up when he wasn’t in it. She missed making him laugh, she missed his teasing.

Jean’s right, she thought glumly. I’ve got it bad.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

He came home in the early hours of Christmas morning, well before dawn. She knew this because he woke her up when he tried to slip into bed. To Victor’s credit, he had been extremely quiet, but when someone is out in twenty-degree weather, however briefly, they cannot sneak up on someone in a warm bed. Thus, Ashley woke up feeling as if a draft of Arctic wind was trying to climb into bed with her.

“Gaaaaahhh!” Then, “You’re back,” she said muzzily, her mind still fogged with sleep. She rolled toward him and gave him a sleepy hug. “Welcome home.”

He was so astonished he almost fell off the bed. “Thanks, honey. Go back to sleep. You need your rest.” But his hands were on her, his arms were around her, he nuzzled her neck. Christ, he had missed her. Never had there been a longer two weeks.

She gasped sharply and he started to let go, clearly, he had startled her, even frightened her, with his affectionate, too-sudden embrace. But, incredibly, the words he heard weren’t ‘Don’t touch me,’ but “My God, you’re *refreezing* .” She snuggled up closer to him, trying to warm him.

He groaned into her hair, trying to ignore her sensual wriggling against him. *She doesn’t mean anything by it* , he told himself sternly, even a little frantically. *Leave her alone. Go to sleep.*

“Victor...” she whispered.

“What, honey?”

“I missed you.” This was so quiet as to be almost inaudible.

“Really?” he gasped. Then, trying for nonchalance, he said casually, “Oh. Well, I missed you, too... a little.”

She giggled and when he gently stroked her stomach through her nightgown she didn’t pull away. “What’s this?” he asked delightedly. “Ooooooh, Ashley, you’re getting fat!”

“Too many crullers,” she yawned.

“You’re definitely thickening around the waist,” he said, feeling, stroking. She was maddeningly soft and warm. “It’s so cute!”

“Shut up, you’re making me sick.”

“God, I wish the baby was due tomorrow. I can’t wait.”

“If the baby was due tomorrow, you wouldn’t be able to get your arms around me. We’d have to buy a bigger bed.”

“Hardly. Can I...?” He inched the hem of her gown up, wanting to feel her stomach without the cloth barrier. She didn’t demur. Soon he was rubbing his palms across her soft little stomach. He wanted very badly to kiss her there. He squashed the impulse. “Do you feel okay?”

“Mostly. I still have morning sickness, and not just in the morning, but if I nibble on something it goes away.”

“That’s good.” His hands, independent of his will, were inching up until they were stroking just below her breasts. She drew in a sharp breath but still said nothing; he couldn’t believe it. “I missed you so much, Ashley. I thought about you constantly.”

“That’s good.” Was that... did she actually sound a little breathless? Was it possible that she wanted him? No, that was too conceited for belief. They’d been married less than a month. *You have to give her more time to get over what a bastard you were. You have to—*

“Um...Victor?”

“Yes, sweetheart?”

“You didn’t—ah—frolic with any of the native girls while you were in Greece, did you?”

Shocked, he said, “No, of course not.”

“Oh. That’s good. Because...well, I know I haven’t exactly been the ideal bed partner...”

“That’s not your fault,” he interrupted.

“I didn’t say it *was*,” she said tartly. “But while I wouldn’t condone your cheating, I guess...I wouldn’t blame you for wanting to.”

He felt his mouth drop open. If she truly hated him, she wouldn’t care who he slept with, or how often. Now she was telling him she wouldn’t approve, but she would understand. What did this mean? Could she possibly have feelings for him?

“But I don’t want to,” he said.

“Really?” She sounded surprised. He almost laughed. “Why not?”

“Because I only want you,” he said, and kissed her lips. They were soft with sleep, and her breath was milky, sweet. Her small tongue curled up to meet his, her hands stroked his forearms, while they plundered each other’s mouths and finally separated, she, gasping, he, breathing hard. “I only want you,” he said again, “always.”

He touched the dark fire of her hair, then breathed in her scent. He kissed the column of her throat, opening the buttons on her gown as he went along, baring her breasts. He kissed a soft nipple, feeling it stiffen beneath his lips, and licked the tender undersides of her breasts, pausing now and again to kiss her mouth, and when she started pulling frantically at her nightgown, he helped her pull it over her head.

Half of him was still reeling that she was allowing his touch, even welcoming it, and the other half couldn’t get enough of her, wanted to touch and kiss and stroke every inch of her. He did what he had wanted to since coming to bed this night: kissed her stomach, then trailed kisses further down, until he was nuzzling the downy forest between her legs. She made a strangled sound and her knees twitched as she automatically tried to bring her legs together, but then forced herself to welcome him to her.

Overwhelmed by her gift of trust, he showered kisses on her woman’s flesh, which was as the softest silk, warm and salty-sweet. He sucked on the impudent nub, lapped at her, and used his tongue to delve inside her. He ran his thumbs up and down her swollen nether lips, then spread them wide and blew softly on her soft, slick flesh.

When she was very close, when she was moaning and her hips were jerking helplessly toward him, he stopped, gently turned her over, and eased her up on her knees. He stroked her back and the sweet flesh of her buttocks, marveling at their silky, firm feel. Then he slowly penetrated her from behind, his eyes closed, his hands cupping her breasts, stroking the nipples, her soft whimpers making him crazy but still wanting to go softly, to be very gentle, to...

She backed into him, hard, and in a second he was seated to the hilt. It took every shred of his

self-control not to climax right there; he crouched behind her, shuddering, teeth clenched. She moaned and wiggled her delectable backside against his groin; he tightened his grip on her and gently, very gently, bit her shoulder just as he pulled out and then thrust back in. She met him willingly, thrust for thrust, writhing under his touch, moaning softly. He stopped caressing her breasts and reached between her legs, finding the sensitive button and teasing it with a fingertip. She cried out sharply and he felt her climax, felt her muscles tightening around him, milking him, and then it was too late, he couldn't stop his own release, and so he gave in to it and poured his seed into her.

They collapsed, shuddering.

“Welcome home,” Ashley murmured, and before he could muster a reply he realized she was snoring softly.

* * * * *

She was gone when he woke, and he got up at once to find her. Remembering Jean was living in their home, he stopped long enough to shrug into his robe, and then went looking for his wife. He found her in the kitchen, gobbling down plain toast and a glass of milk. When she saw him she turned bright red.

“Good mor—what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she muttered, then finished her milk in two gulps. He noticed she was having difficulty looking at him.

“Are you feeling okay?”

“Fine, I have to—uh—go to the bathroom.” She darted out of the kitchen before he could say anything; he watched her go, astonished, and then trotted after her.

He jumped into the bathroom just as she was trying to close the door. “What’s the matter?” he asked again.

“Nothing!”

“Are you mad at me?”

She grinned. “For a change, no.”

“Then what...” He trailed off, puzzled. She was still having trouble looking him in the eye, and was now toying with the belt of her robe, staring at the rug in front of his feet. He thought back to last night, wondering if he had offended her, hurt her, or—then he had it.

“You’re embarrassed about last night.”

“Am not,” she said to the rug.

“Yes, you are,” he teased, stepping forward and pulling her into a hug. She tried to struggle free, but her heart really wasn’t in it. “You’re embarrassed because you’re the most incredible lover I’ve ever had.”

“That’s *snot* why I’m—I am? The most incredible lover you’ve ever had?”

“You’re in first, second, and third place,” he promised, giving her a squeeze. He kissed the top of her head and, miraculously, she didn’t pull away or cut him with a sharp word. “So, what’s to be embarrassed about?”

She was very quiet, and just when he had decided she wasn’t going to answer him, she said softly, “I shouldn’t enjoy what we do. I shouldn’t enjoy *you*. After what happened... after how I got pregnant. I should hate you, and I did try, Victor, but it’s impossible. I don’t hate you now. I don’t think I ever truly did. But that’s wrong. It’s *bad*, really bad.”

He thought he was going to have to sit down, her words nearly left him reeling. But the only place to sit was the toilet, and Ashley was standing in front of it, so he had to bear the dizzying sensation. He shook himself and said hoarsely, “Did you just say what I think you said? You don’t hate me? You forgive me?”

“Yes.” She frowned. “Proof that I need help. I’m clearly a masochist.”

He understood, then, in part. Her pride was very great, and it was a good thing. Would she have survived a horrific childhood without that fierce pride? But she was its prisoner now, and even if she could love him as he loved her, she would hate herself for it.

He decided to leave talk of love out of it. “Ashley, you’re a passionate, beautiful, healthy young woman. Why shouldn’t you enjoy lovemaking?”

She shrugged.

“Especially,” he said modestly, “with a partner as skilled, as sexy, as incredibly inventive and versatile as myself—oof!” He rubbed his stomach. “Well, at least you’re looking at me now.”

“I have no idea why,” she said coolly. “You’re not at all handsome.”

“I am to you, though,” he teased. “You’re craaaaaazy about me!”

This did not make her smile, or tease back, if anything, it had the opposite effect. She looked even sadder than she had earlier, and asked him to give her some privacy so she could “use the facilities”. Bewildered, wondering just when he’d said the wrong thing, he did so.

* * * * *

It was, Ashley realized with surprised pleasure, the nicest Christmas ever. “Not much of a contest,” Jean snorted when Ashley told her this, a comment that made Victor’s eyebrows go up. Mercifully, he asked no questions.

They had been lazing around the house most of the day, and both fireplaces—the one in the living room, and the one in their bedroom, were kept blazing. Their housekeeper/cook had prepared a mouth-watering meal before departing to have dinner with her own family, staring with stunned pleasure at the size of the Christmas bonus check Victor had written her. “I know you’ve only been with us for a couple weeks,” he explained, handing her six weeks pay, “but my wife and I really appreciate your coming in on Christmas day to cook for us.”

“For this,” the cook said, waving the check, “I’ll move in with you. My family can fend for themselves.”

Later, Ashley realized what was missing from their small circle: her best friend was here, but Victor’s wasn’t.

“Derik’s in Minnesota until February,” Victor explained when asked. “He goes back home for the holidays and doesn’t come back until after Valentine’s day.” He shook his head, smiling ruefully. “He’s got to be the only person who goes to Minnesota for the winter.”

“But why?”

“Family stuff. He’s tremendously hard to reach out there, spends most of his time working outdoors on his father’s farm. I usually have to wait for him to call me. He doesn’t even know we’re married yet.”

“We should have him over as soon as he gets back,” Ashley said.

He mock-saluted her, inwardly pleased. He missed Derik sorely every winter, though with luck this winter wouldn’t be as lonely as most of the others had been.

They exchanged presents, and for once Ashley took pleasure in this. She had been able to buy presents, for one thing, and secondly, no one in this room was giving her something because they felt obligated, or needed a tax break. Jean had given her two “baby sacks”, long sleeved gowns with draw-string bottoms, both hand-stitched and exquisitely embroidered. One was blue, and one was pink.

“Hedging my bets,” Jean explained.

“When did you have time to work on these?” Ashley exclaimed, examining one gown and passing the other to a pleased Victor. “We only found out I was pregnant a few weeks ago!”

“I decided to quite doing doll clothes for a while. Besides,” she added shyly, “I wanted to be the first one to give you a present for the baby.”

“They’re lovely, Jeannie, I don’t know what to say.” She felt her face grow warm and her eyes fill, and blinked hard. If she cried it would only upset her friend. “Thank you so much.”

“You’re incredibly talented,” Victor said seriously, carefully folding the pink gown and handing it back to Ashley. “I’ve never seen such quality.”

“Oh, go on.” Jean waved a hand modestly.

“Sorry.”

“Go on, I said. Talk about the fine stitching, the exquisite detail.”

They all laughed, but Victor was looking at Jean with a warmth he had never felt before. Whatever she had intended, her gift meant something to him, as well. So he was very pleased at her obvious pleasure in his gift: a two-week retreat at an artist’s colony in New Hampshire, where she would sketch and paint under the supervision of some of the world’s finest modern artists.

“This is so incredible,” she exclaimed happily, flipping through the brochure, “I don’t even mind that

you've gotten rid of me for two weeks, and that you're about as subtle as a brick through a window."

"I was just thinking about your needs," he said innocently. "Let me know if you need a ride to the airport."

"Funny, you are not. But thank you...it's a wonderful gift." Smiling over the brochures, she then squealed with delight when she unwrapped the small envelope from Ashley: season passes to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

"This way you don't have to stand in line," Ashley explained, "and you get special privileges...you can bring guests for free, you can get in after hours...it's really neat!"

"And expensive," Jean said. "Special memberships do not come cheap, to say the least. You shouldn't have. Especially since you're using your own—" She cut herself off and glanced at Victor, embarrassed.

"It was fun," she said simply. She knew Jean liked going to the museum, often for inspiration, sometimes for solace. Her friend was so intensely creative, being around great works of art calmed her as nothing else could. "I'm glad you like it."

Victor looked expectantly at Ashley, but she made no move toward the small pile of gifts by the tree. Disappointed, he assumed she hadn't gotten him a present. Well, what did he expect? *Sorry I had to blackmail you into marriage, dear... God bless us, every one!* Yeah, right.

He got to his feet and with forced cheer said, "Your present's in the nursery, Ash. Come on." He led them to the room next to the master bedroom and threw open the door with a flourish. Square in the middle of the empty room was a large padded rocking chair on runners, complete with padded footstool.

Victor dashed into the room and set the rocker in motion with a gentle shove. "See?" he said excitedly. "It rocks and it'll help soothe the baby. And the footstool is supposed to be really good for nursing mothers." He faltered. "I mean, if you decide to breastfeed."

"It looks *very* comfortable," Jean said approvingly, walking over to touch the wood.

"It's wonderful!" Ashley exclaimed, practically shoving Jean over so she could sit down in the chair. "And so comfortable! I'll be dozing off in this before the baby does, I'm sure."

"You really like it?"

"I really love it," she assured him, looking up at his hopeful face and smiling. "It's perfect. And so thoughtful, Victor."

"What did you expect?" Jean asked her. "An envelope stuffed with cash?"

"Well..."

"Yes," Victor said, laughing. "That was my second choice. But she gets mad at me when I try to give her money."

"She also gets mad at you when you talk about her like she's not in the room," Ashley said tartly. She rocked blissfully and put her feet up on the footstool. "Ahhhh...I think this will come in very handy, even before the baby's born. Can we move it into the living room?"

“Sure, hon. Scoot out, I’ll move it right now.”

Once they were back in the living room, Victor started cleaning up the discarded wrapping and ribbon.

“Wait, Victor. You didn’t open my presents.”

“Presents?” Plural? He could feel a hopeful smile crease his face.

“Sure. Here.” She casually handed him a small, wrapped box and an envelope. “Open the box first.”

He did, and saw at once that it was a framed picture of . . . of . . . what the hell was it?

“Oh, Ashley,” Jean breathed, peeking over Victor’s shoulder. “Is that your baby?”

“It’s an ultrasound photo!” he said, very surprised. He stared at it, then her, dumbfounded.

“See, Victor? Here’s her feet, and that’s her spine . . . and these are her legs and arms.”

“When—how—?”

“When you were in Greece,” she said gleefully, “I asked Dr. Opitz to give me an ultrasound and make copies of the picture. I had to pay for it, three hundred bucks, because there was no medical need for the test yet. And I got her to print a big picture and two little ones.” She ripped open the envelope and held up a smaller picture. “See? This one’s for your wallet.”

“What a fabulous gift,” he said sincerely. “The nicest one I’ve ever gotten.”

She waved that away, blushing. “Oh, you don’t mean—”

He caught her hand and looked her right in the eye. “Yes, I do mean, Ashley. This is the nicest present, ever. I can’t thank you enough.”

She looked back at him, smiling a little, and was very conscious of his warm fingers on her hand, of his face, his intent expression and his dark, dark eyes. Suddenly she was in his arms and they were embracing fiercely, and he was kissing the top of her head and squeezing the breath out of her. “I love you, Ashley Lorentz-Lawrence.”

“Ow, my stomach!” Jean said loudly. “I think that turkey is disagreeing with me. Radically. I must go to the bathroom now. I expect I’ll be in there for at least an hour.” She tiptoed out, making more noise than if she had simply walked.

Victor was laughing softly against her hair, seeming not to notice, or care, that Ashley had said nothing in response to his declaration of love. When she heard the words, everything in her rose up and screamed, *Tell him you love him! Take your chance! Now! Do it!* But she couldn’t. Her pride was very great, and she feared she would never escape its grip. Bad enough she’d given herself to him like some masochistic slut the night before, but then to confess that she loved him, loved the blackmailer . . . no.

But she had to say something. So she blinked back tears and whispered, “I know, Victor. I know.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Three months passed. Victor and Ashley got along almost as well as they had before his concussion and the subsequent rape, but she was still troubled by her conflicting emotions. He never gave her any cause to regret marrying him. In fact, marriage to Victor was wonderful. She wanted for nothing and her life was very pleasant...splendid, even. Her days were full, but not exhausting, and when she wasn't shopping for the nursery, she was working on her book, a non-fiction woman-to-woman book on pregnancy.

She also saw Dr. Opitz, and kept in touch with her old boss, who gave her the occasional freelance assignment, and when she wasn't doing any of those things, she lazed around and gained weight. This pleased Dr. Opitz greatly, because she had been concerned at Ashley's petite size and underweight status in her first trimester. "I guess I was always working so many hours, there wasn't a lot of time to relax and enjoy a big meal," she had remarked casually to her doctor, and at that Victor had gone white with anger and made her eat an obscenely large steak dinner that night. She learned not to talk about her past with him, because he got *somad*. It was sweet, but kind of silly. Didn't he know that was all water under the bridge?

Odd, that she could dismiss a difficult childhood so easily, but held Victor's few mistakes against him with relentless fury. Perhaps because she had never expected to have a wonderful childhood, and so wasn't disappointed. *Perhaps because she was a vindictive bitch*, she thought gloomily. But she had fallen for Victor and expected great and wonderful things from him, only to be cruelly surprised.

Despite these problems, their sex life was amazing, better than any she had ever known. Better, even, than the night he had returned from Athens. She still could not bring herself to initiate sex, but she never had to—Victor always wanted her, and in fact she had the impression that there were times he wanted her but held back, either because he thought she didn't want him or was too tired.

She had thought, even worried, things might change as she began to get bigger, but it wasn't so. Victor was as passionate and uninhibited as ever, and he adored her body—belly, larger breasts and all. He was fascinated by the anatomical changes in her, so much so that she didn't hesitate to wake him at two o'clock in the morning the first time she felt the baby move. They lay awake together for another hour, hoping, but the baby didn't oblige them again.

Since then, of course, she had felt frequent movement. She was in her fifth month, after all, her second trimester—over halfway there. She had loved the baby even before feeling those first tentative nudges, but now the emotion she felt for him or her was almost frightening in its intensity. Unlike what she felt for Victor, about the baby she had no ambivalence. And there were times when she thought she must love Victor if for no other reason than gifting her with this incredible creature...and what did it matter exactly how she had gotten pregnant?

Other times, she thought back to the horrible words he had said to her in Derik's dojo, about how an accomplice to murder wasn't a fit mother to raise his child. About how he would fight her for custody, and thought she couldn't bear to stay in his house another day.

Jeannie moved out, sensing Ashley's unhappiness. "You've got to deal with the issues of your marriage," she had told her firmly, ignoring Ashley's pleas that she stay. "And it's too easy to ignore them or put them off if I'm here...a nice, convenient distraction. Besides, I kind of miss the gang at Carlson-Musch, and someone has to torment the good Dr. Langenfeld. And really, Ash—didn't you know? In this case, three is most definitely a crowd."

So, Jean left. Surprisingly, things were a little easier after that. And Victor was definitely more relaxed. She supposed having Jean live with them had been a dear concession indeed, but he had never indicated in any way he wasn't happy to have her there.

Victor vowed his love for her frequently, and never seemed to expect reciprocation. But every time she heard the words, she felt like flinching. They reminded her that she didn't, or couldn't, love him, or that she did love him, but was too cowardly to admit it. Either way, every time she heard the dreaded three little words, they just made her feel worse.

She started a journal, and seeing her thoughts on the screen in front of her was very helpful, though when she had to describe the rape her fingers shook so that she had trouble typing. But once it was done, it didn't seem so bad, reading over it. Hell, she'd thought with a ghost of a grin, she'd been to social events that were almost as awful. And she was able to get fresh perspective on him, because she was forced to realize that never before or after had he tried to force himself on her. Never had he hurt her by entering her before she was ready...if anything, her pleasure was more important to him than his own.

March 27—Victor surprised me with flan for dessert for supper...I mentioned once, a few weeks ago, that it was my favorite, so he and Marnie, our cook, have been practicing so they could get it right. I suspect Marnie did most of the work, though she swore up and down she couldn't have done it without him. Ha! Without his money to buy the ingredients, maybe...anyway, it was delicious and I had two pieces, God, I am getting so fat. Sharon Opitz is thrilled, of course, she's always bugging me to eat more. So is Vic, for that matter. I think I know what it's like to have a mother, now, because he's always after me to eat, eat, eat.

He told me over breakfast that I was the prettiest pregnant lady he'd ever seen, and I accused him of being just slightly biased. He wanted to know what that had to do with anything, and he said it so seriously I had to laugh. He seems happy most of the time, especially about the baby, but I often get the impression he's waiting for something, and I keep catching him looking at me when he thinks I can't see. I don't know what to—

“Hi, Ash. Working on the book?”

She shrieked in surprise, then quickly saved the document and exited out of the application before turning around and seeing him in the doorway to her home office. “Okay, we're putting in hardwood floors and you're wearing tap shoes in the house, all the time,” she said by way of greeting. “Cripes, you're like Batman, sneaking up on me all the time.”

“Fine, thanks, and you?” He was shrugging out of his suit coat, and raindrops gleamed in his dark hair. “Didn't mean to scare you.”

“That's all right. I didn't realize it was so late.” She laughed shakily. “You startled me, to put it mildly.”

“I'm sorry, honey.” He looked at her face and apparently didn't like what he saw there, because his next words were concerned, almost sharp. “How long have you been working?”

“Oh...er...”

He was frowning at her, hands on his hips, and his handsomeness struck her all over again—would she never get used to his dark good looks? “Since late this morning, I'll bet, which means you didn't have lunch.”

“Oh, lunch,” she said with a weak attempt at dismissiveness, but he wasn’t having it. He crossed the room in three strides and gently pulled her up from her chair.

“Come on. I’ll fix you a sandwich or something. . . Marnie made tortellini soup, how about some of that?”

Her stomach *goinged* noisily and she laughed, then gasped as the baby kicked, hard. “Oof! I guess that’s a pretty great idea. Maybe two bowls?” she asked hopefully, following him into the kitchen. Before long they were consuming Marnie’s excellent homemade soup with gusto, and he was telling her about his day.

In truth, Victor found day-to-day business intensely dull these days; his thoughts were always turning toward Ashley and the baby. The office practically ran itself, and he was seriously considering working out of the home and only going in for board meetings and the like. He wasn’t sure how Ashley would feel about having him around all the time, and so was waiting for the best time to bring it up.

He knew she was unhappy, and it frustrated and saddened him. Used to ‘fixing things’, he was at last up against a problem—a person—he couldn’t instantly make better, and it was breaking his heart. He gave her all the material goods she would accept, made her life as easy as possible, but she was still unhappy, and there were times when she had an odd look on her face, almost as if she were trapped. . . or thought she was. He knew her unhappiness was a result of a failing in him, and all he could do was try to be patient, try to prove that he loved her and she need fear nothing from him. But it hurt knowing the love of his life was sometimes wary of him, and almost never trusted him.

She never refused him sex anymore, and that was a straw he clung to. They were very, very good in bed, and she was as thrilling a partner as he could have hoped. She was completely, utterly *there* for him in bed, never distant, never cold. Afterward she was sometimes unhappy, as if letting her passionate nature assert itself was shameful, a failing of sort. He could do nothing about that but try to show her with his body that he loved her, that she would come to love him, that everything would be all right.

“Derik’s going to be in town over the weekend,” he said, watching Ashley work her way through chocolate ice cream heavily sprinkled with walnuts. “Should I invite him over?”

“Of course! I haven’t seen him since before we were married.”

“Since the day I threatened you and bullied you into marrying me.”

Her spoon clattered against the bowl. “Yes,” she said, and she wouldn’t look at him.

“Ashley. . .” He leaned forward, trying to capture her gaze. “Ashley, haven’t you figured it out yet? You’re so smart, I was sure you’d have guessed the truth by now.”

She looked up, startled. “What truth?”

“It was all a lie,” he said gently. “I made it all up. I bluffed you into marrying me.”

Silence while she stared at him, mouth open, ice cream dripping from her spoon. “But—you said—you said any judge would—”

“It was *alie*. I was desperate to be with you. I was terrified you’d leave the state and hide my child away, terrified I’d never see you again. I knew you were afraid of me, I knew you’d never give me a real

chance, and I was too selfish to let you do that. I couldn't let you keep yourself distant from me, so I made up all those horrible things so you would think you had to marry me, that it would be best for the baby. But I didn't count on you believing me so utterly, never questioning that I could do such monstrous things to you."

"It was a trick?" she said unbelievably. "You tricked me?"

"And you threatening an abortion wasn't a trick?" he asked quietly.

"You—you—"

"It was the only thing I could think of to do," he said simply.

She sat for a long moment, then moved—surprisingly quickly, given her increased bulk. Only years of martial arts training gave him the reflexes to duck in time; her ice cream bowl whizzed past his ear and shattered against the counter. "Well, that was pretty damn *horrible* of you," she shouted, flinging her spoon after the ice cream bowl. The tension of the last few months overwhelmed her and she gave free rein to her temper, and as a result his eyebrows were level with the table in his efforts to avoid her missiles. "You tricked me—made me think you'd take the baby away—and all because you didn't want to *lose* ! Asshole! Monster! Egomaniac!" Each insult was punctuated with another missile: the salt, the pepper, the napkin holder.

Victor, under considerable stress himself, also gave in to his anger. "Oh, like you weren't being just *abit* unreasonable yourself?" he shouted back, cautiously standing when he noticed the table was completely bare. "You remember how I found out I was going to be a father, don't you? *Pure luck* ! If Derik hadn't happened to be getting lunch in the same building, I still wouldn't know! If someone was trying to hide your child from you, wouldn't you take steps to prevent that?"

He had her there, he saw—she looked uncertain, wary. Then she shook her head firmly. "We're not talking about me, we're talking about you. How could you be so mean?"

"Mean? Fixing it so the mother of my child doesn't have to work sixty-hour weeks? So she doesn't have to pinch pennies and go back to work two weeks after the baby is born? So she doesn't have collection agents harassing her night and day? Oh, yeah, I was a real bastard to take you away from the good life!"

Suddenly, shockingly, she burst into tears. His anger vanished and now he felt like the world's biggest bully. She slapped her hands over her eyes and wailed like a child, "I hate you!"

He stepped over the shards of glass, avoided the spilled salt and pepper, and tried to take her by the arms; she backed away, still crying, still covering her face. "Do you, Ash?" he asked anxiously. "Do you really?"

"No," she sobbed, then cried harder. More than a little confused, he followed her to the corner and then pulled her into his arms. Surprisingly, she allowed it.

"Please stop crying," he begged, "you know I can't stand it."

"I can't help it."

"*Try*. Please, Ash. I'm a desperate man."

She looked at him, her eyes puffy and teary and still so beautiful. “Did you really?” she asked in a watery voice. “Make it all up? If I hadn’t married you, you—”

“I would have tried to be as involved with the baby as you would have let me. But I couldn’t have done anything to take him—or her—away from you. How could I do anything that would hurt you? I love you more than my life—*don’t* start crying again.”

“I *not* crying,” she protested tearfully. Somehow her arms were around him, her fingers locked loosely behind his neck. “I’m just glad you told me the truth. Even though it was a horrible trick.”

He tensed, waiting for her fingers to tighten as she smashed his head into the wall. Happily, this didn’t happen. “It *was* a horrible trick,” he said. “I was desperate.”

“Yes,” she sighed. “I know about desperation.” Then, miraculously, she was rising up on tiptoe, the better to fit her body against his, and she kissed him lightly on the lips. “I’m glad you told me. It makes me feel better...about a lot of things.”

He didn’t let her pull away. “I’m so sorry you believed me,” he murmured back. “It was integral to my plan...but I was sorry, all the same.” He kissed her on the mouth, feeling her soft belly pushing against him, her full, ripe breasts pressing against his chest, and suddenly it was difficult to hear because of the dull roaring in his ears. There was nothing in the world now except his wife, and himself. He could feel light taps against his belly and knew the baby was kicking, and a surge of love and desire rose in him so strongly his knees almost buckled.

“Quick,” he gasped, trying to pull away from her, wanting to lead—hell, *race*—her to the bedroom. “Quick—I—”

“Here,” she said, almost panted. “Right here. Help me with this.”

In seconds he had her free of her tunic and leggings, was frantically unbuckling his belt and shoving his pants down. He lowered her to the floor, barely noticing the shock of cold tile against his elbows; she didn’t even flinch as her skin came in contact with the floor. They were both focused entirely on the other. He reached for her, parted her downy lips and felt her slick softness—she was ready for him, needing no loving preparation.

He spread her knees wide, and entered her with one swift stroke. Her legs came up and helped him go deeper still, and they thrust against each other again and again. The only sound was their harsh breathing and the quiet burbling of the coffeemaker. He buried his face in her throat and sucked, relishing the salty taste of her sweat. She was moaning, deep in her throat, making almost guttural sounds, and he felt the pain/pleasure of her nails digging into his back. Then he felt the glorious all-over tightening that was her body’s release, and followed quickly with his own.

It was only after this that they noticed several things at once: that they were half-naked on the kitchen floor, that they were sprawled all over each other like a couple of teenagers, that the tile was exceedingly hard and cold. A little embarrassed at their ardor and urgency, they both got up and tried to assemble themselves. Victor thought that Ashley, fumbling with her clothes, her hair mussed and her cheeks glowing with passion and good health, had never been more beautiful. He stopped her and, placing his hand on her gently swelling belly, told her so.

She grinned at him, for the first time in days. “You’re just saying that so I’ll clean up all the broken

glass.” Then she stuck her tongue out at him, kicked his pants into the salt pile, and darted down the hallway, giggling.

He chased her into the bedroom.

* * * * *

...so it was a lie? He tricked me but I can't honestly say he did it entirely without reason. But now what? Do I believe him? If I do, does this mean we have a future together? Does it mean I can finally put the past behind us? After he told me last night, we had a completely childish fight, complete with him yelling and me throwing things, I mean, how lame can you get? Then things definitely got weird...we ended up making love on the kitchen floor in piles of condiments. It was fast and furious and incredible, and afterward we went to bed and we made love again, this time he took me from behind, so slowly and gently I wanted to cry, it was so nice. Then we talked about names for the baby, and then we fell asleep. All in all, it was one of the nicer days of the year—possibly the decade—and I feel so hopeful now. Even if I haven't been able to get the salt out of the sheets. But my mood switch is pretty dumb, when you think about it—he confessed to tricking me into marriage, only slightly less nasty than blackmailing me. We had great sex. Twice. And now all of a sudden I'm happy about being married. It's all very—

Ashley had been putting off going to the bathroom, wanting to finish her journal entry, but the pressure on the bladder finally gave way to wetness between her legs. *Great*, she thought, *you were so intent on your journal entry you've wet your pants. Have I finally found something that will turn Victor off? And more important, do they make diapers for pregnant women?*

Her good humor evaporated as soon as she stood and realized she hadn't wet her pants at all—the dampness between her legs was blood. A lot of it. For a moment she was so frightened and startled she couldn't move. Just stood there, frozen, staring down at herself, and fear rose in her so quickly she choked on it. In a flash all her worries about her and Victor, all her fretting—do-I-love-him-if-I-do-does-that-make-me-weak—seemed too ridiculous for words. A single thought started and kept cycling through her brain: *I'm losing the baby. I'm losing the baby. I'm losing the baby.* It made everything else seem beyond trivial.

Had she thought she was frightened the night Victor was mad with fever? That was the mild concern over a blistered heel compared to the consuming terror she was feeling now. She was scared to move to a phone or the car, afraid of doing further damage to the baby. But she couldn't stay in her office all day.

She slowly backed up until she was again sitting down, then picked up the phone and dialed Victor's office number. His secretary answered on the first ring, and informed Ashley that her husband was already on his way home. “Snuck out early to go see you, I imagine,” she giggled. “I can patch you in to his car phone, if you like.”

Ashley swallowed hard. “Yes, please.”

She heard a couple of clicks, and then the line was ringing. She heard his voice and relief swept over her, so great that she closed her eyes.

“Hello?”

“Vic.”

“Ashley? Speak up, honey, I can barely hear you.”

“Vic, I’m bleeding. I’m—” A sob tried to escape and she choked it back. This was no time to lose it. And speaking of losing it. . . “I think I’m losing the—”

“Oh my God!”

“Vic. . .” She managed a wounded laugh. “I—there’s so much blood.”

“Where are you?”

“Home.” Had she referred to the house he bought with his money as her home before? And why was she thinking stupid thoughts like that, when her child’s life was ending? “In my office.”

“Okay, sweetheart. I want you to hang up and call Dr. Opitz, and do whatever she says, okay? I’m only ten minutes away.”

“I can’t. Her number’s in my purse, and my purse is in the hall closet. I’m afraid to move. When I move there’s more blood.” She got that out okay, but ended on a near-sob.

“That’s okay, honey, she’ll be listed in information,” he soothed. Dimly, she could hear screeching brakes and angry honking. He wasn’t wasting any time getting here. . . how that comforted her! “Call 411 and ask for her number. She’ll be listed, she’s a doctor.”

Damn. Why hadn’t she thought of that? “Okay. I’ll call her. Vic?”

“I know, sweetie. I’m coming.”

She disconnected him, then called 411 and, lo and behold, Dr. Opitz was listed. She called the office number and, once the receptionist was made to understand the seriousness of the situation, was put through to the doctor immediately.

“Ashley, it’s Sharon Opitz. What’s the matter?”

“I’m bleeding, Sharon,” she whispered into the phone. “It’s all over, isn’t it?”

“Hell, no!” she shouted, so loudly that Ashley jerked the phone away from her ear with a wince. “It could be any one of a hundred things, and a lot of them won’t have any lasting effects on the baby. Five months is a little late for a spontaneous miscarriage, okay, Ashley? It might not be as bad as you think. Where are you?”

“Home. Victor’s on his way, he should be here in another couple minutes.” *If he doesn’t get himself killed driving like an idiot.*

“Okay. Rather than wait for an ambulance, have Victor drive you to Mass General. I’ve got privileges there, and it’s only fifteen minutes away. I’ll meet you there, okay? Head up to the tenth floor and tell them your name, they’ll get you set up. And try not to panic, okay, kiddo? Like I said, it could be any number of things.”

“What should I—the blood, it’s—”

“Take a towel and stuff it between your legs. This is no time for modesty, Lorentz-Lawrence. Victor will help you into the car, and you can hop into a wheelchair when you get to the hospital.”

“I can’t!” she cried. “I’m afraid to move.”

“You can’t teleport to the hospital, Ashley,” she said sternly. “Keep it together, now.”

Sharon’s tone had the desired effect; suddenly Ashley felt silly, almost ashamed of the fuss she was making. She was just hanging up when she heard the front door flung violently open and pounding feet. Victor burst in just as she stood to find a towel.

“Oh, Jesus,” he cried, and she assumed it looked even worse than it felt.

“I need a towel,” she said calmly, “and then you have to drive me to Mass. General.”

He held his hands up and started backing out the doorway. “Don’t move. I’ll get it. Don’t you move an inch. Oh my God. Does it hurt?”

“No.” Was that good? She thought so. She felt no cramping, no labor pains. “No, actually. I didn’t feel a thing until I noticed the blood.”

He came back in and sort of flapped the towel at her; she took it, folded it to a small square, and put it between her thighs. He bent to pick her up and in his anxiety, scooped up the chair as well. He turned and started out the door, not noticing when the chair legs thumped against the doorway.

“Victor.”

He turned, the better to maneuver her, him, and the chair out the door, and she practically yelled, “Victor! Let go of the chair.”

“What?” He looked down and noticed he was holding an office swivel chair, as well as his bride. He shook her lightly and the chair swung away and thudded to the carpet. “Well, why the hell did you bring it if you didn’t want it?” he snapped, and she reminded herself that he was just as rattled and frightened as she was.

“It’ll be all right,” she said, but, oh, that felt like a lie.

“I know,” he said.

And now, she thought grimly, *we’re both lying.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The car phone rang once on the way to the hospital. Victor punched the speaker-phone button and barked, “What?”

“Er—Victor? This is Crystal.”

“Not now,” he snapped, swerving to avoid rear-ending a Wonder Bread truck.

“This will only take a moment. I just got back from Paris and I heard the most *incredible* rumor. Apparently you've gotten married to some nobody no one's ever heard of.” She tittered. “I thought you should know what people are saying—”

“I am married, she's not a nobody, you're a worthless bitch, goodbye.” He punched the disconnect button.

“That wasn't very nice,” Ashley said, eyes closed.

“For God's sake! You're—*we're*—in the middle of this huge crisis and you want me to make nicey-nice with my ex?”

“No, but I do want you to avoid running that red light.”

“Shit!” He stood on the brakes and Ashley felt her seatbelt lock. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” she said patiently, “but being tossed about the car isn't going to help, especially if you get us in an accident. Calm down, we're almost there.”

“I'm perfectly calm,” he shouted.

She had to smile a little at that. “If you get any calmer I'm going to need earplugs.”

He pulled into the hospital and parked in the red No Parking zone. Leaping from the car, he wrestled a wheelchair away from a startled valet, wrenched open Ashley's door and then tenderly helped her into the chair. He ignored the valet's pleas that he move the car, tossed his keys at the woman, and then ran for the doors, pushing Ashley's wheelchair in front of him.

“I hope that was an actual hospital employee,” she commented, watching the valet drive Victor's Mercedes away. “Or we're going to have to take a cab home.”

“This is no time,” he said through gritted teeth, “for your weird sense of humor.”

“Sorry.”

Things happened very fast after that, and the next half hour was a blur of doctors, nurses, paperwork, and tests, finally culminating in her lying in a hospital bed, dressed in a hospital gown. For the first time since they'd arrived, only she and Vic were in the room. Dr. Opitz and her team were at the nurse's station, discussing the test results and their options.

“Do you want me to call Jean?” he asked anxiously, pacing back and forth in front of her bed.

“Heck, no. Let's wait until it's over, one way or the other. She's not what I would call a calming influence.”

“Well, Dr. Opitz didn't seem too worried,” he said as if she had said something entirely different. He wore the look of a man grasping at straws. “She would have been a little more worried if something was really wrong, don't you think?”

“I think it’s all over,” she said dully. “I think in a minute she’s going to come in here and schedule me for a D&C.”

“Don’t say that!” he cried. “You don’t know that!”

“Yes, I do,” she said, and suddenly the events of the last hour overwhelmed her and she started to cry. Victor looked stricken, and came to sit on the side of her bed. “Victor, I know my baby’s dead!”

“You *don’t* know,” he said, pulling her into a hug. She clung to him, taking comfort from the warmth of his body. “You don’t. It—it could be anything. Don’t give up on him yet.”

“Her,” she sobbed.

“Her, okay. And it’s *sour* baby, you goof. You didn’t get into this mess by yourself.”

“Our baby,” she repeated. Strange, that that should be so comforting. That sharing loss could actually make her feel a little—a very little—better. “You’re right.”

“Actually, that was your cue to start yelling and throwing things at me.”

“I never felt less like yelling at you in my life. Victor...” She pulled back and looked at him. His dark eyes were intent, too bright with unshed tears, and his mouth was pulled down in a sorrowful bow...and yet, he had tried to tease her, to cheer her up a little. *Oh, God, I love this man so much.* “Victor, if something—if the worst has happened...let me finish,” she said, because he started stubbornly shaking his head. “If I lost the baby, will you get me pregnant again? I couldn’t bear not to have your baby. If we’ve lost her, I’d hate it—I’d miss her forever, but I’d want to get pregnant again. I don’t want to use a miscarriage as an excuse to get a divorce and go our separate ways. I want to stay together and raise a family.”

He was looking at her incredulously, with dawning hope. “You—do you mean you—”

“I mean I love you, Victor. I’ve always loved you, and I’ve been lying to myself for months and months. I love you and I want to have your baby—oh, God, I wanted this baby so much!” She tried to cover her face with her hands, but he clasped her wrists and gently prevented her from looking away.

“Don’t give up on her,” he said, and kissed her lightly. “She’s tough. Like you. I love you, Ashley.”

“I love you, too.”

“Again,” he murmured, kissing her eyebrow. “Say it again.”

“I love you.”

“Oh, thank God.”

They were holding each other, taking comfort from the other’s body, when the door to her room *whooshed* open and Dr. Opitz stood there, holding a printout and grinning. “Can you say *placenta previa*, boys and girls?” she asked triumphantly.

“What?”

“You, young lady,” she said, advancing into the room and pretending to scowl at Ashley, “have given us all a scare for nothing.”

Scarcely breathing, hardly daring to hope, Ashley couldn’t speak. When Victor spoke, his voice was almost inaudible. “Do you mean the baby’s okay?”

“I mean the baby is just fine. Placenta previa is when part of the placenta detaches prematurely from the uterus. It causes blood loss and looks scary as hell, but it’s not serious and we can fix it in a jiffy. Bed rest for you, though,” she said sternly to Ashley. “We can take steps to make sure it doesn’t happen again, and I’m going to want to see you at least once a week for the rest of your pregnancy, but the baby’s fine. And so are you.”

“The baby’s really okay?” she asked tearfully.

“Yes,*they* are.”

“You mean—”

“*They*?” Victor nearly fell off the edge of the bed.

“—twins?” Ashley asked, stunned. “You know for sure?”

“Yes, we know for sure.” Grinning, Sharon Opitz remembered again why she loved her job. “They’re just as perky as you please, too. Incidentally, you’re going to get huge.”

“Twins...I...*twins*?”

“Wow,” Victor said, grinning so hard he thought his face would break. “That’s fantastic!”

“Twins?” Ashley squeaked.

“I was starting to suspect when you got so big so quickly, but ultrasound confirmed it.”

“But I had an ultrasound months ago!”

“Yes, but sometimes one twin is almost directly behind the other, and the scan only picks up one...especially so early in a pregnancy. I never picked up a second heartbeat, either. It’s rare,” she admitted, “but it happens. But we know for sure, now.”

“She’ll probably deliver early, then, right?” Victor asked.

“Most likely. We’ll keep a close eye on her, and you should definitely consider hiring someone to help you with the babies for the first couple weeks.”

“First couple*years*,” Ashley said, still stunned. She was happy the baby, babies, were okay, but this was a lot to take in.*Twins*? “Oh my Lord.”

“Anyway,” Dr. Opitz said briskly, “we’re keeping you overnight, just to make sure we’ve got everything under control. But lay off sex, and—”

“Doctor, it’s my fault this happened,” Victor said anxiously. “We had sex yesterday—”

“Twice,” Ashley added helpfully, blushing a little at the memory.

“Yes, and I was—that is to say, it was awfully fast, and...uh...”

Dr. Opitz tried to keep a straight face, but her reserve cracked a little as this large, powerfully built man fumbled through an explanation of a quickie on their kitchen floor, blushing like—well, rather like Ashley was blushing right now.

“—and then we went into our bedroom and I made us do it again, only this time...”

“Please, spare me further details. I’m begging you. This was not your fault,” Dr. Opitz said sternly, in her best doctor-to-patient voice. “Sex during pregnancy does not cause placenta previa.”

“But we had *sextwice* .”

Dr. Opitz laughed politely.

“Okay...you’re sure?”

“Positive. I swear on my stethoscope.”

The Lawrences exhaled in relieved unison.

“I’ll go finish up the paperwork for your admission,” Sharon said, preparing to leave, “and we’ll see about rustling up a cot or something for you, Victor...I assume you’re going to insist on staying overnight?”

“Damn straight. And good luck moving me.”

“No, no, we wouldn’t dream of it. I’ll go talk to an orderly about getting a cot.” With a cheerful wave, she left the room.

Ashley lay back in her bed with a sigh of relief. “I just can’t believe it,” she said. “Not only did *Inot* miscarry, but we’re going to have two babies!”

“It’s a wonderful miracle.”

“That’s redundant.”

“So’s what’s in here,” he said, gently patting her stomach. “Give me a kiss, Ash.”

“Why?” she teased.

He grinned. “Because you adore me and you can’t live without me.”

“Oh, well...there is that.” She complied, and they ended up necking in her hospital bed like teenagers, stopping when an embarrassed nurse came in to give Ashley a sponge bath.

“Great news!” Dr. Opitz sang. “You’re dilated to ten centimeters.”

“I want my epidural!”

“Well, you can’t have one. Sorry. You’re fully dilated. But guess what, Ashley? You get to push now!”

“I think,” Jean said nervously, looking at her enraged friend, “you’d better get away from her, Doctor. She’s small, but she’s strong, and if she gets to that stethoscope around your neck...”

“I don’t want to push! I want some drugs, and then I want to go home.”

“But you’ll have your babies soon! It’s almost over,” the nurse said comfortingly, taking care to stay out of throwing range. Ashley had already heaved two books and her focal point, a framed picture of the babies’ most recent ultrasound, at him. “You get to push, and then the babies will be here.”

“What’s this ‘get to push’? You make it sound like a privilege. And where’s my idiot husband?”

“You told him to get the hell out of here before you killed him where he stood,” Jean reminded her helpfully. “Needless to say, he did not linger.”

Ashley slumped against the pillows, exhausted. How did women do this for twenty-four, thirty-six, even forty hours? Her labor had started six hours ago and already she wished she were dead. *And I wouldn’t mind some company down in the morgue, either*, she thought murderously, glaring at the others in the room. How had she never noticed Dr. Opitz’s obscene, constant cheerfulness before today? And that irritating laugh that sounded like the Wicked Witch in the Wizard of Oz? And Jean’s useless, provocative comments? And the way Victor—*Victor*—well, she’d remember some of the things he did that annoyed her, later.

It had started out so deceptively pleasant and exciting. Just like the books said, she knew at once that this was the real thing, and the contractions didn’t even hurt that much. Oh, they left her breathless, but she was staying on top of them, and the breathing really seemed to help. Victor was so excited he kept dropping her suitcase and tripping over things, and for that reason she refused to let him carry her to the car. Once at the hospital, she had elected to walk the halls, hoping gravity would speed things along, and it certainly seemed to do the trick...now, a few hours later, she was ready to go, or so Dr. Opitz claimed.

The contractions were coming fast, and breathing *did not* help. Nothing helped. The pain gripped her belly, seized it in red-hot pincers, twisted, squeezed, and finally let go after thirty or forty years...then she would have a break of about a half second before it started again. When the breathing no longer helped, when all she wanted to do was scream, she finally asked for an epidural, only to be told she was fully dilated, so now she ‘got to push’. Oh, goody.

Victor poked his head in. “How’s it going in here?” he asked Jean.

“What the *hell* are you asking *her* for, you dumb son-of-a-bitch? *I’m* the one having the babies!”

“About as well as it was going when you left,” Jean admitted. “Why don’t you get in here? I’d much rather have her screaming at you than at me.”

“Stop talking about me like I’m not here!”

“And stop taking your pain out on us. It’s nobody’s fault that labor hurts.”

“Come a little closer and say that,” Ashley snarled.

“Not on your life. Or mine.”

“This sucks!”

“It sure looks like it,” Victor said nervously. He thought Ashley beautiful, always, even now, but she did look a bit...crazed. “Can’t you give her something?”

“Nope. It’s too late.”

“Oh, shit!” she gasped. “It’s starting again.”

“Okay, Ash, this time push during the contraction.”

“Push...*during*? Are you out of your mind, Opitz?” She groaned and gritted her teeth and writhed through the contraction; Jean and Victor watched, wincing. Finally, it was over. “They lied,” she gasped. “The books lied. You’re supposed to want to push. I never wanted to do anything less. I can’t push! The babies will tear me in half. *This is going to kill me, somebody call the police!*”

“Ashley, this is what your body was made to do,” Dr. Opitz soothed. “And since you’re going a little early, the babies are actually smaller than term, so it’ll be easier than it is on most women.”

“Easy! You call this easy, you blonde harpy?”

“No,” she admitted, “but it’s not as hard as it could be. Now, when the next contraction comes along, push hard for a count of ten.”

“No.”

“No?”

“I won’t do it.” She scowled. “I won’t, and you can’t make me.”

“Um, Ashley,” Victor said tentatively, “shouldn’t you do what Dr. Opitz says?”

“Not if it’s going to kill me!” She sucked in her breath as the contraction started.

“Push!” the nurse, Thomas, exhorted. Ashley glared at him and did nothing. “Push, Ashley, push hard.”

“For...get...it...”

“I don’t believe this,” Jean groaned. “She’s actually refusing to push. Now what?”

“Now,” said Dr. Opitz, “we wait.”

And so they did. Dr. Opitz and the nurse knew, as the others did not, that nature was on their side. There was no need to force Ashley to do anything.

She endured two more contractions before a tentative attempt to push. “Hey, that *hurts* !” she cried, freshly enraged. “It burns and I hate it! The books lied! They lied!”

“Everyone’s different,” Thomas said.

“You stay out of this. Oh, God, this really, really sucks. When is it going to be over?”

“When you push the babies out.”

“I told you to stay out of this!” She tried another push, but by the time Thomas reached the count of three she quit.

“Take a breath and do it again,” he coached, but she refused.

“The contraction...is...over,” she groaned, clearly lying through her teeth. “The urge...to push...is gone.”

“Clearly,” Jean observed. “Memo to me: adopt.”

The contractions were coming right on top of each other, but after pushing for a few seconds Ashley would stop, crying out that it hurt too much, that the contraction was over and she couldn’t push, anyway. Everyone knew she was lying, but for Victor it was a particular torment. It was his fault she was in so much agony, and seeing her small body wracked with pain was almost more than he could bear. He didn’t know how Ashley was enduring such torment. It would have killed him hours ago, he was sure.

Eventually, as Dr. Opitz and Thomas had known, it was more uncomfortable *not* to push than *to* push, and soon they could see the baby’s head. “One more should do it,” Dr. Opitz coaxed. “One hard push and this baby’s as good as born, Ashley.”

Ashley looked at the clock. Twenty to midnight. Damned if she’d still be pregnant at midnight. She pushed for the millionth time, and what was odd was, it didn’t hurt nearly as much as before...everything down there felt numb. She could feel the baby start to slide down and wanted that so badly her body took over, and with a mighty strain felt something slide from her, and then Dr. Opitz was scooping up a small, purply-red bundle. She did something to the baby’s head and then the room was filled with a watery wail. Ashley closed her eyes in pure relief—had she ever heard a more beautiful sound? She had not.

“You’ve got yourself a little girl!” Dr. Opitz said, handing the newest Lorentz-Lawrence to the nurse.

“I can’t believe it,” was all Victor could manage.

And, ten minutes later, another one. This time, Victor did slightly better: “You did it, Ashley! I have no idea how, but you did it!”

“Thank God,” she breathed, then opened her eyes wide as Sharon put a baby on her stomach. The baby was perfectly formed, with a dear button nose and a mouth like a rosebud. Her eyes were very dark, almost black, her skin was very fair, and she had dark red hair, the color of cherry syrup. Black brows swooped above her great dark eyes as she stared at her mother; her coloring was startling, and

incredibly beautiful. Her sister looked exactly the same.

“Oh my Lord,” she said weakly. Were these perfect creatures really her daughters?

“Ashley, Victor, look what you made,” Jean breathed. “They’re the prettiest babies I’ve ever seen.”

“Almost as pretty as their mama,” he said, bending to kiss Ashley. “You did it, sweetheart. I’m so proud of you.”

“You shouldn’t be. I was a jerk.”

“You had cause,” Jean said, not looking up. She couldn’t look away from the perfect little baby on Ashley’s stomach. “Are the babies okay, Dr. Opitz?”

“Apgars of nine and nine...they’re perfect. Here, Victor. Have a twin.”

“Thanks.”

“Take two, they’re small,” she said, and cackled her distinctive laugh. “You need to push out the placenta, Ash, and then you’re free to snooze for the next week or so.”

“Okay,” she said, not really listening. She was thinking about her mother. Her mother had gone through this, and still had given Ashley up. She decided Victor was right, that her mother hadn’t wanted to, had fought hard to keep her. She herself knew she could never give up either of these darling babies without a fight.

And so it was that in a delivery room at Massachusetts General Hospital, years after a frightening and lonely childhood, Ashley finally forgave her mother, and, in doing that, began to be kinder to herself.

EPILOGUE

Ashley hurried into the twins’ nursery, a sleeping Kirsten cradled in her arms. The baby was deeply asleep, absolutely glutted with milk, and Ashley was looking forward to a short break...or possibly a nap. She had to put Kir down, then go back into the living room and scoop up Karen, and then she’d be—

“Psst!” Victor hissed. “Hey! You, with the baby!”

She turned and saw Victor coming down the hall, Karen tucked under his arm like a football. “Is this your baby, lady? I found her on the living room floor.”

“Har-har, and keep your voice down. I was afraid I’d wake them up if I carried them both at once.”

“Will they sleep long?” he asked, clearly disappointed. It wasn’t the first time he’d sneaked home early in order to play with the babies. Not that at six weeks they were really into much interaction, but to Victor’s credit, he liked everything about them, even changing diapers.

“Hopefully. I need a nap.”

“Where’s Marnie?”

“She took the day off.” At his frown, she added, “For God’s sake, Victor, I can take care of the babies by myself for one day. Just think, if you and I hadn’t patched things up, I’d never have any help at—”

“Let’s not talk about it,” he said with a convincing shudder. “The thought of you on your own with two newborns is...eesh.”

“I’d have managed.”

“And worked yourself into an early grave, likely as not.”

“You’re right. Let’s not talk about it.” They tucked the babies into their cribs without another word. Originally they had given each baby her own room, but the babies, once asleep, slept through anything, so there was no worry of one waking the other in the middle of the night. Ashley and Victor weren’t forced to run all over the house to tend to crying babies in different rooms. Thus, one nursery.

Once the babies were well and truly tucked, Ashley shut the door and headed for their bedroom, Victor on her heels.

“I’m glad you’re home,” she said upon reaching their room, smiling warmly.

“Me, too. It’s so boring at the office. I’m—uh—” While he was speaking, she stripped out of her leggings and T-shirt, and stood, delicately pretty in bra and panties, rummaging in her dresser drawer.

“Kirsten spit up on me a little,” she said by way of explanation. “Go on. I’m listening.”

That’s nice. Now what the hell was I talking about? Victor hadn’t had sex in months. Despite Dr. Opitz’s assurances that sex wouldn’t hurt Ashley or the babies, or cause a recurrence of *placenta previa*, he hadn’t touched her except to kiss and cuddle. Once the babies were born, watching Ashley’s slow, wincing movements around the house, he knew the six week postpartum wait was a good idea for them, and resigned himself to more cold showers.

Ashley, dismayed at the changes in her figure, had greeted with joy and relief Victor’s surprise: an in-house gym, complete with weight-training equipment, a stairmaster, treadmill, and stationary cycle. She had attacked the machines with characteristic willpower, and between near-daily aerobic exercise and weight training, a sensible diet and breastfeeding, she had slimmed down in a remarkably short time.

The result of this was that his wife, who, he was sure, had been born beautiful, was now walking around in a world-class body, taut and toned. The only other change, besides stretch marks that were even now fading, was a slight increase in fullness at hip and breast, which made her all the more attractive to him...he liked women who looked like women, and Ashley was all that and more.

He was certain she wasn’t yet ready for sex, and was in no rush to push her or even bring it up, but Christ, did she have to walk around in her underwear? How many cold showers was a man expected to take in the course of a day?

“...for the day?”

“What?”

She frowned, holding her T-shirt in one hand, and shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “I said, as long as you’re here, when the twins wake up, why don’t we take them out for the day? It’s a gorgeous afternoon for stroller-pushing.”

“Sure. That sounds like fun.”

“Are you all right?”

“Sure.”

He was acting strangely, and she wondered what was on his mind. He was looking at her so intently, but when she tried to meet his eyes, he jerked his gaze away. It was almost as if he was anxious about something. Or nervous.

She stepped closer, concerned. “Victor, what’s the matter? You can tell me.”

He was actually backing away from her! Her jaw dropped in astonishment, even as he fumbled for the doorknob. “Nothing. Don’t come any—I mean, everything’s fine, just fine.”

“Are we going to start this idiocy again?” she asked, arms akimbo, and stomped her foot in frustration. He flinched and his eyes dropped to her breasts. “I thought we’d gotten past all the secrets and bad feelings and all that petty *bullshit*. For the past five months—ever since that awful day we thought I was having a miscarriage—we’ve been getting along so well! You know, like *husband and wife*? I love you and you love me and we love our babies, there are no secrets and no hidden bad feelings and now we’re supposed to live happily ever after. So start being happy, damn you!”

“I am happy,” he protested, jerking the door open and clearly preparing to leap into the hallway the moment he finished speaking. “I love you more than my life, and I practically worship those babies, as you well know.”

“Then what in the name of heaven is the matter?”

“You! Walking around half-undressed and prattling about spit-up and changing clothes and stroller walks while I’m supposed to listen to your words and not notice that since you had the twins you look even more incredible than usual. I’m supposed to think platonic thoughts, when all I can think about doing is—is—”

She gaped at him, then started to laugh. “Is that what’s bugging you? For God’s sake, are we ever *not* going to be worrying about lovemaking in this marriage?” She walked to him and started prying his fingers off the doorknob, one by one. “We can, you know. The twins turned six weeks old the day before yesterday and I got the green light from Dr. Opitz. I half expected you to be all over me that night.”

“I didn’t want to rush things,” he managed, very conscious of her warm nearness. “I wanted to wait until you were ready.”

“I’m ready now,” she murmured, turning her face up to his. “Only...go slow, okay? It’s been a while.”

“For me, too,” he said, kissing her softly on the mouth. He shrugged out of his coat and suit jacket without breaking the kiss, then picked her up and pulled her against him. Her legs went around his waist and he supported her easily, his hands on the backs of her thighs. He kissed her throat, then pressed his

lips to just below her collarbone, greedily inhaling her scent; she smelled like her own sweet self, with a tantalizing milk undertone.

He kicked the door shut behind him, thanking God his amiable babies slept through just about everything, and carried her to the bed. Before he even had his tie loosened she had reached behind her and unsnapped her bra; her ripe breasts bounced free and he felt every cognitive thought leave his mind, actually felt his IQ drop and his mouth slacken in appreciation. Suddenly his necktie grew three feet and the knot doubled in size.

Laughing, she reached up. "Let me help you, you're going to strangle yourself." She got the tie unknotted and flung it away, then quickly unbuttoned his shirt and ran her hands over his tautly muscled chest. She flicked her nails over his nipples and giggled when he growled at her.

In minutes they were both nude, both rolling around in the king-sized bed, tickling and laughing and mock-wrestling, pleased to be together this fine afternoon, willing to stall for a few more minutes what they had both longed for months. Soon enough the laughter died down, replaced by sighs and soft moans. Victor at last got to do what he had been fantasizing about for six weeks; he pulled a stiffened nipple into his mouth and suckled gently, his passion trebling as his mouth was flooded with sweet, warm milk.

"This is so Freudian," Ashley said, giggling, then moaned as he licked the underside of her full breast. In moments he had traced a trail of kisses to the dark forest between her legs and was kissing her there, deeply and with pent-up longing. Her taste, her delightful musk, was subtly changed, but she was still his sweet Ashley. He could feel her thighs tremble as he tongued her clit, could hear her gasps and her entreaties that he never stop, he mustn't stop, *don't you dare stop!* Her hands beat imploringly at his shoulders, then clutched at him.

Laughing softly, he kept up the gently merciless onslaught while easing a finger inside her. She accepted him but it was a tight fit; his own control suffered when he imagined his cock entering her, enjoying the ecstatic agony of a tight fit.

Ashley was enduring an ecstatic agony of her own; her head was thrown back and she looked at the ceiling through eyes slitted with lust. She could feel him down there, doing delicious, wonderful things to her with his customary skill. His fingers were practically dancing between her thighs, moving with delicate rapidity, only to be replaced with his lips and tongue. When his tongue slowly pushed inside her and then wiggled, she thought she would go out of her mind. Then he pulled back and rained kisses down on her slick flesh.

She could hear him muttering what he'd like to do to her, what he *wasgoing* to do to her, and how much she would like it, and how much he loved her, adored her, worshipped her. Oh, by the way, are you getting close, sweetheart?

The answer was yes...and no. She felt as if she was teetering on the brink of orgasm, but she lacked the final nudge which would push her to the other side. It was torture, sweet agony, and she was sure the strain of enduring such pleasure was going to be the end of her. She felt Victor grip her hips and raise her to his mouth, his tongue, pulling her so close, she could feel the muscles in her thighs trembling. Could hear someone crying out in throaty agony and realized with dim shock that it was her making all that racket, thanked God for blessing her with babies who slept like little logs, and wondered how much more of this she could stand.

Suddenly he released his grip on her hips; her buttocks were flat against the bed and Victor was leaning

over her, reaching between her legs to gently hold her apart. She felt his cock nudging at her opening, and scrambled toward him, trying to help him, and then he was entering her with delicious slowness. She could feel every ride, every fold, every wrinkle of his hot throbbing length, and nearly sobbed with the joy of it.

She was biting her lips with the effort not to cry out, and he soothed her with a kiss. But that became delicious torment as well, because as he was slowly coming inside her his tongue penetrated her lips and delved inside her mouth, just as slowly.

Overwhelmed by her tremendous need, she started quivering beneath him, clawing him, trying to lunge against him, to force him into her faster, harder. He groaned into her mouth and gripped her shoulders, effectively pinning her to the bed with his hands and his weight, forcing her to endure the slow torment. When at last he was fully seated within her he rested his head against her shoulder for a moment, then asked, in a voice so thick she barely understood him, "...doesn't...hurt?"

"No," she panted. "No. No. Please. It—please, Victor, my God, I can't—"

"Telling...truth?"

"Yes!" she practically screamed. "You're not hurting me, it doesn't hurt, please, Victor, I want you so badly..."

"Have to be...careful. You're not...not so wet. Feels—God, you're so tight...how can you...how...can you...be tight...after having...babies?"

"Please, Victor," she said, close to crying from sheer need, and he pulled out slightly and then thrust back in. She was tight, she could feel every fraction of her skin against his, but she didn't care, it didn't hurt, it felt delicious, and if he stopped, she would die. "Please, more, I love you," she cried, then gasped as he thrust against her a little more forcefully.

"Don't say things like that or we'll be done before we've started," he panted. "And if you could stop looking so passionately gorgeous and sexy, that would be a big help, too."

"So close your eyes," she managed, smiling, and her smile disappeared as he surged against her, as he released her arms and let her pull him against her. His head dropped and his mouth was on hers. His tongue was in her mouth, and he was stroking so sweetly, but with increasing speed, and then she felt him shift, reach down, and then his thumb was rubbing across her clit and the combination of that stimulation coupled with his thrusting spun her into orgasm. She shut her eyes against the inner explosions, against the glorious all-over tightening, and writhed beneath him from the sheer pleasure of it. When she at last opened her eyes, panting, she was shocked to see Victor looking as if he were in great pain; his jaw was clenched and his eyes were slits.

"Wh—what's wrong?"

"I am trying—to think—about baseball."

"Ooh, poor baby." Now that she had enjoyed her own release, it was time to torture him back, this wonderful man she had married. She smiled dead into his eyes and wriggled against him, running her tongue across her lower lip and then pursing her lips in silent invitation. He scowled down at her, and once—as recently as nine months ago—that would have terrified her. Now she only laughed and jerked her hips up.

“You...bitch.”

“Victor, you look *terrible*. Are you sure you’re not having a heart attack?”

“No...I *amnot* sure. Be still, you...damned vixen.”

“But it feels so much nicer when I move,” she whispered, the teasing lilt gone from her voice. “Doesn’t it?”

With that he surrendered, kissing her savagely and thrusting against her with hard, quick strokes. His very roughness, so different from his usual controlled lovemaking, brought her to orgasm again. She opened her mouth to scream in surprise and pleasure, but his hand pressed firmly over her mouth, muffling her cries. His hips were forcing her legs apart and he tugged on her thighs, clearly wanting her to bring her legs up but unable to vocalize. She complied with his silent request, wrapping her legs around his waist. As he plunged deeper yet she found her release a third time, this time crying out into his mouth, for he had removed his hand and kissed her deeply the moment he felt her legs come around him. At last he shuddered against her, and she saw his throat tighten as he poured his seed into her, finally collapsing over her.

Silence, except for their rapid breathing, and then Victor rolled away and gasped, “Did I hurt you?”

“No. God, no.” She turned on her side and reached out to him; he caught her hand and pressed it to his lips. “That was...not at all like new parents should behave.”

“Wrong,” he groaned. “Oh, Jesus, it’s been too long.” He looked at her anxiously. “Are you *sure* I didn’t—”

“Victor!”

“All right, all right. It’s just—I was rougher than I intended. But you’re so—”

“Ah, so it’s all my fault you’re a ravening beast?”

“Actually, yes.” He pulled her into his arms, kissing her damp forehead. “Where were you all my life, sweetheart?”

“Waiting for you,” she said seriously. “Wherever I was, that’s what I was doing. Even if I didn’t know it. And you know, Victor...”

“Yes?”

“We didn’t use birth control. Just think, we could be pregnant again!”

He groaned. “Great. More abstinence.”

“But another baby.”

“Later,” he said firmly. “When you get your strength back. Having a baby every year will wear you out. Let’s talk when the twins turn two, okay?”

“Okay. I was only teasing, anyway. I put my diaphragm in when I put the babies down after lunch. I was hoping you’d come home early,” she said slyly.

“Conscienceless seducer. ‘Kir spit up on me,’” he mimicked, “‘I have to change my clothes. All my clothes. And stand here in my underwear looking like Miss February.’”

“Well, it worked, didn’t it?” She kissed him on the jaw. “Really, Victor, it certainly took you long enough.”

“It certainly did. About a lot of things,” he said seriously.

“Me, too, sweetie. But we finally got our act together, didn’t we?”

“I love you, Ashley.”

“You’d better!” she threatened, then kissed him. “Because I’m not going to be the only one in this marriage hopelessly infatuated with her spouse.”

Victor sighed, content. That sounded like a good deal to him.

The End

Also at Ellora's Cave

By MaryJanice Davidson

Canis Royal: Bridefight

Things That Go Bump In The Night II

Ellora's Cave

www.ellorascave.com

About this Title

This eBook was created using ReaderWorks®Publisher 2.0, produced by OverDrive, Inc.

For more information about ReaderWorks, please visit us on the Web at
www.overdrive.com/readerworks