

-Martha's Madness-

Book II of the Second Chances Trilogy

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PROLOGUE

September

"Martha's Madness?" Tony asked, his gaze never straying from her face.

Brittany smiled. Tony was the nicest guy she'd ever met, and talk about tall, dark, and handsome! "That's what people call my Aunt Martha's house in Oregon. It's the greatest house, right on the beach and designed just how she wanted it. But they call it Martha's Madness because she uses it only in the summer when it's too hot to stay in Texas, and it's way bigger than she and Uncle Harry need. I've spent every summer there since I was twelve."

"It sounds nice. You like the ocean, then?"

She nodded and set her empty ice cream cup on the low table next to her. "The waves are so great - and the sunsets!"

"I agree. Would you like a soda or anything else?"

He'd been generous like that all evening, offering popcorn at the movie, then ice cream, and now pop. He didn't seem to expect anything in return, either, and that was the part Brittany found the hardest to get used to. "No, thanks. I've been hoping to get a chance to see the Atlantic Ocean, but I haven't been off campus since I got here."

"Maybe we could go for a drive down Narragansett Bay sometime," he suggested, his deep voice making her insides itch.

"You have a car?" That was definitely unusual, even for a sophomore. Brown's location in the middle of the East Side of Providence made for a lack of space for student parking. The lots were expensive and on-street parking almost impossible to find.

He nodded. "I'm from Newport, and I go home fairly often for family get-togethers. I had to take the bus last year, but that was for the birds. So I saved money to buy a car this summer."

He must be from a reasonably well off family, then, if he could save his wages for a car instead of tuition. Well, maybe not. He could be on a full scholarship, like she was. "What kind of job did you have?"

He made a not-too-successful attempt at looking and sounding modest. "We have a marine products distributorship - Fiore Marine. My grandfather runs it, but I'm going to take over when I graduate."

Great looking, super nice, sexy as the devil - with a company waiting for him, no less! He could

undoubtedly date any girl on campus, and that realization boggled her mind. She'd get her heart broken, if she didn't watch out. Guys like Tony ended up with sweet innocent girls. Her roommate, Carolyn, for example. Never girls like Brittany.

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Tony stopped in the middle of the block and looked around. How had he gotten this far from campus?

The answer was a peculiar combination of sexual frustration and exhilaration he'd never felt before. And it was all Brittany's fault - except he wasn't sure fault was the right word.

Sure, she'd turned that goodnight kiss into the single most sensual experience he'd had in his whole life. And then, just when he'd been about to suggest going for a drive - all the way to the nearest place to park - she said they were moving way too fast.

But he could have changed her mind without much trouble. She might have said the words, but she was just as turned on as he was.

The truth of the matter was that he didn't mind waiting. He and Brittany already had a connection he'd never felt with anyone else, something that went way beyond the physical. Rushing her into sex would be almost sacrilegious.

And that, his body reminded him, was a damn shame. She could have been created with every one of his hot buttons in mind. Those long sandy curls that fell almost to her waist. A mouth that was made for kissing. And lush but firm breasts.

He was in for some torture, but fifty or a hundred years from now, he'd be glad he waited.

CHAPTER ONE

March, Fifteen Years Later

Brittany set the tray on the table next to Michael and picked up half of her grilled cheese sandwich. She'd eat while she got their clothes ready. When she heard a commercial come on, she asked, "Which tie do you want to wear today?"

He laughed rudely. "You know the answer. I want to sit here and watch TV, and I don't need a tie for that." He picked up his sandwich and bit off a big chunk.

She sighed. "But we promised to go to Carolyn's wedding this afternoon . . ." That sounded awfully close to whining and she knew very well that whining wasn't the way to deal with Michael. Offering a bribe would be more effective. "And I was thinking - we could stay overnight in Portland. The reception'll be over early, so we could go to a club or a movie or something fun like that."

"Oh, right. You forget I've been reading the Portland papers for the past three months, looking for some halfway decent entertainment. About the best thing was some road company of a Broadway show we saw five years ago, and that was weeks ago."

Why did he have to be so picky? She was sure there were plenty of places in a city the size of Portland where they could spend an enjoyable evening. "There's a great bookstore downtown. You'd enjoy going there, wouldn't you?"

He didn't answer because his show came back on. That was all he seemed interested in doing anymore - sprawling on the loveseat in front of the TV, watching shows that were first broadcast in the '50's or

'60's. They'd been here for almost three months in this wonderful oceanfront house, and Michael hadn't bothered to walk on the beach yet. Most days he probably didn't even look out the windows to watch the waves. She brought most of his meals to him here in the master suite, and the rest of the time she was on her own. Of course, she could happily spend her whole life doing nothing more than enjoying the sights and sounds of this beach. But still, this wasn't exactly what she'd expected when he told her about the vacation time he'd taken - to cheer her up, as he'd been careful to mention.

The phone rang and he answered it immediately. He always needed to be the first to know who was calling and why. After a moment, he said, "That's great! I'll be there in half an hour." He hung up and clicked off the TV. "The part for my car's in and they're going to put it in this afternoon." He stood up and stretched.

"That's good. We can drop your car off on the way." She wouldn't question his sudden about-face. Any reason that got him moving was okay with her.

"Jesus, Britt, forget about the wedding, will you? Now that my car's going to be fixed today, we don't have time for crap like that. You start packing while I take it down there. I'll help when I get back, and if we're lucky, we can be out of this hick town by tomorrow."

Her stomach twisted. "I thought we weren't leaving until Monday night." She'd been counting on that - she needed an extra couple of days. She wasn't ready to go back to California and look for a new job. Not yet. She needed to let go of her last bit of hope first, the hope that Michael would learn to love living here and agree to stay and build a business with her. She stared out the window at the surf, wishing she could let go of her dream as easily as the sand relinquished each wave.

"That was just because of my car, you know that." Michael wrapped his arms around her. "Britt honey, I know you'd like to stay here longer, but we can't. I've got to be at work on Wednesday. If we drive back tomorrow instead of Monday night, we'll have a couple of days to play first. You've been missing all those great ethnic restaurants, too - and you know how hot you make me when we go dancing." He snuggled up close and started exploring her breasts. "Just thinking about it turns me on. Let's do it right now."

All he had to do was touch her and everything else became unimportant. It had been that way since they first met. People always said that relationships built on sex couldn't last, but their marriage had outlasted those of most of their college friends - including the ones they were supposed to see this afternoon. Carolyn and Tony had been together all through college, just like Brittany and Michael, and they too had married within weeks of graduation. Their marriage had lasted less than seven years, although their friendship was still strong. Five years later, Carolyn was getting married again, and Tony would be there to watch. Brittany and Michael had to be there to support him!

Brittany exerted all her willpower to pull away from Michael and put several feet of distance between them. "We need to go to the wedding, Michael. Tony's going to be there, and - "

"Don't give me that crap. The Crown Prince is a grown man and doesn't need his hand held all the time. If he's got any brains, the only reason he's going is to laugh at the guy the Ice Queen's got her mitts into now." He took a couple of steps toward her and added, "As for you, don't play games. We're either going to do it right this minute, or I've got to cruise. Which is it?" He punctuated his question by slipping his hand inside the loose waistband of her sweatpants and squeezing her bottom.

She was aggravated enough that she could almost ignore the melting feeling inside her body. "Agree to go to the wedding first. It's really important to me - and we don't have to stay overnight. In fact, we'll leave the reception real early . . ."

His smile dropped away and the playful squeeze turned much less playful. "You think I don't know why you want to go? You just want to see your precious *Tony*, and I'm not putting up with any of that shit. No, I want out of here *tomorrow*, and that means you spend today packing, not drooling over some damn wop."

"I'll stay up and pack tonight - " The rising hysteria in her voice wouldn't do her any good. Michael never agreed to do anything just because she got emotional about it. Forcing herself to sound calm and logical, she said, "Then I'll go by myself and you can get your car fixed this afternoon. As I said, I'll pack when I get back, and we'll leave tomorrow."

He glared at her and shook his head. "I said no, Britt. You should have asked me *before* you accepted the damn invitation in the first place. The Ice Queen and the Crown Prince can go to hell, for all I care." He squeezed harder, until she felt like her buttock was clamped in a vise grip. "I'll be back soon, and you'd damn well better be busy packing when I get here." He released his grip and walked out of the room.

She heard the front door close, and then the faint sound of his car starting up. She sagged against the cool glass of the window, not really watching the waves but letting their presence soothe her. He'd never had any intention of going to the wedding! She'd told him about it last month when Carolyn called - but now that she thought about it, she'd been surprised at his lack of reaction. He'd grumbled and made a few sarcastic remarks, but he hadn't refused to go or even made a serious objection to it.

Suddenly she was so mad she felt like smashing something. He was so damn sure of himself - so sure that she'd do just exactly what he said. It was her fault, too. She always gave in to him, sooner or later. More often sooner.

Well, she wasn't going to give in this time. She'd go to the wedding, just like she'd planned - and promised. And she wouldn't sneak out of the reception the minute it started, either. She'd stay a while and talk to Tony. It had been years since she'd seen him, and talking on the phone just wasn't the same.

She couldn't totally break with her usual habit, though. She'd stay up packing all night when she got back. They would still be ready to leave tomorrow. Maybe that would satisfy Michael and he wouldn't stay angry with her for long.

Maybe not. But for once, she'd take the chance.

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"Hello. I'm Seth Worthington."

Tony shook his hand and answered, "I'm Tony Fiore." He didn't bother adding "Carolyn's ex- husband," because Seth probably already knew that. "You have a lovely home."

The well-dressed man who so fit his surroundings smiled. "Thank you. We like it. The ceremony will be in the tent right off the patio. It'll be at two o'clock and the ushers will ask everyone to go out there a few minutes early. In the meantime, we've put a few snacks out, and please make yourself comfortable."

"I'm supposed to meet some friends. Do you happen to know if Brittany and Michael Stone are here yet?"

Seth frowned slightly. "I haven't seen them. It's still early, though."

He nodded. "They'll probably be along any minute. I guess I'll go watch for them." He moved toward a small window that looked out on the street, although now he remembered that Brittany was rarely early

for anything. She and Michael would likely arrive just before the ceremony.

He waited until nearly everyone else had gone outside, but still no Brittany and Michael. He took a seat near the back of the tent and marveled at the size of the crowd. Carolyn had said it would be a "small" wedding - well, maybe it was in comparison to theirs all those years ago in the Catholic Church in Newport, but there must be seventy-five or a hundred people here.

Brittany slid into the seat next to him and flashed him a smile in the moment of silence before the wedding march started. He returned it half-heartedly, shocked at her tense expression and the worry lines it made so noticeable. To cover his concern, he peered over her shoulder to catch a glimpse of the bride.

Carolyn was beautiful; there was no other word for it. Normally, attractive was a more accurate description of her, but today her happiness spilled out in such radiance that he found himself smiling. For her, certainly, because she deserved it. But for himself, too. Maybe he would someday find a love to transform his life, a love like she'd found. A love that would fill the emptiness she'd left behind, but one that would do more than that. A love the two of them had never felt for each other.

The ceremony passed quickly. He'd wondered for days how he'd feel. Would it be like losing her all over again to see her make her vows with Scott? Surprisingly, it didn't hurt. She was his best friend and he was thrilled for her happiness. But still, he felt numb - and more than a little jealous. He wanted to feel the way he imagined she felt today, like his life was only beginning and full of infinite possibilities.

The new couple was introduced to the assembled well wishers and he joined wholeheartedly in the burst of applause that greeted them. Brittany looked over, wearing a troubled frown. He didn't need to wonder if she'd changed her mind. She was still angry with Carolyn for leaving him, and she still thought he was denying his true feelings about their divorce.

When they returned to the house for the reception, Tony looked around. "Where's Michael? I figured maybe he'd gone to park the car and was stuck in the back during the ceremony."

"Oh, no. It turns out he couldn't make it today." She quickly changed the subject. "I'm so glad to see you, Tony! It must have been . . ." She frowned in concentration.

He supplied the answer, "More than four years. I haven't seen either of you since you moved to San Francisco."

She nodded, still looking more serious than he'd ever seen her. "That's right. I really wish you didn't live so far away." She looked at all the people surrounding them and asked, "Do you know anyone here other than Carolyn?"

Perversely, he said, "Well, I've met Scott a couple of times, but I can't say I know him."

She looked shocked, as he'd known she would. "Where did you meet *him*?"

"Out here. I don't know if I told you, but we bought a distributor up in Olympia last year, so I've spent a fair amount of time in Washington State recently. Sometimes, when I'm there for a week or so, I drive down to see Carolyn. Scott's around once in a while, which is only natural."

"But how can you - I mean, he's the reason you're not married any longer. I'd think . . ."

He smiled slightly, realizing that he'd wanted this opportunity to make Britt understand. "I know, Britt. But Carolyn loves him and he makes her happy. That's what matters most to me." There was more he wanted to say, but this was no place to get into such an intensely personal discussion. "I know her family, too, of course, and I'd better go say hello."

"I'll go with you."

The Kelleys were all perfectly pleasant but distant, greeting Brittany with considerably more enthusiasm than Tony. They gave no sign that he'd ever been part of their family. He knew Carolyn would have emphasized that he wasn't to blame for their divorce, but he supposed they'd assumed he actually was. They certainly would never have believed the truth - that Carolyn, the life-long good girl, had fallen in love with another man. And Tony wasn't about to tell them that their brand-new son-in-law had been both the cause of the divorce and the one who'd broken Carolyn's heart by abandoning her.

As soon as they could, he and Brittany excused themselves to get a drink. He took an already-poured glass of champagne from the bar, but Brittany settled for sparkling fruit juice. "I have to drive back tonight." Her eyebrows drew together, giving her a grim look that seemed totally unlike her.

He couldn't politely ignore her distress any longer. She might say the problem was none of his business, but he had to ask. He steered her into an alcove between the living room and the sunroom and commented, "You seem kind of uptight today."

Brittany sighed, and just when he thought she might answer, she suddenly plastered on a fake smile. "Carolyn!" The two women hugged and Brittany added, "That's a lovely dress."

He added, "Such a good color on you, babe." Mint-green always brought out the turquoise of her eyes.

While she hugged him, she murmured, "Thanks for coming, Tony. It means a lot to me."

It did to him, too, but his throat was too tight to say so.

Scott stood uncertainly behind Carolyn for a moment longer; then Carolyn stepped to one side and introduced him. "Britt, I'd like you to meet Scott."

They shook hands, but Brittany's smile wasn't very encouraging, so Tony offered a greeting. "Good to see you again, Scott. And congratulations. I hope you'll be very happy."

Scott said, "Thanks. I'm sure we will," but his voice sounded strained.

Carolyn barreled ahead somewhat desperately, "I'll give you a call sometime, Britt. Now that you and Michael are nearby, we should get together."

Brittany grimaced. "Well, actually, we're heading back to California tomorrow. We'll still have the house up here, though, so we'll be back once in a while."

Hadn't she said they were moving to Myrtle Beach, the last time they talked? No, not exactly, he remembered. She'd said it wasn't definite, that they were looking at all their options. He'd just assumed they'd do it, based on knowing how much Britt loved the ocean and Martha's Madness, the house she'd just inherited. No wonder she seemed strange today!

Carolyn looked quizzically at Tony. "I thought you said . . ."

He shrugged. "I guess I misunderstood."

They all seemed frozen in place. Brittany broke the impasse by saying, "I probably gave you the wrong impression, Tony. I'd hoped that Michael and I would stay and start a small business in Myrtle Beach." With a tight smile, she added, "But hopes and reality aren't the same thing. So unfortunately, I'm going to have to hit the road real soon. Michael's back there packing, and I need to help him so we can leave tomorrow."

He couldn't let her leave before they talked. He knew Brittany well enough to know that more was involved than she was saying. He turned to Carolyn. "I'm sorry, but I need to leave, too, babe. I flew out this morning, so it's already been a long day for me."

If he didn't know Carolyn so well, he wouldn't have noticed the way she blinked quickly, like she'd been slapped. Her cheeks reddened, and after a moment, she said, "That's okay. The important thing is that you came." Tony promised himself that he'd explain his abrupt departure the next time they talked.

"Be sure to sign the guest book before you leave," Scott added, slipping his arm around Carolyn's waist and giving her a squeeze.

After he was sure they were out of earshot, Tony said, "I've got a suite over by I-5 and 217. Do you have time to stop off and talk for a few minutes?"

Brittany studied his face for a moment, then nodded. "I can spare about that long."

She followed his rental car to the hotel and was silent as they walked through the lobby and rode the elevator up to his floor. She sank into a chair in the living room of the two-room suite and sighed, but still said nothing.

"Britt, what's the matter?"

She glanced up at him with a rueful smile. "I'm being pretty obvious, I guess. The thing is I'm just not ready to leave Myrtle Beach - and I can't face looking for a job, either. But Michael's due back at work on the first of April . . ."

"The idea of starting a business there didn't work?"

She shook her head. "Not really. See, one of the main reasons we came up here is because I was so down. Aunt Martha died late in October and, while I was still dealing with that, I got downsized. They had outplacement counselors and all, but - well, I guess I got caught in the grief phase and couldn't do anything productive about anything."

"The grief phase?"

"You haven't heard about that?" She smiled a little more naturally and continued, "I guess you don't need to, working for the family company. But basically, somebody decided a while back that losing your job is a lot like having somebody close to you die. You go through a bunch of phases, like disbelief and grief and anger, and eventually you get to acceptance. Except that I didn't. I'd just sit in our apartment and stare at the walls, and even buying groceries or fixing dinner was too complicated."

"That sounds awful." He remembered feeling a little like that, right after Carolyn left. He'd had Brittany and Michael to help, though.

She nodded. "It was. So Michael's Christmas present to me was this vacation. He's been working at the same place for four years now, so he'd managed to save up a lot of time off, and they're not very busy right after New Year's, so his boss let him take it all off at once." She paused, blinking and gulping in air. "That was so sweet of him! It's helped a lot, too . . ."

Her voice sounded wistful and vulnerable, very unlike the usual Brittany. He wanted to help somehow, even if all he could do was hold her and assure her that everything would be all right. But holding her was impossible, too. Words would have to do. "Maybe when you get back home, you'll feel better about being there."

She blinked one last time and sat up straighter, something that only emphasized the way the chair overwhelmed her petite size. "I'm sure you're right, and I apologize for dumping on you. Now, what's going on with you? We haven't talked for a couple of months."

He shrugged. "Nothing new. The subsidiary in Olympia is our tenth one, and I'm in charge of all of them. My brother Robbie works with me, but he's got a couple of kids, so I do most of the site visits. That's what I'm doing next week, actually. I'm going to drive around the Olympic Peninsula tomorrow and Sunday, spend Monday and Tuesday at the site in Olympia, fly cross-country Wednesday, and spend Thursday and Friday in North Carolina."

"How's your social life? Or do I even need to ask?"

She always got around to asking that eventually. As did Carolyn and at least half of his family. They all figured that if he wasn't dating, he wasn't over Carolyn yet. But that wasn't true. "I'm on the road so much . . ."

She punched his arm lightly. "Don't give me that. You could make time, if you wanted to." She seemed about to say more, but then she shook her head reluctantly. "Damn. I really have to go, Tony, but this has been way too short." With a sudden grin, she asked, "Look, how about if you come out to Martha's Madness with me? I'd love to have you see the place, and we could talk lots more."

"But you're leaving tomorrow, and you have to pack." He didn't mention Michael, not knowing a polite way to say that Michael so often seemed jealous of their friendship.

She frowned intently for a few seconds, apparently thinking some idea through. "Packing won't really take all that long, and I'm going to do it right when I get back. Michael likes to make the drive at night, so we'd have all day tomorrow to talk and walk on the beach and all. He'll probably be glued to the TV, so he wouldn't mind."

He felt sure that she was making overly optimistic assumptions about packing and Michael's reaction, but all that really mattered was that she was reaching out to him for support and friendship. He said, "If you're sure . . ."

She nodded and bounced out of her seat. "I am. Oh, Tony, this'll be great! I'll just draw you a map in case we get separated on the drive - " She pulled open the drawer on the small desk and grabbed a piece of hotel stationary and a pen, then started sketching.

"If you're going to the trouble of doing that, I think I'd like to drive out first thing in the morning. My body's still on East Coast time, you know. I can probably leave here about seven, so we'll still have plenty of time. And if something comes up, you can give me a call not to come." Something like Michael throwing a fit, for example, something he'd been known to do.

Her mood shifted back to somber. "That's a good idea."

CHAPTER TWO

Brittany took the curves in the road through the mountains faster than was wise. Now that she was on the road, she was desperate to get back to Martha's Madness. She had so much to do before they could leave! She'd better use this time to make a mental list of everything and plan how she'd accomplish it.

As she'd told Tony, packing wouldn't be too bad. They'd only brought clothes and books with them, and she could leave the books she'd read behind. Michael undoubtedly thought it would take a considerable number of hours to pack their clothes, but she'd done a ton of packing over the years and knew

differently.

The more difficult part was closing up the house. She'd never been there when Aunt Martha closed up the house for the winter, but she knew it was fairly complicated. In addition, she needed to clear out the refrigerator and freezer, clean the rooms they'd been using, and wash their sheets and towels.

Wait a minute. Maybe she didn't. Aunt Martha always had a local man, Fred Pool, watch the house while she was away. He also handled any needed repairs. His daughter Angela, who'd become a good friend over the last few months, had often cleaned for Aunt Martha. She'd see about hiring them to clean and close up the house. Michael would be annoyed at her spending money for something she could do herself, but she didn't have time to learn what to do and how to do it in the next twenty-four hours. The house belonged to her, anyway, so it wasn't really any of Michael's business.

She laughed, a bit hysterically. What a ludicrous idea - that Michael might accept that something she did wasn't his business! Especially since he must be furious with her already, and would be even more ticked off when she told him Tony was coming . . .

Well, damn it, she was ticked off that he'd moved their departure two days earlier. Besides which, it had been rude to refuse to go to Carolyn's wedding at the last minute like that. Since he obviously assumed he could get away with crap like that, she wasn't going to back away from her perfectly reasonable plans.

A nagging cynical voice in the back of her head asked, "Oh, yeah? You're really going to stick to your guns this time, as opposed to the last three thousand times? Even when Michael slices you up in that vicious way of his and makes you remember how much worse your life was before you met him?"

To silence the voice, she turned the radio on loud and sang along with the bouncy inoffensive songs on the local station. From time to time, the announcer gave the weather report or read an ad about one of the local stores. He sounded completely sincere, and she had the sense that he was a regular customer of each store he advertised.

Maybe that was part of why she loved the Oregon Coast so much. People seemed real and honest and willing to accept each other, so unlike the self-obsessed people she'd known while growing up in LA and in the cities she'd lived in since. Unfortunately, that difference was at the heart of why Michael didn't feel comfortable here.

The house was dark when she got there. Since Michael often watched TV in the dark, she wasn't too surprised. Still, she crept silently into the bedroom, not wanting to wake him if he happened to be asleep already.

He wasn't asleep. Nor was he watching TV. He wasn't even in the room. She looked in the attached bathroom, and that was empty, too. Had he gone out somewhere? But where, in a town he hated?

She hadn't been looking forward to dealing with his anger tonight, but at least being yelled at was something she understood. Now, she didn't know whether to feel relieved or scared - or angry.

Well, she guessed it didn't matter at the moment. He wasn't here this minute, so she'd start packing. She could accomplish lots more without his constant interruptions. As she reached for the overhead light, she noticed the answering machine light flashing and pressed the "Play" button.

"Bitch!" Michael's voice snarled out of the machine at her. "You've got a hell of a nerve prancing off to that damn *wedding* the minute my back was turned. You knew damn well I wouldn't have let you go, and don't you try and claim different. I'm sure as hell not going to sit around waiting for you, either. I

grabbed a few clothes and I'll be home by morning. Who knows? Maybe the trip'll mellow me out a little - you'd better hope so, 'cause I'm more pissed at you than ever, and that's saying a lot. You've obviously forgotten that I'm your husband and you promised to 'love, honor, and obey' me. You owe me a hell of a lot of all three, and don't you forget it!"

She knew just what he'd looked like when he recorded that message - his face so tight with anger that his eyes bulged, his hands clenched into fists at his sides, and his whole body puffed up, making his slight 5'6" build seem immense. She found that she'd backed away from the machine, as if it was Michael himself. She blinked a couple of times and groped her way to the loveseat.

Why had she gone? It couldn't have been worth upsetting Michael so incredibly much. Sure, she'd accepted Carolyn's wedding invitation, but her college roommate would have gotten along just fine today without her. And Tony had been happy to see her, but he hadn't seemed to need her support like she'd expected. Maybe she'd gone as a way of rebelling against Michael's decision to leave for California tomorrow.

Yes, that was it. She'd been angry with him, yet not willing to talk the issue through. The mature thing would have been to wait until he got back and explain how she felt. Instead, she seized on the wedding as a symbol - a stupid one, too. Going to the wedding against Michael's wishes meant that she was putting her friends above her marriage, when Michael was the only person other than Aunt Martha who'd ever really loved her.

She was an idiot! No wonder Michael was angry. She desperately wished she hadn't argued against him getting a cell phone last fall. At the time, she'd been worried about the money - he wanted a fancy digital one that cost a couple of hundred dollars, plus a not-insignificant monthly fee in addition to airtime. But if she hadn't been such a penny-pincher, she could have called him right now to apologize. He wouldn't forgive her right away - and he shouldn't, given the outrageousness of her behavior - but she could explain why she'd done it, how sorry she was, and how she'd make it up to him.

She'd call the apartment and leave a message there, instead. It wouldn't be as good as talking to him directly, and after driving all night, he might be even angrier by the time he arrived, but it was the best she could do. And when she got a new job, she'd buy him the best cell phone in the universe, just to remind him how much she loved him.

"Hi, Michael. Please call when you get in, even if it's the middle of the night. I'm really sorry about today. I know you're mad, and you deserve to be. I really do love you, honey, and I promise I'll make it up to you. I hope your trip went well, and again, please call me right away. I hate for us to be at odds like this." She made a face as she hung up. That wasn't a very good message. She'd call back and leave another one - if she could figure out what to say. He wouldn't be there for hours, so she had plenty of time to think of something better.

She'd pack while she thought. It was more urgent than ever to leave tomorrow. Talking to Michael on the phone was all well and good, but he'd never truly forgive her until she was there with him. If she didn't need to talk to Fred and Angela about cleaning and closing up the house, she'd leave tonight.

Oh. Tony was due in the morning. Maybe she should call him and tell him not to come - it wasn't too late to do that tonight. Yes, it was. He'd flown in from Rhode Island today, so he might have gone to bed early. She'd get up early in the morning and call, instead.

By the time she finished packing, she was exhausted, but also encouraged at the progress she'd made. She'd have to wait until at least nine o'clock to contact Fred and Angela, being that it was a Saturday morning. She could get a lot of cleaning done after calling Tony, and that would save money. It would

also make her departure seem less abrupt, and therefore, less embarrassing. She hated the pitying way people looked at her when she changed her plans at the last minute to please Michael. It was none of their business what went on inside their marriage - and if more people were willing to compromise with their spouses the way she did, there'd be a whole lot fewer divorces.

She'd had doubts about how much sleep she'd get, but she fell asleep even before she had a chance to miss Michael's warm presence next to her. She opened her eyes sometime around five and wondered why he hadn't called. Wouldn't he be there by now? But her musing about whether the answering machine had malfunctioned and maybe she should call again were short-circuited by the lulling murmur of the waves just outside.

The alarm woke her at six-fifteen. Tony had said he'd leave about seven, so she'd call him in a few minutes. Except . . . What kind of friend was she, anyway? She saw the guy for the first time in years yesterday, and she wasted the whole time whining about her problems. She wasn't the one with a broken heart - he was. Maybe he didn't want to hear any advice about putting the past behind him, but he sure needed it. He couldn't let the years keep slipping by, while he became progressively more lonely and unhappy. With Carolyn finally married to Scott, Tony couldn't keep waiting for her to come back to him. Brittany figured that Carolyn must be a world-class idiot to trade Tony for any other guy, but she had, and that was that.

No, she'd keep to the original timetable. She'd spend the next few hours doing all the cleaning she could manage, then later in the day she'd call Fred and Angela about closing up the house. The rest of the time she'd devote to Tony, with the side benefit of having another opportunity to enjoy the sights and sounds of Myrtle Beach and Martha's Madness. She'd miss them more than ever, once she got back to San Francisco.

She was careful not to stray too far from the phone, hoping Michael would call. She'd assumed that he left mid-afternoon yesterday, in which case he should have gotten there a few hours ago. But he might have waited several hours for her to come back first, making his angry message even more understandable than it already was. Alternatively, he sometimes got sleepy on a long drive. When they traveled together, either in the same car or following each other, they'd stop along the side of the road and take a short walk or eat a snack. He might have opted for a nap while driving alone.

She decided to think positively about the situation. It was pointless to worry about whether Michael would still be furious, or whether he'd refuse to call. She'd be with him tomorrow morning. That would be soon enough to fix things.

Tony arrived a little before nine. "Look, Britt, I've been thinking. I really can't impose myself on you today. Just give me a quick tour of the place - I'm too curious after all your stories to pass up the chance - and I'll hit the road. I'll drive up the coast and nose around, pretty much like I'd been planning."

He looked determined, so she wouldn't outright argue with him. She'd just draw out the tour until they started talking seriously. "We'll start on this floor - well, actually, right here. Did you see the 'Martha's Madness' sign?" She pointed at the polished wood plaque just above the front doorbell. "Uncle Harry carved it himself."

"It's great. I know you've said why the house is called that, but I don't remember."

She had to smile. "Well, Aunt Martha and Uncle Harry happened to come to Myrtle Beach on their honeymoon - they drove up the coast from San Diego all the way to the Canadian border. But Myrtle Beach was their favorite, and they came back here for a week at the end. He was a builder in Texas and already partially retired. They weren't in a hurry to get back to Texas because it was still summer and

Aunt Martha didn't like the heat. I guess he saw a for-sale sign on this property when they were out driving one day, and he said he ought to buy it because ocean-front land here would be worth a mint someday. Aunt Martha said she'd like to live here, but he didn't want to move away from Texas permanently. He had grown kids from a previous marriage and wanted to see them frequently."

"He must have been in his forties or so, then. How old was she?" He seemed extraordinarily interested in her story. Maybe he was just watching her closely to see whether she was still weird like she'd been yesterday.

She gestured for him to come in, and led him into the living room. As always, she paused the moment she caught sight of the floor-to-ceiling windows looking out at the beach. Tony caught his breath - she'd known he'd appreciate the beauty. "I think he was fifty-two and she was forty-one. Anyway, they compromised by living here during the hot summer months and in Texas the rest of the year. He designed and built the house for her, exactly the way she wanted it. And that's why it got its name - Aunt Martha's family thought the whole idea was crazy. Having someplace to stay here during the summers was extravagant enough, but building a house like this? It has three - well, really five - bedrooms upstairs, plus a super master suite down here. And that's only the start! She never had any kids, so it seemed like a gigantic waste of money and effort. People started calling it Martha's Madness behind her back, but once she heard about it, that's what she called it, too."

Tony laughed. "That's right. I remember now. Your Uncle Harry made the sign to prove just how little either of them cared about anybody else's opinion."

She felt ridiculously pleased that he'd remembered part of a story she told him fifteen years ago, on their one and only date. The phone rang right then, before she had a chance to respond. "Look around while I get that."

She dashed into the bedroom and shut the door, sure that this must be Michael. "Hello?"

"You packed yet?" It was, and miraculously, he didn't sound particularly angry.

"Michael, I'm so glad you called! Did you just get in?" Suddenly, she remembered to answer his question. "And yes, I have things packed up."

"Great - you'll be home tonight, then. I'll get you something to go from Leo's when I go there for dinner. God, it is *so* great to be home!"

She hated to disturb his good mood, but she had to correct his assumption. "Actually, it'll be morning before I get there. I still haven't done anything about closing up the house - "

"Isn't that what you've got what's-his-name and Angela for?"

How ironic. She'd been worried that he wouldn't approve of her hiring them, and it turned out he was expecting her to do exactly that! "Well, I haven't talked to them yet. I didn't want to call too early . . ."

"Jesus, Britt! You're gonna have to *pay* them - you can damn well call them at nine o'clock on Saturday morning."

"I guess." She didn't want to tell him about Tony's visit, feeling a little disloyal for having invited him, but she had no choice. "I'll leave sometime this afternoon. Tony's here right now - he wanted a tour after all the times in school I talked about Martha's Madness. He'll be heading up toward Olympia later today, and I'll hit the road then, too."

He didn't respond for several seconds, then grumbled, "I should have known. What *is* it about him that's

got you all hot and bothered?"

"Tony's my friend! And he hasn't gotten over Carolyn yet, and . . ." She wished she could believe Michael was actually listening to her explanation.

He snorted and she knew he hadn't been. "Yeah, right. Tell you what, Britt baby. You just *stay* up there and play with your little friend. In fact, stay overnight and get him to scratch that itch of yours."

"Michael! Stop being horrid - "

"Well, stop lying to me, bitch. You've had the hots for him as long as I've known you, and I'm getting damn sick of it. The only reason you're still all moony over him is 'cause you haven't been to bed with him yet." That vicious voice of his made the words sound even worse.

She had to make him stop. "Shut up! You're making things up, and you're being mean, and - "

"Can't stand to hear the truth, can you?" He laughed harshly. "Hell, do it or don't do it, whatever you want - just don't show up down here until after noon tomorrow. I'm gonna party tonight, and I *won't* be doing it alone." He hung up.

She dialed his number and let it ring twenty times, but he never answered.

**

Tony stared out at the beach, mesmerized by the sunlight glittering along the tops of the waves as they lapped at the beach. The setting was superb, and the little he'd seen of the house seemed pretty great, too. He could easily see why Brittany would hate to leave here.

He couldn't tell much about her state of mind today. She wasn't quite as jumpy as she'd been at the wedding, but her focus on him seemed forced somehow. Obviously, it *was* forced, which only went to prove what he'd said a few minutes ago - he had no business here today. She had a million things on her mind, and at least half of them were probably related to Michael. He didn't have to be a genius to see that their relationship was going through what he'd heard politely called "a rough patch." He'd better hurry the tour along and get out of here.

And then, she came back into the room and he saw that the rough patch had just turned into a minefield. She looked stunned and reached out to touch the raw wood paneling of the nearest wall, as though she needed its support. "I - I guess we'll go upstairs now."

He crossed quickly to where she was standing and put his hand on her arm. "Tell me what's wrong and how I can help."

She caught her breath and stared straight at his chest. "What do you mean? Nothing's wrong."

He clenched the fist that wasn't touching her, knowing that his gut instinct of pulling her into his arms wasn't appropriate. Instead, he tilted her head back so she had to meet his gaze. "Something is very wrong, Britt. If it's private between you and Michael and you don't want to tell me, that's okay. I'll just leave and you can get back to whatever you need to be doing. But otherwise, I'm not leaving this room until we talk the situation through."

Her eyes slowly filled with tears and she finally let out a shaky sigh. "Okay. I guess - well, Michael and I had a fight yesterday about going to the wedding - " Her forehead creased with what looked like anger. "He went out and I snuck out to the wedding while he was gone - " She blinked a couple of times. "He left for California before I got back. I got all packed to leave tonight - " She gulped, then with her voice rising hysterically, she wailed, "But he just called, and now he says he's going out and getting laid tonight

and I'd better not show up until tomorrow afternoon!"

Tony didn't think, he just wrapped his arms around her. She melted against his chest and clung to him for a couple of minutes. The fragility of her petite body surprised him, and thinking about that made him suddenly aware that all of her wasn't petite. She had beautifully abundant breasts, and they were pressing into him exquisitely. Aghast at reacting so inappropriately to his friend's distress, he loosened his hold.

She looked up at him and smiled weakly. "I'm sorry. I don't usually get all emotional like that." She stepped out of his arms and seemed about to leave the room.

He stopped her with a hand on her arm again. "That's not much of an emotional outburst, and we haven't started talking, so don't even think about continuing the tour."

She stiffened slightly in surprise, then stared quizzically at him. "What is there to talk about? And what kind of outburst were you expecting?"

He laughed. "This is going to take a while. Let's sit down." He sat on a sturdy high-back sofa and Brittany in a matching wing chair that dwarfed her. "To answer your second question first, I wasn't expecting anything in particular. But as far as emotional outbursts go, you definitely need to take lessons from my cousin Luce. If she got a run in her pantyhose, she'd react more than you just did."

Brittany frowned, first in disbelief and then in confusion. "But why? What's the point?"

"It gets her plenty of attention, for one thing. And if her husband's done something wrong, he ends up crawling, too."

She looked down at the floor. "Oh. Well, Michael's not like that."

Great. He'd made her feel worse instead of better. "I'm sorry, Britt. I don't mean to make things more difficult for you. It just seems like you're kind of overwhelmed by all the stuff that's happening right now, and I'd like to help."

"I don't see how you can. I mean, Michael's being a pain, but it's not the first time. I'll just head down there tomorrow and hope he decides to forgive me fairly soon."

The plaintive dejection in her voice made him want to scream. "Why are you the one who needs forgiving?"

"Because I went to the wedding when I wasn't supposed to - I was mad because he said we had to leave for California today instead of Monday, like I'd been expecting."

"And then he was mad because of that, so he left right away?" He waited for her nod before continuing. "But you've forgiven him for that already? And for the original thing, too?"

She nodded again. "Sure. I know what you're going to say, and I know I let him have his way an awful lot. The thing is that he really cares a lot more about the details than I do. Like with the deal about going to California two days earlier - he has to be at work on Wednesday, so we'd get there in plenty of time if we went on Monday night. But he wanted to be there a couple of days before going back to work, so we could go to some of our favorite restaurants and things like that."

"But you wanted to stay here another couple of days."

She shrugged. "Well, yeah, but face it. Two extra days here isn't going to change anything - I'm not suddenly going to be ready to leave or whatever. But for him, it's the difference between being satisfied

with things or being pissed."

He reminded himself that these traits were nothing new for Michael. He couldn't count the number of times over the years the four of them had made plans, only to change them at the last minute because of Michael. Brittany obviously loved Michael enough to be willing to live her life like this. Selfishly, Tony wished he'd never learned just how painful her life sometimes was. "Did I hear you right earlier? Did Michael really say he was going to . . ." He couldn't complete the question. How could any man lucky enough to have Brittany even think about another woman?

She shifted nervously in her chair. "Yeah, and I guess I'm not sure if he meant it, either. I mean, he was mad because I was waiting until tonight to leave, and 'cause I said you were here. Normally, I'd figure he was just blowing off steam, but he's still pissed about yesterday, too, so . . ."

"Has he ever - " He was horrified. "I'm sorry. I have no business asking that."

She grinned devilishly for a moment. "That's okay. I'll just ask you something horribly personal in return." Sober again, she said, "I don't think so. I told him it would be okay a couple of times, when we were in separate cities for months at a time, but he said he didn't want to."

She didn't seem about to say anything more, so he asked, "Now what horribly personal thing about me do you want to know?" Suddenly, he realized that the obvious question was the same one - whether he had cheated on Carolyn while they were married. And that was one he'd rather not answer, because it would get them into a subject he and Brittany had never discussed, his sexual relationship with Carolyn.

With another grin, she answered, "I'll have to think about it first. I wouldn't want to waste such a golden opportunity. Now, are you as sick of my personal problems as I am? I'm ready to continue your tour, and I'm hoping you wouldn't mind staying overnight." Her smile faded into wistful yearning.

Tony marveled that he'd spent fifteen years thinking Brittany was indomitable. Just in the last day he'd seen how untrue that impression was, and now he wondered if there had ever been any truth to it. "Sure, I'll stay."

CHAPTER THREE

Brittany continued the house tour with the second floor, also known as the guest floor. Three of the bedrooms were virtually identical, with the same furniture and an ocean-view window in each. Across from them, on the street side of the house, was the shared bathroom. At the far end of the floor were two larger bedrooms and another bath. Those bedrooms, where Aunt Martha's nieces and nephews had stayed, were called "the girls' dorm" and "the boys' dorm," and they were furnished with half-a-dozen bunk beds apiece. The dorms also looked out on the beach.

"This is an amazing design," Tony commented. "I didn't think about it downstairs, but all the important rooms are on the ocean side of the house."

She nodded. "Aunt Martha wanted to always be able to look out and see the water, and she wanted that for her guests, too. Even the kitchen has an ocean view - out a side window, but it's there. Let's go up one more flight of stairs."

She purposefully didn't say anything more, and hurried to the top of the stairs so she could watch Tony's face as he emerged into the lookout tower. His mouth dropped open and he turned completely around, first quickly, then more slowly. "What is this? A greenhouse or something?"

"We call it the lookout tower, because you can look out in any direction - even up."

He approached one of the glass walls and touched it tentatively. "It's all glass?"

"Except for some structural stuff. Uncle Harry came up with a real innovative design that solves most of the technical problems - leaks and so forth. It was expensive to build and takes careful maintenance, though, so not many people have copied it over the years."

He walked along the wall, feeling the surface with his hand, and looking out at the beach. Halfway around the room, he turned to face her and said fervently, "If this was my house, I'd live in this one room."

The tightness in her chest melted away - a tightness she hadn't noticed, but one that must have been there for months. She smiled. "That's a little impractical, but I know what you mean. I've always loved it, even at night when I can't see much outside, but especially at sunset and sunrise. When I'd be here for the summer, Aunt Martha knew she could always find me up here. The rest of the family would be out on the beach whenever possible - and I love the beach, too - but this room is . . ."

"It's magic."

She nodded, surprised to find that her throat was too full of emotion to speak. She almost never cried, nor wanted to, and she'd come close twice in the last hour. It must be the situation with Michael that was making her so sensitive today.

Tony watched her, his expression growing more troubled the longer she didn't speak. Finally, he said, "You know, I'd kind of like to go for a walk on the beach, if you don't mind. I heard on the radio that it's probably going to rain later in the day, so maybe I should go now."

She cleared her throat. "Great idea. I'll go put on my beach shoes - and do you have a jacket to wear? The wind's still pretty bitter this time of year." He looked surprised and she realized that he might not have intended to invite her along. "We don't have to stick together or anything, if you'd rather not."

He smiled. "It's up to you. Personally, I'd love some company, as well as the loan of a jacket, if you have an extra. My raincoat won't help much against the wind."

A couple of minutes later, they went out the sliding glass door from the living room onto the main deck. She led the way down to the hard-packed sand near the water, then turned south, away from town, like she usually did. It hardly mattered at the end of March like this, especially since the main part of Myrtle Beach was close to a mile away, and there were unlikely to be many people on the beach anywhere in the vicinity. That habit had been formed during her childhood summers here, first when she was busy avoiding her cousins Ralph and Richie, and later when she discovered how annoying it was to be patronized by aunts and uncles she barely knew.

They walked along quickly, and for the most part, silently. The few times either of them spoke, it was through wind-chilled cheeks and lips, and the extra effort required to enunciate made the conversation seem somewhat unreal. She intended to take Tony to the end of the beach, about three-quarters of a mile south of the house, thinking he'd be interested in seeing the spot where the smooth flat beach turned into rocky coastline. It started raining before they even got close, though, and she could tell the rain would only get harder for the next couple of hours. They hurried back to the house, Tony grabbed his garment bag from the car, and both changed into dry clothes.

Brittany lit a firelog and flopped onto the floor in front of the fire. Tony grabbed a pillow and joined her, groaning as he tried to get comfortable. "I may never be able to get up, you know."

"Come on. You're in better shape than that." At least, he used to be. "You still do a lot of sailing, don't you?"

He shook his head. "Not really. The guys in Newport I crewed for have given up on me because I'm never around when they have a race. I go out sometimes with customers, but that's primarily business, and someone else sails the boat while I sit back and enjoy the ride."

"That's too bad. I know you enjoyed it." She was amazed that the conversation she'd been determined to have with him had started almost on its own. "Tony, you don't seem very happy with your life."

He paused a few seconds, frowning slightly. "Happy's kind of a nebulous word, it seems to me. If you mean am I ecstatic with how things are going, you're right, I'm not. But I'm not unhappy, either."

She didn't believe that for a minute. "What's so great about your life now, if you don't mind my asking?"

He moved back a few inches and rested his back against the carved wooden leg of a nearby chair. "My career, for one thing."

She wanted to say that his career didn't count, but for all she knew, his career was part of what was wrong. "I don't buy that. You've been busting your ass for - what? - thirteen years, isn't it? I always thought you were supposed to run the place the minute you grew up, but I don't see that happening."

He sighed patiently. "Sure, I'm going to take over eventually, but not until Grandmother's ready to retire. And maybe you don't think it's such a huge deal, but I'm in charge of the whole company except the original site in Newport. I think I mentioned that we have ten other sites, and they bring in 75% of our net profits. When I got out of college, we only had the one warehouse, so I think I have plenty to be proud of, career-wise."

His simple recitation of facts made her realize how little she and Michael had accomplished in nearly the same number of years. They'd made enough money to live on, fairly comfortably most of the time, and that was it. Neither of them had spent long enough at any company, nor had a significant-enough position, to do anything truly meaningful. "I'm sorry, Tony. I didn't mean - well, I didn't know all that, and I agree you've accomplished a lot. Still, it kind of seems like nothing's changed all that much over the years. You're still traveling constantly, and that doesn't give you much of a chance to have a normal home life."

He half-smiled. "I wouldn't be having a normal home life, anyway."

"When I asked about your social life, you said you were on the road too much. And, as I said then, you could make time for it, if you wanted to."

"Yeah." His voice was so flat and he didn't say anything else for so long that she was afraid he'd shut her out. Finally, he looked straight at her and said, "I know you think I'm still in love with Carolyn, and that's why I haven't gotten married again. That's what most of my family thinks, too, but it isn't the truth. I think the problem is that I'm too much of a perfectionist. I want it all this time - somebody I love wholeheartedly who loves me the same way. And no amount of trying can make that happen unless it's meant to."

Brittany's insides ached with his pain, but at the same time a tiny bit of anger tried to work its way to the surface. She couldn't imagine having the luxury to insist on such pure and complete love. She'd needed love so desperately for so many years that having any, no matter how flawed, was cause for gratitude.

He sighed. "But I have to admit the chances of achieving that are pretty slim. And you're right; it's lonely without someone. Plus the family's after me all the time to settle down and have kids - " He rolled his eyes dramatically. "Especially Grandmother. Sometimes I think she's waiting to retire until I produce an heir."

She gritted her teeth intently, stifling the urge to scream at him. There were no words to the scream - just sheer sound - and she didn't understand why she felt the need so strongly. The emotion behind the scream was also unclear, but it filled her whole body so full she couldn't catch her breath.

She shook herself mentally. Obviously, her difficulties with Michael were upsetting her more than she realized. She took several deep breaths and reminded herself that Tony was a friend, not a foe, and definitely not part of the problem. "Well, Tony, you're certainly not going to find someone - perfect or not - without devoting some energy to the search. Promise me you'll go out with one new woman every month for the rest of the year."

He stared at her, seeming to wonder if she was serious, for a few seconds. Finally, he nodded. "I'll do that. Maybe it'll even work - who knows?"

She felt oddly let down. They'd talked about his life, and he'd agreed to do as she requested, but the conversation still felt rather remote. They were friends, and she didn't have the feeling he was purposefully being aloof, but he wasn't sharing his emotions, either. Of course, she hadn't shared hers with him earlier, so she could hardly blame him.

She craned her neck to look past the furniture and out the sliding glass door. When she couldn't see well enough, she scrambled to her feet and peered out. The rain hadn't totally stopped, but the western sky showed patches of blue. "Are you up for a drive? The Three Capes are pretty spectacular during and after a storm."

"That sounds great - if I can get up." He reached a hand out toward her, as though he wanted her to pull him to his feet.

She took his hand, then stood over him and realized how impossible the task would be. If he pulled on her, instead of being able to brace herself and help him up, she'd end up falling right on top of him. For a moment, though, she hoped he'd do exactly that. If she landed in his lap, he'd hold her safe and secure, and she could cling to him, if she wanted to. Maybe their lips would even brush against each other's . . .

He smiled, almost like he knew what she was imagining, and gave her hand a gentle squeeze before releasing it. "It would never work." She turned away from him, knowing and hating the truth of his words.

Their scenic drive took the whole afternoon. The Three Capes were just south and west of Tillamook, the small city only a short drive south of Myrtle Beach. There were countless places to stop for a glimpse of the ocean, and they stopped at almost every single one. Each was different - sometimes they could only see a small patch of water, other times a dramatic cliff seemingly surrounded by churning foam, and still other times, an unspoiled beach far below their vantage point. Once, Tony pointed at a large rock a small distance from shore and said, "I've seen that rock on calendars." A few miles later, she pointed out a similar rock, and they couldn't decide which rock was the famous one - or even whether it was definitely one of the two.

The wind was incredibly strong, and Brittany wondered whether a gust might actually be powerful enough to lift her off her feet. Every time she got back into the car after being outside for a minute or two, she sat in her seat, stunned and blinking, for a few seconds. Even then, her senses stayed wide-open and alert and she felt an almost-electric exhilaration that faded only gradually.

When they got back to town, they stopped at the local pizza place for dinner. It wasn't a fancy restaurant - it had probably started life as an ice-cream stand, and been remodeled and enlarged numerous times since. They served good pizza and draft beer, though, and that was what she cared about.

Shortly after their pitcher of beer arrived, Brittany caught a glimpse of Angela waiting for an order at the counter. She called out and Angela came over to their table.

"Hi, Brittany - " She looked at Tony, then away, obviously not sure what to say to him or about him.

"Angela, I'd like you to meet Tony. He's an old friend."

Tony offered his hand to Angela. "It's nice to meet you."

She nodded, looking slightly stunned. "You, too."

Brittany said, "I'm glad you happened to come in just now, Angela. I intended to call you earlier today, but I forgot."

"I wasn't home, anyway. I'm working Saturdays now."

"Well, it turns out I'll be leaving for California tomorrow sometime. Michael had to leave yesterday, and I've packed and cleaned, but I don't know how to close up the house. Do you suppose I could hire you and your dad to help me with that?"

Angela's mouth bunched into a pout, but she nodded. "I guess. I'll have to ask Dad, but we could probably come over after church tomorrow, if that's okay."

She'd hoped to leave town by then, but meeting with Angela and her father was something she needed to do. And the extra few hours weren't likely to make Michael much angrier than he already was. "That would be fine. I don't need to leave until late afternoon."

"I thought you were going to stay up here - remember, you said you'd help me learn computers?"

Brittany sighed. "I know, Angela, and I'm sorry. I wish I could stay, but I've got to go back to San Francisco and find a new job."

She mumbled, "It's okay. I better go - Dad and Kevin can't stand it if the pizza's even the slightest bit cold."

Tony said their pizza was excellent, but Brittany didn't think it had much taste. She only ate a couple of pieces, but she made up for that by drinking more than half the beer. Two glasses was her usual limit, and although she didn't consciously set out to overdo, she also didn't care if she did. She had to leave here tomorrow, and Michael's idea of welcoming her home would probably include ranting at her for every mistake she'd made in the last three months. She deserved some fun.

She almost fell asleep on the short drive back to the house, but she was determined to stay awake and enjoy her last evening at Martha's Madness. She lit another firelog, sat in front of the fire, and searched through her mind for a safe subject for conversation. Nothing about either of their lives now, that was for sure, and tonight, even memories of the years they'd all spent at Brown would be painful. "Tony, tell me about how your family celebrates Christmas."

He laughed. "Food - that's all you need to know. More of it in one place than you can possibly imagine - and then you go to somebody else's house and they've got just as much. And you can never go anywhere empty-handed, either - you take a cake and maybe some cookies or a pan of lasagna - whatever."

"Who eats all the food?"

"Everybody. I suppose even then it doesn't all get eaten, but a lot of it does. The whole family's there,

too, so . . ."

He continued talking, but she couldn't make out the words anymore. She floated in space, warmed by the fire and seduced by his voice. She felt safe, and for the moment, she could imagine what it would be like to be loved wholeheartedly, by someone who she loved the same way.

"Britt."

She discovered her eyes were closed, and she didn't have the energy to open them. "What?"

"Britt, wake up. You need to get up and go to bed."

"Nuh-uh." She tried to ignore him, but suddenly she thought about what he'd just said. He said she should get up to go to bed! That was silly. She started to laugh, but then she remembered that Michael had suggested she go to bed with Tony tonight. Her eyes snapped open - no way could she let that train of thought continue.

"Ah. Sleeping Beauty awakes."

Only Tony would refer to her as Sleeping Beauty. Michael would say something rude about her falling asleep on him, as though she'd done it on purpose to annoy him. Was Tony always kind and sweet and caring? What if he'd had a hard day and she burned dinner and someone had forgotten to pay the credit card bill, so their card was refused when they went out in the pouring rain for something to eat?

She jumped to her feet. None of that mattered. Tony was her friend and Michael was her husband, and that was the way it was. Even if she was stupid enough to seriously consider what Michael suggested, Tony would refuse - for good reason. "I guess I'll go to bed now."

"Okay. I'll probably sit here by the fire for a while. See you in the morning."

Brittany crawled into bed a couple of minutes later and lay listening to the surf outside her window. Tonight was the last night she'd hear that sound . . .

The phone rang. She grabbed it and cleared her throat. "Huh-hello?" Her mouth was horribly dry and sticky. She must have been sleeping with her mouth hanging open.

"How was it, baby?"

She narrowed her eyes, trying to stare at the receiver. "Michael? Are you drunk?"

He cackled. "Maybe a little - but not on booze. I just thought I'd call my sweet wifey-poo to see how her evening went."

"Okay. Why?"

"Only okay? You mean, he's no great shakes in bed?" He laughed again. "The Ice Queen could've told you *that!*"

"Come on, Michael. It's the middle of the night - I'm not in the mood for joking around. You know damn well Tony and I didn't go to bed together."

"Really? That's funny - " He made a pleased kind of sound that instantly alerted Brittany that something was up. "You didn't ask about *my* evening."

She couldn't speak. He - he couldn't possibly - he *wouldn't* really . . .

"You *know* you want to know, baby. Well, it started out with dinner - I told you I was going to Leo's, didn't I? And I had the best meal! Just what I've been wanting for three months. And after dinner, I went over to the club. Everyone was there - all the usuals, plus some new people. Roger said to tell you to hurry back."

Maybe she'd panicked for no reason. He always knew how to get a rise out of her. "Thanks for passing the message along."

"The funniest thing happened, though - the minute I said you weren't back yet, Cyndi glommed onto me like nobody's business. She wouldn't let me dance with anybody else - hell, I could hardly even *speak* to another woman."

Brittany gritted her teeth, remembering Cyndi. She was built a lot like Brittany herself - short and buxom, but she was a good ten years younger, and she had thick and lustrous auburn hair. "Oh, really?"

"Yeah," he said with a contented sigh. "We didn't stay all that long at the club, actually, and then we went back to her place." He chuckled. "Didn't make the bedroom, though - and I guess that's how come I ended up here at home to call you. Her damn roommate came in - and boy, does that bitch know how to shriek! You'd think the place was a convent, for Christ's sake."

She gripped the receiver tightly and stared into space. What did Michael expect her to say? Was she supposed to say she was happy he'd gotten lucky? And how was she supposed to feel? How *did* she feel, anyway?

"You there, Britt?"

"Sure."

A little hesitantly, he said, "So, I guess the reason I'm calling is that I was wondering what time you're gonna get here tomorrow . . . I mean, are you going to drive at night like we always do, or leave in the morning, or what?"

A few minutes ago she would have known how to answer. "I don't know. I . . ." Did he really expect to confess that he'd been unfaithful and have her just accept it? Wasn't he at least supposed to have to say he was sorry?

"Well, see, Cyndi has to work all day tomorrow, but she gets off about four - and with the way her roommate freaked tonight, we can't exactly go there . . ." He was quiet for a few seconds, then rushed on, "I thought like, if you were going to drive all night, she could leave like around four in the morning or something, and that would be before you got in."

It took a minute for her to realize that he couldn't hear all the questions that were running around in her head. "This wasn't just a one-shot thing 'cause you're mad at me? You're going to see her again?"

"Oh, Britt - " Suddenly, he was whining and wheedling to get his way. "I guess maybe it's a little unfair, with you not fucking Tony and all, but that was your own choice, after all. And I'll probably get sick of her real soon - I just didn't get a chance to tonight, and she's really got it bad for me." His voice turned sickeningly sweet. "Besides, she won't have a chance of competing with you, once you get here. But why not stay up there another day or two first? That way, I'll get her out of my system once and for all, and then we'll get back to our regular lives."

A thousand things needed to be said, but the only one she had the words for was, "Don't worry about me interrupting anything. I'll stay up here."

And for the first time in their fifteen-year relationship, she hung up on Michael.

**

Tony sat by the fire until it burned down, then went to bed. He couldn't fall asleep and his book didn't hold his interest, so he lay awake thinking.

He hated the idea that Brittany was going back to Michael, especially when she seemed unhappy about it herself. Michael had always manipulated her, but Tony had believed their relationship was based on real love and respect. It didn't seem that way anymore.

Of course, it was easy to be an expert on the right path someone else should take, and something totally different to be the one who has to choose. He had no right to criticize Brittany for clinging to her marriage, not after the pathetic way he'd clung to his.

When Carolyn told him, nearly five years ago now, that she'd fallen in love with Scott and wanted a divorce, Tony had known there was no hope. Carolyn wasn't the type of woman to let lust cloud her thinking or to use an affair to hurt her less-than-attentive husband. Their marriage had always been missing the magic "something" that they both wanted, and when she found it unexpectedly with Scott, it only made sense she'd grab it with both hands.

But Tony hadn't been able to admit the inevitability of their breakup. He'd begged Carolyn for another chance - down on his knees with tears streaming down his face - and he'd sworn he could make her change her mind. She hadn't believed that he could suddenly change the course of their relationship, but she'd been too kind to refuse his plea.

Her kindness - and his refusal to face reality - had cost her years of unhappiness. Scott believed she'd chosen to stay with Tony permanently, and he'd disappeared from her life. It was only happenstance that brought the two of them together again. Tony was relieved that they'd been given a second chance - not only for them, but because he no longer needed to feel guilty for destroying Carolyn's happiness.

Based on the way he'd messed up his own marriage and divorce, it made no sense for him to even try to tell Brittany what to do with hers. Complicating the situation more were his feelings for Brittany. He'd tried to deny it all these years, but she still appealed to him in a way no other woman did. For his own sake as well as hers, he swore a solemn vow to keep his mouth shut about Michael from now on.

He fell asleep eventually, but was awake again before dawn. He decided that the lookout tower would be the ideal place to greet the day. To his surprise, Brittany was already there. "Good morning. I hope I'm not intruding."

She wiggled to one side of the beanbag sofa and said, "Not at all. There's room next to me, if you'd like a seat."

"Okay." He lowered himself gingerly, not wanting to dump her unceremoniously onto the floor, nor himself into her lap. He looked outside and saw a world of gray. The beach, the ocean, and the sky were different shades of gray. Different intensities of gray might actually be a better description.

"The sun will be coming over the mountain behind us soon. That's when things start taking on color and detail, but I kind of like it now." Her voice was hushed.

"So do I." The landscape didn't appear to change from moment to moment, yet the changes over the next half-hour were dramatic. The waves became defined, and he could see that the beach wasn't quite as flat and featureless as it had appeared earlier. He saw, too, an old log that had washed up on the beach during a storm.

She turned to him finally and said, "You're up early."

"I usually am, especially on the West Coast. I don't stay out here long enough to get used to the time difference."

"I'll go start breakfast." She stood up gracefully. "What time do you plan to leave?"

He shrugged. "It doesn't really matter. It'll take a few hours to drive to Olympia, but I don't need to get there particularly early. What time will you be leaving?"

She froze for a moment, then said, "Oh, I've changed my mind again. I'm going to stay here another day or two."

"I thought - " He stopped, not sure what to ask, or whether he should ask anything.

"Michael suggested it last night, actually, and it seems right. Maybe this way I'll be a little more ready to start looking for a job when I get down there." Her voice seemed deliberately casual, much too casual to be real. "I'll put some coffee on before I get dressed. Just help yourself when you come downstairs."

He forced himself not to follow her, remembering that he'd sworn to stay out of Brittany's marital problems. But why would Michael suggest that she stay up here when he'd been so anxious to have her in California just yesterday? He could only think that Michael said it in anger - something like "If you're going to do that, then just stay up there, for all I care!" And if that was the case, he'd be even angrier when Brittany took him up on it.

Was it wise for her to make Michael any angrier? Wouldn't that just make it harder for them to resolve whatever their current problem was?

On the other hand, maybe Brittany had finally had enough. Maybe that's why Michael was angry - because she wasn't willing to follow him around like an obedient mindless slave anymore. Maybe when she said she was going to stay here another day or two, she really meant she was going to stay here permanently.

And that posed a problem for Tony's non-interference policy. If she was even considering leaving Michael, she needed Tony's friendship and support more than ever before, and he would provide every last morsel of either she would accept. Yet he couldn't just walk up to her and say, "I want you to know that I'll be there for you if you leave Michael." He'd have to watch and wait.

After breakfast, he decided to test the theory that a day or two wasn't as definite an amount of time as it sounded. "You know, Britt, I was just thinking - if you're still going to be here later in the week, maybe I could come back after I finish in Olympia. Who knows when we'll get this good a chance to see each other again?"

"I thought you had meetings across the country on Thursday."

Him and his big mouth. "Tentatively, but they might get changed." Like if she said yes. He'd cancel them in a heartbeat. "Last Friday was the first work day I've taken off in years, so another couple this week wouldn't hurt."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. If you'll be here, that is."

She bit her lip and looked down at the table. "I think I will." She took a sudden gulp of air and added,

"But I wouldn't want to mess up your schedule and then change my mind at the last minute, like I seem to do all the time now. It's a real nice idea, but maybe we should just forget about it."

"How about we don't decide right yet? I'll call you tonight, after you've had a chance to think about it." He smiled in what he hoped was a reassuring way. "What's the worst that can happen, anyway? If I end up taking a couple of days off and you're not here, I'll still have the time off. I just won't get to spend it with you."

After a few moments, she looked up at him, a very serious expression on her face. "Okay. I'll think about it."

He was suddenly sure he was right. She was thinking about something much more involved than her schedule for the week.

CHAPTER FOUR

Brittany spent the day in the lookout tower, staring at the beach without seeing a thing. The cordless phone was within easy reach, but except for a quick call to tell Angela and her dad not to come over, she didn't touch it.

She ought to call Michael. She needed to understand what was going on between him and Cyndi, and how it related to the problems she was having with him. She needed to understand their problems better, too. On the surface, this didn't seem so different from all the other times she'd made him angry.

It felt totally different, though. Like suddenly she didn't know what the point was. If they didn't share any of the same interests and if he didn't care enough about her to compromise about anything, then why bother? Let Cyndi deal with him sulking anytime she expressed an opinion - assuming she actually had opinions. If she didn't, she'd be ideal for Michael.

But what about *her*? She'd spend the rest of her life holed up in this house. Maybe Tony would come back a time or two and try to cheer her up, but he had better things to do. She'd already alienated Carolyn, the only other friend she'd ever had, and she didn't have the slightest clue about how to make new friends. No one would want to be friends with her, anyway. She'd end up a half-crazy recluse kids told scary stories about. One day she'd die and no one would even notice.

She didn't have any choice. She'd have to face Michael eventually, so she might as well accept it now and get on with it. It wasn't like him cheating on her was the end of the world. Like she'd told Tony, she'd given him approval in the past.

But not this time! And those other times, when he said he didn't want to, she took comfort in that fact and made the assumption that he wouldn't ever want to. It had made her feel loved, to have a man with a strong sex drive like Michael stay true to her when it would have been easier to indulge himself.

She almost picked up the phone and called him. She needed to ask why he'd done it this time. Was he trying to hurt her? Or was it a reaction to her hurting him by spending time with Tony instead of hurrying to California? Or maybe Cyndi had used just the right approach at an opportune moment. Michael might be ashamed now by his lack of control.

But she couldn't call him. It was almost five in the afternoon, and she remembered distinctly that Cyndi got off work at four. By now, she and Michael would be - well, it didn't matter precisely *what* they'd be doing. The point was, they'd be doing it in the bedroom that she was supposed to share with Michael. How could she ever sleep in that bed again?

When the phone rang later, it was Tony calling, not Michael. His voice was calm and soothing - warm and friendly, too. He never mentioned Michael or the difficulties they were obviously having, yet he managed to make her feel like she could cope. She'd be able to deal with her life and make the right choices.

Finally, he asked, "So, are we on for later this week? I haven't had any of your cinnamon rolls in way too long, and I'd love to cook up a batch of the Fiore special spaghetti sauce."

She felt a smile tugging at her lips - a real smile this time. "Yeah, we're on."

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By morning, Tony had decided that canceling his meetings at the site in North Carolina might be unwise. The general manager there had jumped to a competitor last month, and there were already signs that he was making progress at getting some of their customers to follow him. Normally, Fiore Marine insisted on having all the top personnel in their subsidiaries sign an employment agreement containing a non-compete clause. Tony had made an exception for the GM in North Carolina, and that decision had come back to haunt him. The best approach now was the personal one, and that required having a Fiore on-site in North Carolina to meet with important customers.

He called the office in Newport and asked for Robbie. "Hey, little brother."

"Tony! You sound great. How was the wedding?"

"Real good."

"I'm glad. I have to warn you, Sal's dying of curiosity and she wants all the details. You'll have to be real blunt with her, if you don't want to talk about it."

He chuckled. "I'll tell her whatever she wants to know. To tell the truth, I'm glad I can talk about Carolyn to you two without getting that look." The look varied slightly, from family member to family member, but it consisted of a combination of pity, regret, and censure.

Half-laughing, Robbie said, "Well, in that case, maybe you could give me a little preview - to help Sal last until you get back at the end of the week."

He thought back to Friday and the kind of details his very domestic sister-in-law would enjoy. "Okay, I guess there must have been a hundred or so people there. It was in a tent in the backyard of the house where the reception was, and the tent overlooked a small lake and there were huge fir trees all around, even though it was in the city. Carolyn wore mint-green - a long dress, kind of plain but elegant, and that's as good a description as you're going to get. Her only attendant was her niece, Eileen, and her dress was similar but it was gold."

"I wish I had a tape. I'm never going to remember half of what you said," Robbie complained.

"Well, remember this part, at least. Scott's little girl was the ring-bearer - "

"He has a kid? I didn't know that! How old?"

He hesitated. "Five. He's kind of her step-father, but her mother died, so he's raising her."

After a moment, Robbie asked, "And Carolyn's okay about that?"

Tony swallowed hard and strained to make his voice sound natural. "She and Rachel are great together." He was happy about that, he really was. And given the way things turned out, it was good that he and

Carolyn hadn't had kids together, that Carolyn hadn't wanted children back then. "Anyway, the part I want you to be sure to tell Sal is that Rachel was wearing a dress just like the one Trina wore last year when Sal's sister got married."

"The long pink one? Trina's outgrown hers, but she still wears it for dress-up." Proud daddy that he was, he couldn't resist asking, "Was what's-her-name as adorable as Trina was in that dress?"

"Of course not," he answered loyally, then firmly changed the subject. "Actually, Robbie, I called about business. How's your schedule this week? Would you be able to spend Thursday and Friday in North Carolina?"

"Why? Do you think we both need to see the customers?"

He sighed. "No. I - well, I want to spend a few extra days out here. With Brittany."

Robbie yelped, "Brittany? As in Brittany Stone, wife of jerk-to-the-max Michael?" Michael worked at Fiore Marine for less than a year. Robbie had been the unlucky person who tried to keep the peace between the office staff and Michael, who'd been intent on forcing inappropriate new software and processes on them.

Tony outlined the situation briefly, and was pleased when Robbie immediately said, "No problem. How many business trips have you taken for me over the years, after all?" They covered a few details about the plans they hadn't already discussed. As they were hanging up, Robbie added, "Look, Tony, you didn't ask me for any advice, but I have to say 'be careful.' Michael's not going to like you getting involved with Brittany, no matter *how* platonic you claim it is."

When Tony walked into the office of their Olympia subsidiary a couple of hours later, he was greeted by the GM's secretary. "Good morning, Mr. Fiore. Mrs. Fiore would like you to call right away."

There were probably a dozen Mrs. Fiore's in the family, but he had no question about which one had called. He found a reasonably private phone and called Newport again, this time asking for Grandmother.

"Antonio. What's this I hear about changing your schedule? Are there problems in Olympia that you're trying to keep from me?"

"No, Grandmother. Things are fine here. I just decided to take another few days off and spend them out here." And since he knew Grandmother would immediately assume Carolyn was involved somehow - and give the phone equivalent of the look to make it clear how much she disapproved - he explained about Brittany and Michael again.

After a long pause, she asked, "You'll be in the office on Monday?"

"Yes, I will."

"We'll talk then." Just when he thought she was finished, she said, "Antonio, I trust that you will not do to another man what was done to you."

He knew what she meant, of course. It wasn't how he thought of the situation with Carolyn and Scott, but Grandmother belonged to another generation. In her mind, it was inevitable that men would go outside their marriages for sex, and inconceivable that a woman would of her own accord. Not that Grandmother would ever admit it, but Tony suspected she didn't blame Carolyn for leaving him as much as she blamed Scott for seducing her and - most of all - Tony for failing to impregnate her years earlier.

By Tuesday afternoon, Brittany was ready to talk to Michael. She crossed her fingers as she punched in the number, hoping that he'd be there and not otherwise occupied.

He answered on the second ring. "Hello?"

"Hi, Michael."

"Britt! I was gonna call you later."

She wasn't sure whether to believe him, but it wasn't worth questioning. "Do you have time now? We need to talk."

"Um, sure. Just let me put this down and grab a seat." In a couple of seconds, he said, "Okay. I was just unloading the dishwasher."

Unloading the dishwasher? Michael? She could believe that he might need to run the dishwasher, if he'd run out of glasses, cereal bowls, and spoons - he ate only cereal at home when she wasn't there - but she'd never known of him bothering to unload it. He just used the clean dishes out of the dishwasher and left the dirty ones in the sink. When the sink was full and the dishwasher empty, it was time for another load.

Well, that wasn't what she'd called to discuss. "Michael, things haven't been going right for us for a long time, and I think we need to try to fix them."

"I wouldn't say that. I know we both got kind of mad over the weekend, but that's gonna happen from time to time. And maybe it was best for me to be down here without you for a while - it gave me a chance to cool down and see that you didn't necessarily mean to piss me off the way you did. You just didn't realize how anxious I was to get back."

"I'm not meaning just the weekend. That was pretty bad, I agree, but I don't expect us to always get along. The thing that bothers me is that we don't share good times anymore." She wished she could make her explanation come close to describing the way she felt.

He laughed. "Well, geez, Britt, we just spent three months stuck in that hick town - what do you expect? You come back down here, and you'll change your tune. Or hell, just remember last Thursday night, or any of the other nights we managed to share a damn good time, even there in the sticks."

"I'm not talking about sex. I want us to share other things, too." She'd better watch it. Her voice was getting whiny.

He snorted. "You know what your trouble is? You're too damn horny to make sense. You'd better get your ass down here on the double, before you lose all your smarts."

She couldn't help it. The words wouldn't stay inside any longer. "I'm not stupid enough, or horny enough, to go back to you, you two-timing asshole!"

Silence on the other end of the line, and then Michael's cut-her-to-shreds voice. "Well, well, well. I wondered when you'd get around to throwing that in my face. Your goddamned pride is hurt, isn't it? You're supposed to be so damn *special* that I'd be crazy to want anybody else, aren't you? Well, I've got news for you, Britt. You don't have anything a whole lot of other women don't also have, and some of them take better care of what they've got, too. There are even *some* women who don't think they know every damn thing in the universe - and some who don't look at me like I'm a fucking failure every minute of every day. So, if you don't want to get back here where you belong, don't bother on my account."

She'd balanced on a precipice a minute ago and shouted a challenge. Now Michael's answer knocked her off the cliff. She'd hit bottom sometime, and that's when she would feel the pain. "I'm going to stay up here, Michael. At least for now."

"Please yourself, Britt." Businesslike, he said, "Just a couple of things. First, I've been letting Cyndi stay here while you were gone. Her roommate wants her to move out, so I'll probably let her move in. In any case, you'll want to give me a little notice if you change your mind about coming back. And second, you're gonna have to pay your own way up there. I'll be stretched to handle this place without your paycheck."

She'd thought about money, thank heavens. "That's okay. I've got the money in the account up here. That'll be enough for quite a while, if I'm careful."

He sucked his breath in. "Oops. That's what I meant to tell you. I used that money for a car yesterday."

"You bought a new car?"

"Hardly new. But you know how my car's been acting up. After the drive south, I figured I'd better dump it while the dumping was good. Anyway, there's a little money left in the account - a couple of hundred and change, if I remember right."

"Michael, that was *my* money! From the stock plan at my old company!" That was so typical of him, just taking what he wanted without a thought for her needs.

"Ever hear of community property, sweetie?" He paused, but before she thought of an appropriate response, he continued, "I need to get going. I'm picking up Cyndi at work a little later, and I want the place to look nice when we move her stuff in. And Britt, call me at work from now on. I don't want to upset Cyndi by having you call here all the time. She's a little insecure where you're concerned."

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Tony managed to squeeze all his meetings and customer calls into a day and a half instead of two days, so by early afternoon on Tuesday, he was headed back to Myrtle Beach. He was looking forward to the next few days, although he doubted that he'd be very happy with the way Brittany resolved her marital problems.

Still, spending time with her would be a treat, especially without Michael around. He'd tried to like Michael for Brittany's sake, and they'd always gotten along well enough, but Michael was basically a loser. He had an inflated ego and he found fault with virtually everything that anyone else said or did. He'd changed jobs pretty much every year since college, although he'd apparently found his niche now in San Francisco. Brittany had followed him around the country, giving up good job after good job. It was ironic that, just when Michael found the right job, Brittany got downsized out of hers.

He knew he'd never have the nerve to ask her what she saw in Michael, but he sure wished he dared. What was it that Michael offered, that Tony didn't? He and Brittany had gone out once, and as far as he could tell, she'd enjoyed it as much as he had. She'd been the one, after all, who turned the goodnight kiss he initiated into full-contact blow-your-socks-off lose-track-of-where-you-are time.

They'd been in the hall outside her dorm room, and when he heard a burst of laughter close by, he reluctantly moved his mouth away from hers. He continued holding her close for a while longer, and that was almost as wonderful. Just when he was ready to suggest going for a drive - to a dark spot near the river he'd used more than once in the past - she murmured, "We're moving way too fast."

He'd had to agree. There was something different about Brittany; he'd known it even then. He wasn't just

attracted to her body, although hers was his idea of perfection. She was someone he could imagine being interested in fifty years later, or even a hundred years, if he lived that long. She was worth waiting for.

So they cooled it and avoided situations where they'd be alone together. They spent time with Brittany's roommate, Carolyn, and other friends. They went to dinner at the Ratty together. He hung around studying while she and Carolyn wrote programs for their computer science classes.

And sometime while he was busy controlling his hormones, she stopped needing to control hers. One day in the psychology class where they'd met, he decided to ask her out for dinner that Friday night. He'd take her to a homey but nice Italian restaurant across the river in East Providence, then for a drive. If things went right, his roommate was away for the weekend, so they'd have plenty of privacy.

But she hurried out of class and he didn't see her until dinner. Before he managed to think up a way to get her alone, she ran off to the library to study. She kept avoiding him the rest of the week, but not so obviously that he could call her on it. And when the three of them were together, she was just as nice as ever. She was simply no longer interested in him.

A few weeks later, he decided to accept reality and asked Carolyn out. That wasn't a sacrifice, since Carolyn was interesting in her own right and he'd become quite attracted to her. But as later events proved, just because close friends were of opposite sexes didn't mean they could make a lasting marriage out of that friendship.

He took Carolyn to a party at a house on Narragansett Bay on their first date. Randy, the friend having the party, asked Tony to give his cousin Michael a ride to the party from campus, and Tony asked Brittany if she'd like to come along. She agreed, and by the time they drove back to campus, she and Michael were a couple.

Tony had always figured he was overcritical of Michael because of his feelings for Brittany. As long as Brittany had seemed happy with Michael, he forgave the other man a lot. Things were different now, though, and he didn't know where to draw the line between being Brittany's friend and meddling in her life.

He wasn't at all prepared when she opened the front door and threw herself into his arms, crying so hard he couldn't understand what she was trying to say.

CHAPTER FIVE

Tony didn't have long to marvel at Brittany's tears. She stopped crying suddenly, as if a switch had been thrown in her brain, and ran back into the house. He followed her to the door of the master suite and waited outside. He'd give her a minute of privacy, but when she came out, he'd insist on finding out what was wrong.

She seemed surprised to see him standing there. "I'm so embarrassed. You're going to think I spend my whole life upset about one trivial thing or another."

"Somehow, I don't think you're upset about anything trivial. Come into the living room and let's talk about it." He led the way to the sofa.

She sat a couple of feet away, reluctance evident in the way she refused to meet his eyes. "I know you're willing to listen and I don't want to sound ungrateful, but there's really no point in talking about all this stuff. It's boring, depressing, and even thinking about it makes me feel like an idiot. I just have to forget about it and get on with my life."

"I seem to remember feeling a little bit like that myself, a few years ago. But somebody wouldn't let me just close myself off from the world, like I wanted to do. Of course, I didn't admit then that was what I wanted to do. I said I needed to get on with my life." He could tell that she was listening, and that his words were hitting home, but she still wouldn't admit the truth. He took her hand between both of his and leaned close. "Britt, you were right then. I needed to deal with my feelings. And you need to deal with yours now."

Her muscles tensed, straining to hold her emotions at bay. She managed fairly well, although a tremor shook her body from time to time and she breathed in gasps after each one.

"What are you feeling, Britt? Right now?"

She held her breath for a few seconds, then looked up at him. "Scared - scared to death. I'm all alone, and I don't have any money - " She looked shocked suddenly and burst out, "And now I know how my mother must have felt - I was so awful to her - but she couldn't help what happened . . ."

He was at a loss. He'd expected something about Michael, but instead she brought up her mother? Brittany never talked about her parents. Maybe he was about to discover why. "What happened?"

"My father died," she said in a quiet voice. "He was in 'the business' in LA, and so were all my friends' fathers. Some of them had Emmy's on their mantles, but you wouldn't know any of their names. And then he died, and there wasn't any money, so my mother and I moved to this tacky apartment way far away. She had to get a job as a second-shift waitress. I couldn't have any new clothes, and my friends wouldn't be my friends anymore, and I hated her." She folded her arm across her chest and her face creased with regret. "I'd hear her crying in bed at night sometimes - there was only one bedroom, so we shared it - but I'd pretend not to. I wanted to blame her for everything bad, and I wouldn't admit that she was just as scared as I was. But now I know she must have been a lot more scared, because I didn't really understand that we wouldn't have any food or anywhere to live if she got sick or lost her job."

Tony was shocked. He'd known plenty of people living on the edge like Brittany described, but it had never occurred to him that any of his friends from Brown were other than solidly middle-class. He had a hundred questions he wanted to ask, but this wasn't the time for any of them. "You were a kid. You couldn't have been expected to understand."

She bit her lip, unconvinced. "I guess."

They could talk about that issue more another time. He still didn't know what was wrong right now. "What did you mean a minute ago about being alone and having no money?"

She sighed. "I told Michael this afternoon that I'm going to stay up here for a while. I thought - " She shook her head in abrupt dismissal. "It's not important. Anyway, he doesn't care what I do - but he spent all my money!"

Again, he wanted to ask for details - what money, why did it matter, and most of all, was her marriage to Michael really over? "What part scares you the most, Britt? Being alone or not having money?"

"The money." Her face lit up suddenly. "But that's silly! I can get a job."

He nodded, but he had to wonder about the likelihood of a software quality assurance job being available within commuting distance of Martha's Madness. "Or you could start a business, like you talked about doing."

"There'd be too many start-up costs, and it would take too long to start making money. I've only got a

couple of hundred dollars to last until I get a paycheck." She frowned to herself. "I wonder if I kept last week's paper . . ."

Before he lost her attention completely, he said, "Britt, forget about the want ads for right now. You're starting a new phase of your life - take the time to make it the kind of life you want."

She watched him with puzzled and slightly wary eyes. "But how am I supposed to do that, when I'm broke? And if the answer is taking money from you - forget that. I don't take handouts."

Well, that *was* the answer, as far as he was concerned, and he wouldn't call it a handout, either. He knew better than to insist on either point right now. "You own this house, don't you?" She nodded. "Is it in your name, or yours and Michael's? And is there a mortgage on it?"

She smiled. "Just mine. And no mortgage. You're thinking about an equity loan, aren't you?"

He nodded. "You'd have to be able to afford the payments, but if you don't have a lot of other bills, that should be feasible." Realistically, he wasn't so sure. Bankers were notoriously unwilling to loan money to people just starting their own businesses, and for good reason, since so many of them failed. But the Bank of Antonio Fiore had none of those qualms, and he sincerely hoped he was a good enough salesman to convince Brittany to take his money.

She was nodding to herself now, and grinning. "Tony, you're wonderful!" Before he realized what she was doing, she threw her arms around him and kissed him, right smack on the lips.

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Brittany couldn't believe how much better the world looked now than it had an hour ago. She'd spent so many years being dragged down by Michael that she'd let herself get trapped into his mindset. Michael constantly looked for reasons to fail, or more precisely, things outside his control he could blame for his failures.

The money no longer in the bank was just an excuse. Left to her own devices, she would have taken the first job she heard about. She'd have been a chambermaid in a motel or a waitress or a clerk, even if it was only part-time for minimum wage, and she'd have been angry with Michael for forcing her into that job.

Maybe she'd still end up with a job like that, but not until she'd evaluated all the other options. And reminding her that she at least had a choice was a priceless gift that Tony had given her.

Which is why she'd kissed him - why she'd initiated the kiss, that is. As for why she still had her arms around him - well, she liked the broad solid feel of his chest against hers, and the gentleness of his kiss.

And kissing him let her pretend that she wasn't all alone. She didn't want to be with Michael anymore, and she wouldn't even if he got rid of Cyndi. But she didn't want to be alone, either. She'd never been able to tolerate being alone. That's why she'd been so stubborn about staying with Michael. And why she didn't deserve anyone as wonderful as Tony.

She made herself let go of him and break the kiss. "I guess I got a little carried away there," she said with a laugh. Inside her head, she begged him to initiate a kiss of his own - or to drag her off to bed, for that matter.

He looked a little regretful, but immediately backed away. With a teasing smile, he said, "And here I thought I was so wonderful you couldn't resist me any longer."

If he only knew! She wondered what he'd do if she said that was the truth. Would he hold her and make

love to her, even just for tonight? Or would he say he didn't feel the same way about her, and that he didn't want to ruin their friendship? Unfortunately, either alternative would damage their friendship, probably irretrievably. And she couldn't afford to lose Tony's friendship, not when she'd already lost so much.

The grandfather clock near the front door struck the hour. Five o'clock. Tony must have arrived much earlier than she'd expected. "Oh, no. I didn't go grocery shopping this afternoon!" The phone call with Michael had driven the thought out of her mind, and now she dreaded the prospect of spending any of the money left in the bank.

"That's okay. We'll go out for dinner - my treat, and then get some groceries, also my treat."

She shook her head. "I can't let you do that, Tony."

"Don't be silly. Of course you can. I'm staying here, as your guest, in a fabulous house right on the beach. The least I can do is pay for the food we eat." There was a hint of firmness in his voice, reminding her that he was a very successful businessman, undoubtedly used to getting his own way.

He also made sense, so she said, "All right, but we'll eat at home. I'll get something quick for tonight."

He shrugged matter-of-factly. "If you'd rather. Where's the store?"

She half-laughed. "That depends on whether you want the store in town, which would probably fit into this room, or the one in the next town, which is maybe the size of the living room, dining room, and kitchen together. Or one of the ones in Tillamook, which actually resemble supermarkets."

"I don't care. Where do you usually go?"

That was one of the differences between Michael and Tony, she decided. Michael would insist on going to the biggest fanciest store in Tillamook, even if he only wanted a quart of milk. Tony had the strange idea that she was competent to make that decision on her own.

Her choice was the medium-sized store in the next town. She remembered shopping there with Aunt Martha, and she liked the idea of supporting local businesses whenever possible. When she could, she shopped in Myrtle Beach even if the prices were a little higher or the selection less extensive. The grocery store, though, just didn't stock enough produce to satisfy her, and their meat was extraordinarily expensive.

As soon as they got there, Tony went off in search of the ingredients for his spaghetti sauce. She shopped carefully, despite the knowledge that Tony wouldn't care how much they spent on food. It wouldn't hurt her to be more frugal in general, and Michael's crack about not taking care of herself reminded her that she ought to lose some weight and firm up her muscles.

"Brittany?" Angela had just turned the corner onto her aisle. "I tried to call yesterday . . ." Her voice trailed off uncertainly.

"I'm sorry, Angela. I meant to call you back, but I forgot." She'd put it off, actually, until she knew what she was going to do. "It turns out I'm going to stay up here for a while longer. Michael and I are splitting up." There. She'd said the words.

"Really?" She looked more excited than sorry about the news, but after all, Michael had never been anything but unpleasant to her or her father. "Because of the guy I saw you with? Who *is* he, anyway?"

"No, not because of Tony. And I told you, he's an old friend."

"But - but he's so cute!"

Cute wasn't the right word. Tall, dark, and handsome was more like it. And not interested, she reminded herself. Before she could say anything more, he rounded the corner behind Angela and said, "Their fresh seafood looks good. I thought - " He apparently recognized Angela right then. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt."

Angela's cheeks blotted pink with embarrassment and she looked ready to fall through the floor. She still managed to watch him with avid interest, however. Tony didn't appear to have heard their conversation, and he asked, "Did Britt tell you she's going to start her own business?"

"She is?" Angela dragged her eyes away from Tony to settle on Brittany. "A bed-and-breakfast, like we talked about?"

"I don't know. I have to think about it."

Tony put a plastic bag of tomatoes and a couple of smaller items in the cart. "A bed-and- breakfast? What a great idea!"

Angela nodded shyly. "I think so, too. My third-grade teacher runs a reservation service, and she says there aren't enough on this part of the coast."

"You mean she takes the bookings and things like that? Just for bed-and-breakfasts?" Tony focused his gaze on Angela's face, causing her blush to deepen.

Her voice was somewhat squeaky when she said, "I think so, and I'm sure she'd be glad to explain all the details. Her name is Mrs. Pitney, and she lives right in town."

Tony smiled. "Thanks for mentioning her." He turned to face Brittany. "Maybe you can call her tomorrow."

She nodded, but she wasn't sure whether she thought he was being overly pushy. He was being helpful, but where was the line between offering suggestions and advice and telling her what to do? She was sick of the latter, and she had no intention of letting herself fall into the same pattern of behavior with Tony as she had with Michael. Of course, Tony would be leaving in a few days, so the problem would probably never arise.

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Tony smelled the luscious aroma of cinnamon rolls baking when he came downstairs the next morning. He went into the kitchen and found Brittany buzzing around the room. She said, "Help yourself to coffee. I want to get all these dishes put away before the rolls are done. Mrs. Pitney's coming at nine- thirty, and I don't want her to know what an awful housekeeper I am."

The kitchen wasn't dirty, but most of the surfaces were cluttered with dishes and other items that had been left out after they were used. "How can I help?"

She stopped in her tracks and stared at him, seemingly shocked at the question. Finally, she asked, "Would you want to make your own breakfast? I mean, I'd be glad to do it, but - "

He smiled. "How about if I make breakfast for you? Cinnamon rolls and coffee's plenty for me."

She shook her head. "I don't want anything. I'm not very hungry."

"Then you'll have to come up with something else for me to do." He saw a flash of panic in her eyes and

realized that she wasn't as calm as she appeared this morning. "Or I could go away and let you take care of things in your own way."

"That would be good." A bit hesitantly, she said, "It's not that I don't appreciate the offer. I - it's - just . . ."

"Don't worry about it. I'll go watch the waves for a while." He stepped out onto the deck and sipped his coffee. The weather was mild with no wind or rain this morning, but still the warmth of his drink was welcome. He tried to remember the tide table he'd seen in a newspaper over the weekend. Was the tide coming in or going out now? Brittany would probably know, just by looking at the beach, but he wouldn't bother her for something that didn't really matter.

Before he knew it, the doorbell rang and he saw that it was nine-thirty. He hurried inside and managed to beat Brittany to the front door. "You must be Mrs. Pitney. Please come in."

She nodded minutely as she sailed past him. "Are you Mr. Stone?"

"No, I'm Tony Fiore, Brittany's business advisor." He glanced at Brittany out of the corner of his eye, hoping she wouldn't contradict him. It had occurred to him that this woman might be offering unneeded services at exorbitant rates, and he intended to take part in this meeting.

Brittany came forward and shook Mrs. Pitney's hand. "And I'm Brittany Stone. Would you like to start with a tour of the house?"

"Yes, please. That way I can tell if there's any point getting into the business details. We'll start with the guest rooms."

Brittany led the way upstairs. Mrs. Pitney bounced on the beds, opened and closed all the doors, ran hot and cold water in the sinks and tubs, and flushed the toilets. She also peppered Brittany with questions about the age of the house, the functioning of the furnace and hot water heater, and a dozen other topics.

From there, they went to the lookout tower, which impressed Mrs. Pitney despite her best intentions, and back down to the first floor. After she examined all the furniture and peered in every cupboard, they sat at the dining room table to talk.

"This is a lovely home, Mrs. Stone, and you're quite rightly proud of it. I did note a number of problem areas, though, that would need correcting before I could allow you to begin servicing my clients. My clients are accustomed to things being just-so, and they can be quite demanding at times. I would be risking my reputation to accept you into my association of bed-and-breakfasts at the present time."

Tony knew she was interested and probably eager to add this house to her reservation service. He wasn't sure if Brittany understood that, though, so he reacted before she had a chance to say anything. "I'm sure we'll be interested in discussing those problem areas a bit later. But first, I think it would be helpful to understand the services you offer to the bed-and-breakfasts in your association."

Mrs. Pitney went into a well-rehearsed pitch, complete with copies of brochures and advertisements for her service that appeared in local newspapers, magazines, and phone books. She had an 800-number for taking reservations and maintained the reservation book for each bed-and-breakfast. As much as possible, she assigned reservations on a rotating basis between the various B&B's, although clients sometimes requested a particular B&B. She collected payment ahead of time for all but last-minute reservations not paid by credit card, and deducted her commission and any expenses before sending the remainder to the B&B at the end of the month. Her commission was twenty percent of the rental amount, with a one-time charge of \$500 for joining the association. That charge paid for updating and printing

brochures, as well as administrative costs.

Brittany asked how much business she could reasonably expect. Mrs. Pitney explained that Myrtle Beach's summer season started with the kite festival the second weekend in May, and continued through Labor Day weekend. During the summer, most rooms would be full the majority of nights. The rest of the year, she might be half-full once every two or three weekends. Holidays such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's, and spring break were often nearly as busy as summer.

Tony said, "Okay, now I think we're ready to talk about the problem areas."

Brittany nodded and smiled at both of them. "Yes, I'm curious about your perceptions. I know all the rooms need painting, but that shouldn't be a problem. I'm concerned about the rooms with the bunk beds, though. Even if I take the bunks out and put in regular beds, they're not quite as nicely shaped as the other bedrooms. Did you have any thoughts on what to do there?"

Mrs. Pitney glanced down at her note pad before answering. "I agree that's an issue, but an even larger one is the lack of private baths. I know you have two on that floor, but so many people today dislike sharing. Frankly, you'll lose a fair number of rentals because of that one problem. In the long run, you might consider adding a small bath to each of the large bedrooms in place of the existing closet, but you probably wouldn't want to do that yet."

Britt shook her head. "Definitely not."

"I have another suggestion that I think will be more workable. Leave the three regular bedrooms as is, sharing the one bath. And then turn the other two bedrooms and the other bath into a suite. You could simply install a new door at that end of the hall and turn one of the bedrooms into a combination sitting room and child's room. That way a small family could stay here with a minimum of bother for the other guests, and without giving up their privacy."

She leaned forward, as though confiding a secret to Brittany alone. "We get calls all the time from parents who want a rollaway or foldout couch in their room for one or two children, but I turn them down. Part of the beauty of a bed-and-breakfast is the wonderfully peaceful time you have staying there. How can a couple truly enjoy their vacation with their children right on top of them the whole time?"

Tony laughed out loud. "You're absolutely right, Mrs. Pitney." He wondered if Mrs. Pitney had intended to emphasize exactly what activities the parents wouldn't be free to enjoy.

Brittany's lips twitched as she asked, "How would the combination sitting room and child's room be furnished?"

"A small sofa or love seat, a comfortable chair or two, perhaps a small table with chairs. For sleeping, I imagine you could use one of the sets of bunk beds, although you'd need to refinish the wood and replace the mattresses." With a frown, she added, "And this is where it starts getting expensive. You'll need to replace all the beds with high-quality queen mattress and box spring sets. That will probably necessitate buying bed frames, too."

"Ouch," Tony muttered as he made a note. He and Brittany would definitely need to discuss money today.

"That's not all. Most of the living room and lookout tower furniture needs replacing, too. People who visit a bed-and-breakfast expect comfort, not furniture that's ready to collapse."

Brittany's mouth dropped open. Tony hurried to ask, "I'm sure we both appreciate your point, but don't

you think it's possible to adopt a phased approach here? During the summer months especially, guests will spend most of their time outdoors. I would think if the beds are good, the rest of the furniture could wait a bit."

Mrs. Pitney argued, but eventually gave in. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that Brittany hadn't moved, and might not have breathed since Mrs. Pitney's bombshell. He wound up the conversation quickly by asking for a sample contract and promising that Brittany would call within the next day or two.

Brittany came to then. "Thanks for coming, Mrs. Pitney. I'll call tomorrow." But there was a deadness to her expression that made Tony sure what her answer would be.

CHAPTER SIX

Brittany closed the door behind Mrs. Pitney and headed for the lookout tower without speaking to Tony. She knew he was trying to be helpful, but she couldn't deal with him right now. He called her name, but she just kept going.

She should have known not to get her hopes up. Things never worked out right for her - and not because she sabotaged herself, either, like Michael always did. She was just plain unlucky, and had been since her father died.

"Britt, can I come up there? We need to talk." Tony's voice was a bit muffled, like he was standing at the bottom of the stairs. At least he had the decency not to come crashing into her privacy.

"There's nothing to talk about."

"Sure, there is. I know you're worried about the money it would take to do all the things Mrs. Pitney was talking about, but you shouldn't be." He sounded a bit closer now.

"I'm not worried. The whole thing's out of the question, so just drop it." She'd had a few hours of fantasy, now she was ready for reality. And the reality wasn't that bad, she reminded herself. She'd still be living in this wonderful house on this fantastic beach. She'd have a boring job that she'd most likely hate, but she could handle that.

"I'm not going to drop it, Britt. Not until we talk about it some more." He appeared in her vision and lowered himself onto the floor facing her, then leaned back against the glass wall.

She ought to offer him a seat next to her, but damn it, she didn't want to. "Look, Tony, I know you want to help, but you're not helping now. The sooner I get myself psyched to look for a job, the sooner my life will be back on an even keel."

"But I don't want you to give up on the B&B idea prematurely. This place is perfect for one."

"It's not perfect," she shot back. "You heard everything Mrs. Pitney says is wrong, and I know she's right!"

He shook his head in frustration. "Come on. You know what I mean. The house could almost have been designed for the purpose. Don't you think other people would love to come here as much as you always have?"

Why wouldn't he give up? Why did he have to keep pushing? "Well, it's *my* house, and I don't care who else wants to come here. And I don't care what you think, either - you're not me and I'm sick of being

pushed around. You and Michael are just alike - you think your ideas are the only ones that matter - " Maybe she was being a little unfair to Tony, but she didn't care. "I've had all I can stand of that, and a whole lot more. I'm gonna make my own decisions from now on, and if you don't like it, you can just go to *hell!*"

One side of his mouth crooked up into what she realized was a grin. "You do just that, Britt. You've put up with Michael's crap way too long. All I'm asking is for you to think this through and don't let yourself give up on something you want to do because of money."

She gritted her teeth, but then decided it was time he understood how very different she was from him. "You and money! Sure, it's easy to say stuff like that when you've probably got a pile of it sitting in the bank, and you've never had to worry about having enough, and you've got a big family and a successful business behind you. But I don't have any of that. This house is the first thing I've owned in my whole life that was worth anything, and it's all mine. There is *no way* I can give up even a tiny piece of it, no matter what I'd get in return."

He thought about her words for a few seconds and finally nodded. "Okay, I think I can see that. This house represents a kind of security to you, and you don't want anyone to have the power to take it away. But if you felt that way, why did you call Mrs. Pitney? You knew you'd need a loan to get started."

That was a fair question, but she kind of wished he hadn't thought to ask it. "Well, I hadn't thought about an equity loan until you mentioned it, and I didn't really think it through until after we went to bed. I thought I might be able to get away with only borrowing a couple of thousand bucks or so, and then pay it back within a few months." She shifted uncomfortably on the beanbag sofa. Mrs. Pitney was right that it needed replacing. She decided to tell him the rest of it. "Actually, I thought I might be able to borrow that much from you."

"Of course you could. However much you needed." He looked pleased at the prospect.

"But now that I know I'd need a lot more, it's out of the question. Because I don't know how soon I could pay you back - or even if I ever could. And I can't let you just give me money because we're friends. That's not right."

He frowned momentarily before saying, "But you helped me when I needed it. Can't I help you in return?"

"You've already been a big help," she assured him. "Giving me money's not the same thing at all."

His frown lasted this time. "I'm not sure I agree, but I have to respect your opinion."

Was he giving up? She hadn't expected him to do that. She was glad, but at the same time just the teeniest bit sorry. "So you won't mind if I start looking for a job when the paper comes out this afternoon?"

His grin was rueful. "I wouldn't go that far, but I guess if you're determined . . ."

"I am." She meant to sound firm and decisive, but ended up more wistful than that.

He sighed and his eyebrows knitted together thoughtfully. "What if money wasn't a problem? Would you do a bed-and-breakfast then?"

How could she explain how meaningless that question was? "Tony, I can't answer something like that! It's like me asking you what you'd give Carolyn for your anniversary this year, if you were still married."

"Jewelry," he answered promptly. "Probably a necklace and matching bracelet."

"That's no fair! You always gave her the same thing!" He was the kind of guy who liked nothing better than showering a woman with expensive jewelry. Since Carolyn didn't care for fancy rings and didn't wear earrings, necklaces and bracelets were what he bought.

He laughed. "Well, you were the one who made the comparison. I'll be more specific if you want, but I think you owe me an answer."

Damn! Why had she picked that example? "Oh, all right. The question's pretty ridiculous, because I really can't imagine money *not* being a problem, but I guess I *would* try the bed- and-breakfast thing. I read a book about it a couple of months back, and it sounded like a fun thing to do - a lot of work, too, of course."

"Of course. You'd do a great job, too." His forehead creased slightly and he watched her carefully as he asked, "What about Michael? Do you think you two will patch things up?"

She shook her head, not meeting his eyes. "I doubt it. He's not even interested in talking about what's wrong." She couldn't tell him that Michael had already moved Cyndi into their apartment. She had a little pride left.

"Then what about us partnering to do a B&B? You've got the right place for it, the time to devote to getting it started, and the interest needed to do a good job. I've got the up-front money and a fair amount of business know-how."

She knew that this was just another way of him giving her the money, but she couldn't stand to say no again right away. In fact, she was horribly tempted to say yes. Maybe it wouldn't really matter if she took his money and then could never pay it back. He had plenty, and he didn't seem obsessed by it, the way so many people were. Maybe it wouldn't ruin their friendship, and make him the giver and her the grateful recipient of his largess. Maybe she'd still be able to make her own decisions without worrying about what he thought she should do.

Yeah, right. "You also live three thousand miles away from here, and have a career that keeps you too busy to take time off. Sooner or later, you're going to get married again and have a family, and then you're *really* not going to want to have to worry about me and my stupid problems."

"No. That's not true." He shook his head abruptly and continued earnestly, "You've got to understand something, Britt. You and Carolyn are the most important people in the world to me - as important as my family, and that's saying a lot. We've been friends a long time, and I would *never* think your problems were stupid or unimportant. I know I haven't been in touch much over the last few years, but that's because I thought it was better that way. Michael always seemed kind of jealous of our friendship, and when we'd be together, I'd see the way things were between you two. I didn't want to make them any worse . . ."

Her insides clenched at the reminder and she closed her eyes. Michael had been awful about her friendship with Tony; it was true. Not so much during college, when they were a foursome, or even later, while Carolyn was still there. He never particularly liked them, but he seemed happy that Brittany enjoyed their company. Once Carolyn left Tony, the story was different.

What would have been a basically three-sided conversation between Brittany, Carolyn, and Tony became a two-sided one between Brittany and Tony. Michael interpreted every little nuance as meaning that Brittany and Tony were flirting, or that one or the other of them was trying to show up Michael. And when Tony was depressed and having a hard time dealing with life after Carolyn left, Michael resented

every single thing Brittany did to help him - as if doing a load of laundry for Tony meant she wasn't still doing Michael's! When they'd go home after an evening spent trying to cheer him up, Michael would be half-drunk on Tony's liquor and would accuse her of the most ridiculous things. The most memorable was the night he claimed she and Tony had "slipped off for a quickie," when Tony had actually asked her to look through some old clothes of Carolyn's that had been in the back of a closet. He'd wanted to know whether Carolyn was likely to want any of them, and the two of them hadn't been out of the room more than a couple of minutes.

Tony cleared his throat. "And as far as me living across the country, that's true, but I'm out this way on business every couple of months. I might even spend more time out here if the tip I got the other day works out. A guy in the Olympia office told me that a distributorship down on the south Oregon coast might be for sale. It's family-owned and has a good reputation, so it would be right up our alley."

What an intriguing thought! That meant Tony could visit her more than just once in great while. But this was no time to drift off into side issues. They needed to get this B&B thing settled once and for all. "Tell me how this partnership benefits you."

"I get a share of the profits, and over time, that should be considerably more than what I put into it."

"What share? And how do you know what it would be over time?"

"I don't know. We'd have to work all the details out first, but we can't do that as long as you insist on saying no. And as far as the profits over time, I don't know about that for sure, either. I'm just basing my thinking on what Mrs. Pitney said earlier, and I agree that we'd need to do some checking before we made a final decision. I'm sure she'd give us the names of some of the other B&B's she services, and you could talk to people around town to see what they've heard."

Listening to his casual assurance, she realized she didn't know much about the practicalities of running a business. She might be making a bigger deal about the money than was warranted. Plenty of businesses got started exactly this way, where one person had the idea and the other had the money and the know-how. And she certainly trusted Tony . . . "Look, Tony, I'd love to say let's do it. It's just that there are some things I'm afraid of. One is that you'd go into this just because we're friends, even if you thought there wasn't a chance in hell it would succeed." She paused, wanting him to answer before she said anything else.

He pressed his lips together and raised his eyebrows for a moment. "You know how to ask tough questions, don't you? I guess at one level your fear makes sense, because I have to admit that the money isn't anywhere near as important as your happiness. But in this particular case, I honestly think a B&B in this house is a great idea. I don't know how profitable B&B's tend to be, but they've got to do reasonably well or there wouldn't be as many of them as there are. And if we go into business together, I promise that I'll take it very seriously - and I warn you of the exact same thing. I'm not going to be satisfied with a marginally profitable B&B, unless I'm convinced that's the best we can accomplish. Ask Robbie or my Dad, if you don't believe that I can be a real pain even with people who are close to me."

She only had to remember Michael's stories from the short time he worked at Fiore Marine to know Tony was telling the truth. "I believe you about that - about all of it, I guess. But that brings me to another thing that worries me. Would you end up calling all the shots?"

He shook his head slowly. "No way. It would be your business, to run the way you see fit. I'd expect us to talk over major decisions, and I'd certainly offer advice from time to time, but that's it."

She wished she could just leave it at that. Any normal person could. "The problem with that is me. I don't know how to make choices on my own. That's why being with Michael worked for so long - he needed

to be in charge and I was glad to follow wherever he led. I can't keep being that way the rest of my life, but I'm afraid that if we go ahead and do this, I'll start following you around instead of Michael." She cringed at the awful picture she'd painted of herself, a picture that was unfortunately all too true.

He met and held her gaze. "Don't tear yourself down like that. Of course you know how to make choices - that's what you've been doing the last several days. Michael didn't want you to think for yourself, and the easiest way for him to make that happen was to make you think you couldn't do it. But a business partner who can't think for herself is not something I need or want, so I'm going to do my best to get you to use every ounce of that brilliant brain of yours." He paused for a couple of seconds before adding, "And the first decision you need to make is whether we're even going to give it a shot. I think it's the right thing to do, but I'm not going to be the one living and breathing the bed-and-breakfast life. Tell me now and I promise I'll stop bugging you about it." A smile lighting up his whole face, he finished by saying, "And I hope I don't even have to say that we'll still be friends and I won't hold your decision against you. What do you say?"

She looked at him for a long moment. She knew how she wanted to answer, but she wanted to make sure that it felt right everywhere inside. Finally she smiled back at him. "I think we've got a lot of work ahead of us, partner."

**

The moment Tony pulled up in front of the restaurant on Saturday night, smiling young men opened both car doors. One offered Brittany his hand, then raced to open the restaurant door. The other gave Tony a ticket for his car, climbed in, and drove it away.

They went inside and waited only a moment at the reservation desk before an elegant young woman smiled a greeting at them. Tony responded to her implicit question. "Fiore, table for two."

She nodded, apparently recognizing his name without consulting her reservation book. "Right this way," she said, and led them to a table in front of the windows.

Servers materialized to hold both their chairs and they sank into luxurious armchairs on smooth-rolling casters. Large leather menus were placed in front of them and the slightly less cumbersome wine list was entrusted to Tony. The hostess and one of the servers disappeared and the remaining waiter asked, "Would you care for something from the bar while you look over the menu?"

Tony looked inquiringly at Brittany and she shook her head. "No, thanks. We'll probably order a bottle of wine later."

"Very good, sir. Today's specials are listed on the first page of the menu. I'll be back in a few minutes, and I'd be glad to answer any questions you might have at that time." He glided away.

Tony glanced out the windows at the city lights. The restaurant was in the hills above Portland, and the windows afforded a view of downtown, the Willamette River, and much of the close-in residential area. He'd never eaten here before, but he'd stopped at a nearby park once, and he remembered seeing many more trees than he'd expect in any metropolitan area. "The lights are lovely, but I think you'd like the daytime view even better. All the trees make Portland feel less like a big city."

She took in the scene for a few seconds before saying, "Oh, but it *is* a big city - just look at all those lights. Don't get me wrong, but I like my view better."

He smiled. "I know. I do, too."

Her eyes lit up with excitement and she almost giggled. "I just remembered about all the furniture we

bought - I can't wait until it's delivered!"

They'd spent the day furniture shopping in Portland, after spending the last couple of days meeting with other local B&B owners and working out the details for their partnership. He'd been prepared to supply plenty of encouragement to buy the needed furniture and not worry overmuch about price. Surprisingly, he'd only needed to give her a gentle nudge once in a while.

Now that her concerns had been addressed, she seemed to treat the money he'd deposited into their business bank account as, plain and simple, a resource to be used as necessary. Many business people went to one extreme or the other in their handling of money. Either they pinched every penny, and sometimes didn't buy the things they truly needed out of a desire to keep plenty of cash in the bank, or they spent crazily, wasting money on the latest model of this or that, and eventually spending themselves out of business. Brittany seemed to naturally fall in the middle, buying good-quality merchandise to meet the business's real needs.

"I'm glad you're pleased. I am, too." He was more than pleased by the change in her over the last several days. She appeared more rested and less haunted, but the most dramatic change was in her personality. She laughed and talked with energy and passion again, and he realized sadly that she hadn't done either in more years than he cared to count. The woman sitting across the table from him was a lot like the Brittany he'd fallen for back at Brown.

He gave himself a mental shake. That wasn't an appropriate subject to think about, especially here in one of the more romantic restaurants he'd ever eaten in. And especially not when she looked so beautiful tonight, with her hair flowing unrestricted around her shoulders . . .

"Tony, you've got to tell me something." She frowned slightly and gestured at the restaurant. "Is this the kind of place you eat in all the time? Because if it is, I can't believe you like that dumpy pizza place in Myrtle Beach."

He would have laughed, except that he could tell her question was serious. "No, I don't eat at fancy places like this often at all."

A different worry seemed to concern her suddenly. "But you do sometimes - right?" He nodded. She responded hesitantly, "I guess I'm weird or something, because I never have."

He started to formulate a polite response, but changed his mind. "You're not weird, Britt. You've just been married to an extremely selfish man who has no idea of how special you are. He'd rather eat spicy ethnic food that incinerates your taste buds, and what you like doesn't matter." To his embarrassment, he realized he hadn't consulted her before choosing this restaurant, either. "And now, you're stuck with a business partner who makes assumptions about what you like, too. I'm sorry."

Her eyes opened wide and she laughed. "Don't be sorry! I love this place. It's kind of like waking up to discover I'm living in a fairy tale, and I'm the princess. I never felt like that before." A cloud crossed her face, dimming her happiness.

Tony wished he could make the cloud vanish as easily as he'd helped with her financial problems. Brittany should feel like a princess all the time.

CHAPTER SEVEN

At eight-fifteen on Monday morning, Tony sat in a straight chair in front of Grandfather's desk. It was Grandmother's desk now, of course, and had been for nearly fifteen years. Neither the desk nor the office had changed since the day eight-year-old Tony arrived to spend his first half-day learning the

business of Fiore Marine.

Grandfather was also Antonio Fiore, and even though he had three children, he decreed that his first male grandchild would succeed him at the helm of Fiore Marine. Tony was the first grandchild, male or female, and his name was only the first of many choices made by Grandfather on his behalf. And his first half-day at the office had been followed by many more throughout his childhood, time that the other grandchildren spent in their own choice of activities.

This morning, he was here in response to a summons from Elsa, Grandfather's secretary all those years ago, and now Grandmother's secretary. Grandmother wanted an update on operations in Olympia and North Carolina. That's what she said, at least. Tony knew her interest in either site was extremely limited. As long as they were making money for Fiore Marine and not damaging the company's reputation, she'd rather pretend they didn't exist.

Still, he was an obedient grandchild and did as he was told. "I met briefly with Robbie just a few minutes ago. His trip to North Carolina went well. He had productive meetings with a number of long-time customers, including several who told us they were being aggressively wooed by our former manager. All but one assured him that they planned to stay with us, and that one customer said they hadn't made a final decision, but promised to meet with us again in two weeks."

She nodded. "Good. You will represent the company at that meeting." An edict, and one Tony knew had nothing to do with Robbie's competence. "You have finished wasting your time in Oregon, I trust?" She challenged him with that dark disapproving glare of hers, having reached the real purpose for the meeting.

Someone less experienced with Grandmother might try to distract her with talk of the company in Southern Oregon he'd heard about last week. He knew better. "Actually, Brittany and I have become business partners. We're starting a small bed-and-breakfast in the house she owns out there. She's the managing partner, so I won't have any day-to-day responsibilities, but I will need to visit a few times a year. I plan to organize my schedule so that I can spend a few days there whenever I visit the site in Olympia."

She didn't keep him waiting for her response. "You talk of Brittany and not Michael. Therefore, I assume that their marriage is still in turmoil, and I ask why you continue to involve yourself in matters that belong to the two of them to resolve."

He gave her a hard look of his own and answered, "Because he's not interested in resolving anything, and he's taken the money she had to live on. If I hadn't been there last week, she'd be cleaning toilets at the local motel in order to feed herself."

"And it's preferable that she never learn to stand on her own two feet?" Grandmother shook her head, but her expression moderated to gentle scolding. "Antonio, your heart is in the right place, I would never question that. But you have no responsibility with regard to Brittany, and you must not stand between her and Michael. Yet that is exactly what you are doing. This business you and she are starting is in Oregon, and her husband works in California. One of them must give up their livelihood now in order to reconcile, and she will not want to disappoint you by doing so."

He felt a guilty twinge of conscience. He'd thought of that point - that it would help Brittany to stay firm in her decision to leave Michael. Was he doing wrong by her? No, he couldn't believe that. "Grandmother, you know Michael. Do you actually think he'd be any better a husband than he was an employee?"

"She should have considered that before she married him." She sighed and reluctantly admitted, "But I would not deny her the opportunity to improve her life. My concern, as always, is for you. I had allowed

myself to hope that, with that woman finally married again, you would begin to move forward with your own life." "That woman" was how Grandmother referred to Carolyn, when she absolutely had to refer to her. "But now, it will be Brittany whose life you must watch over and assist in a million ways. You will still have no time to find a wife."

He smiled, glad for the promise he'd made Brittany. "Actually, that's not true. I'm going to start dating again." Quickly, before she had the chance to say anything more, he changed the subject. "I know you're busy this morning, but there's one more thing I'd like to discuss. I've heard of another distributor that's being put up for sale this spring. I plan to start making some calls this week about it, and I just wanted you to be aware of that."

She nodded somewhat absently. "Where is it?"

"On the West Coast, a few hours north of the California border. Near Coos Bay, Oregon." He hurried to justify himself before she interrupted. "It doesn't make much sense for us to have only one site out west, and this is far enough from Olympia to avoid fighting over any of the same customers. I'd be able to handle both sites on the same cross-country trip, so it would be more efficient."

"It would also be very convenient for your business with Brittany." Looking like she'd been sucking on a lemon, she paused significantly, then said, "Keep me informed. We will not buy another distributor just to provide you with an excuse to spend time in Oregon. Now, about this dating business, Mrs. Ragazzo's granddaughter Rose is visiting her for a few weeks. She's a sweet girl, well-brought-up and quite pretty. Mrs. Ragazzo is just home from the hospital, and I've been meaning to go sit with her some evening. I'm sure Rose would enjoy an evening out with a nice young man. You could take a walk down to the waterfront for dinner - "

He raised his hand. "I don't need your help, Grandmother. I'll find my own dates, thank you very much."

"And what is wrong with a nice Italian girl, I want to know? Your brother married one - "

"And Sal is a wonderful wife for Robbie, I don't dispute that. I just want to choose my own wife."

Glowing at him, Grandmother muttered, "Then get busy at it - and do a better job this time. I can't wait forever."

**

The house was way too quiet. As much as Brittany had hated Michael slumping in front of the TV in the master bedroom at all hours these last few months, she would have welcomed his demanding voice right about now.

If he was here, or Tony for that matter, she'd be making dinner at this hour. She didn't like eating alone, though, so she'd stopped in Tillamook on her way back from Portland and bought a whole bunch of cans of diet drink. They didn't taste anything like the milkshakes the ads compared them to, but they were easy and they'd help her lose weight. Five or ten pounds would probably be enough.

Fred and Kevin Pool had come by this morning. They fished part of the year and did house repair projects the rest of the time. They agreed to get started tomorrow on installing the door between the suite and the rest of the second floor. They also left paint samples so she could choose colors for each of the bedrooms. She'd initially planned to do the painting herself, but Tony had convinced her she had too many other responsibilities. Instead, she was going to sand down and refinish the bunk beds for the sitting room/child's bedroom.

She'd talked to the people at Inn on the Hill this afternoon. That was another B&B that belonged to Mrs.

Pitney's reservation service, and she and Tony had been there last week to check out the financial questions they had. Ralph and Phyllis had been very friendly and helpful. Even though Inn on the Hill was only a few miles away, on the north end of Myrtle Beach instead of the south end, they didn't seem threatened by potential competition from Martha's Madness. They were located on a hill just east of town. Their guestrooms all had a lovely view of the panorama of the four miles of beach in honor of which Myrtle Beach got its name. But their guests couldn't walk right out onto the beach!

Ralph and Phyllis had offered her the opportunity to learn first-hand the business of running a B&B. They would benefit by getting some free labor from Brittany, but also indirectly by improving the service Brittany provided at her own B&B, which should eventually reflect positively on the reputation and bookings of Mrs. Pitney's service.

They had several rooms filled this coming weekend, so Brittany agreed to spend several hours there each day from Friday through Sunday. The prospect of getting a little supervised practice time was quite exciting. She hoped it would prevent at least a few disasters once Martha's Madness opened its doors for business.

So, it wasn't that she'd been idle all day that made her ready to climb the walls now. It was just that she didn't do well at being alone. Even back when she and her mother first moved into the apartment and her mother started working evenings, she'd felt like this. Kind of scared. Lonely, and willing to put up with virtually anything to avoid being alone one minute longer than necessary.

What craziness had inspired her to sentence herself to so much solitude? The B&B business would be slow-to-nonexistent much of the year, and even when it wasn't, her guests weren't going to want their hostess hanging around with them.

It was Michael, of course. The way he'd been so casual when she said she was going to stay up here a while. Casual, nothing - the guy was glad! All his talk about how she wasn't so special after all and the way he let Cyndi move right in on him -

Hey, *had* she really moved in with Michael? Michael could have just been saying that to make Brittany jealous - and it did, but in a funny, twisted kind of way. Because as far as she was concerned, the idea of letting Michael ever touch her again was pretty sickening. Of course, that made no sense. Brittany had known for a long time - forever, it seemed like - that guys would always take sex wherever they found it. And she hadn't ever in their fifteen years together felt completely secure about her importance to Michael.

So, since their relationship was a mess and she no longer wanted to have sex with him, she shouldn't worry about whether or not Cyndi was living with Michael. He could have made up the whole thing, starting with her coming on to him at the club. None of it mattered to the overall situation.

Well, maybe that was true and she shouldn't care, but she did. She needed to know. Right now.

But how could she find out? If Michael was lying, he wouldn't suddenly start telling her the truth. And she couldn't exactly call their neighbors and ask if they'd seen a strange woman coming out of the apartment - not in their building, where new residents moved in every week.

She'd call the apartment! Michael wouldn't be home from work yet, so Cyndi would answer the phone - assuming she wasn't at work, too.

She picked up the phone and punched in the number, not giving herself a chance to think her decision through. One ring, and a second. She'd let it ring once more, then hang up before the answering machine picked up.

"Mikey, is that you?" Cyndi, definitely. That cutesy breathy voice wasn't the least bit natural.

"Wrong number." Brittany hung up and sat staring at the phone for a few seconds. It was true! Her husband had moved someone else into their apartment. No wonder he didn't care if she stayed up here.

She was stuck. She couldn't go back to him - not that she would have even considered it, of course. It didn't matter how lonely and empty this house was. It was all she had and she'd damn well better get used to it.

The phone rang. Oh, no! She nearly dropped it on the floor. Cyndi must have recognized her voice - or she'd used that call-return feature for when you miss a call. She didn't want to answer, but it was juvenile to pretend she wasn't here. "Hello?"

"Hi, Britt." Not Cyndi - Tony.

She let her breath out as silently as possible. "Oh, hi! How are you doing?"

"Fine. You?"

"Me, too. Was work okay today?" Great question.

"Yeah. How was your day?"

Okay, he could ask some not-so-great questions, too. "Fine. Fred and Kevin came by. They said the new door and all will be easy. And I'm going over to Inn on the Hill to work this weekend."

"Oh, that'll be great. Did you do anything about paint yet?"

"Fred and Kevin left samples, but I haven't really looked at them. I was thinking of using some fairly warm pastels, so the place doesn't look institutional or anything. What do you think?"

"That sounds good."

She'd be willing to bet he didn't have a clue what she was talking about. But the important thing was that she knew he had faith in her decision-making abilities. "And I was thinking, we always used to identify which room people were sleeping in by color. If we did each room in a different color, we wouldn't have to give the rooms numbers."

"You mean you'd assign someone to the Rose Room, for example?"

Hey, maybe he *did* know what a warm color was! "Yeah. One B&B I read about names the rooms after different authors, and the furnishings vary according to the author."

"So the Stephen King Room would be full of Halloween kinds of things? I don't think I'd want to stay there."

She laughed. "That was the idea, but I'm pretty sure the authors are all much more sedate than that. Like maybe the Jane Austin Room, or something."

"Even so, it sounds a little hokey to me. The Rose Room seems classier somehow." His voice had a rough-but-smooth quality to it that she could listen to for hours. It kind of scraped at the edges of her nerves and soothed her anxiety.

They talked a while longer, but she wasn't ready to talk about Cyndi yet. Eventually he asked, "Is it lonely in that big house? I was thinking about it last night, and wondering whether it makes the same

creaking sounds that I hear in my condo."

"I guess it does, but I'm pretty used to hearing the wind and rain outside, so I don't notice it that much. And the same thing about being lonely, too." She made a face to herself - she shouldn't lie to Tony like that. She could tell him how much she hated being alone.

Except right now, she didn't hate it that much. And she knew that, even after she and Tony hung up, she'd be better able to stand the solitude. Being alone but having a friend like Tony was better than being married to someone who thought friends were unnecessary. Someone who apparently didn't care which woman was sharing his bed.

**

It was ridiculous letting an insignificant thing like a telephone control your life. And that was exactly what Tony was doing - for the second night in a row, he'd let the phone chase him out of his condo into the streets of Newport's Point section.

He'd called Britt on Monday night. She had seemed glad to hear from him, despite not having much business to discuss with him. He knew it was important for her not to start feeling he was calling all the time to check up on her. On the other hand, he knew she'd want to talk decisions over with him, so they should talk reasonably often. All in all, he figured twice a week was a workable frequency for phone calls.

The problem was that he wanted to call her every night. Last night, and again tonight, it felt like the phone whispered "Call Britt" at least once every ten minutes. He went so far both nights as to plan out what he'd say to her, assuming he called her. The idea was to prove to himself that he didn't have any valid reason for picking up the phone, and therefore to talk himself out of doing so.

And he didn't have anything to say to her - nothing that he dared to say. Wanting to hear her voice wasn't something her good friend and business partner was allowed. Wondering how she was dealing with her separation from Michael would have been okay, except that she was so reticent and unwilling to talk about it. If he pressed her about the situation, she might very well clam up and refuse to tell him anything.

Or she might see the truth underneath his facade of friendship. The plain unvarnished reality was that he was lovesick over her. Her marital woes only gave new life to his dreams. Maybe he had a chance with her now.

His brain knew better. It propelled him out of reach of the instrument of his potential - and probably inevitable - downfall. It knew that, after he'd walked the streets and stared out at Narragansett Bay long enough, he'd be ready to give up and go to sleep.

Thinking about her while walking wouldn't do him any good, though. He'd think about work. Like about the difference between the Fiore Marine of Grandfather's era and the one of today.

Grandfather started the company shortly after World War II. As a young man, he spent more than ten years working on a fishing boat. They fished for weeks at a time out in the Atlantic, days away from shore. The work was backbreaking and dangerous, and when they had a good catch, reasonably well paid.

He and Grandmother had three small children, two boys and a girl. Jointly, they decided that they would rather their children had two living parents than the comforts that a lucky fisherman's family could enjoy. Grandfather often said that he intended to live to see his children's children have children of their own.

He didn't quite make it. He died suddenly from a massive stroke during Tony's sophomore year in

college. He'd lived to see seven grandchildren be born, but no great-grandchildren.

Grandfather's death was a crisis point for Fiore Marine. The only other Fiore working for the company was Tony's father, Lorenzo, and he'd never been given enough authority to make him a viable candidate to take over. The minute Grandfather was buried, Grandmother announced that she would replace him temporarily. The fact that she had no business experience of her own was immaterial.

In his self-centered immaturity, Tony thought that Grandmother was stepping in just until he graduated from college. He was Grandfather's designated successor, so naturally he'd take over right away. He had all sorts of plans for the changes he'd make then.

But all these years later, Grandmother was still in charge. He now understood that almost all the changes he had wanted to make would have been disastrous or pointless. Luckily, he hadn't been allowed to implement any of them.

He'd started in the warehouse - keeping track of inventory, ordering, and more than a few times, assembling orders and loading them onto delivery trucks himself. His father, who usually ran that end of things, was busy dealing with customers and suppliers, a job Grandfather had always done personally.

After a very long year of apprenticeship, Tony was promoted. He took over the customer and supplier relationships that Grandfather had taught him were the heart of Fiore Marine. Still not the job that had been promised him, but he was making progress.

And then one day, a customer asked if he knew Manny Silvia of Silvia's Supplies. He didn't know Manny, but he knew of the company. It was in Southeastern Massachusetts, almost as far east as Cape Cod, and it was a marine supply distributor with the same good solid reputation that Fiore Marine had. The customer told him that Manny wanted him to stop by that afternoon, if he could squeeze it into his schedule.

He made the time, and Manny turned out to be an old friend of Grandfather's who'd worked with him in the early days of Fiore Marine. Manny wanted to retire from the business and he didn't have any family interested in taking over. Would Fiore Marine be willing to buy his operation?

Grandmother didn't like the idea a single bit, but she didn't want to disappoint an old friend of Grandfather's. They bought the company and she immediately put Tony in charge. If it didn't turn a profit or if it took too much of her time to run, she'd close the place down.

Tony was in seventh heaven! He had a company of his own to run, and it was only slightly smaller than Fiore Marine itself was. He threw himself into the job and made such a success of it that Grandmother had to be pleased. And over the years, he found other small distributorships for them to buy. Every year, their gross sales and net income were significantly higher than ever before. Also of importance, Fiore Marine now was a large enough company that a job could be found for anyone in the family who needed or wanted one.

They had ten subsidiaries in addition to the original operation in Newport. That might become eleven fairly soon, if the distributorship near Coos Bay lived up to the positive results from the first few inquiries he'd made.

That thought led him back to Brittany. Would he be so eager for this deal, if it wouldn't give him a chance to spend more time with her? Logically, he knew the answer was yes. He hadn't had this type of incentive for the ten acquisitions he'd already ramrodded. But he'd need to watch himself closely. The only reason all ten had worked so well was because he'd weeded out all the other possibilities - the ones that had something wrong with them. He couldn't let emotion lead him astray now.

Brittany was as important to him as his family, but he had a responsibility to his family that he didn't have to her. Tony was Grandfather's chosen successor, and the onus of the company's financial soundness and the family's security was his.

Neither Antonio Fiore ever let the family down.

CHAPTER EIGHT

By Saturday noon, Brittany's back and legs were screaming at her. What had gotten into her, to subject them to so much abuse? So many flights of stairs, so much bending and stretching?

She'd learned a heck of a lot about running a B&B, though. The Inn on the Hill had eight guestrooms, each with private bath. Due to the sunny weather that had broken out mid-week, all eight were occupied this weekend, rather than the three that Ralph and Phyllis had expected.

Yesterday morning Phyllis had shown her how to make up a guestroom, and then she'd left Brittany to do the rest of them. In the afternoon, Brittany had watched while a few people checked in and were given tours and explanations of the house rules. She'd arrived at six this morning to help with breakfast, and now she'd finally finished cleaning the last bathroom.

She didn't see Phyllis anywhere on the main floor, so she had to go down another flight of stairs to their private apartment. She knocked on the open door and called out, "Phyllis? I'm through with the bathrooms. Would you like to check them?"

"Come on in, Brittany," Ralph answered. "Phyllis ran out to the store for a few minutes. Have a seat. Would you like some coffee?" He sat in a recliner chair with his feet up, a mug of coffee in his left hand.

"No coffee, thanks." She sank onto a low sofa with deep cushions that made her afraid she'd never stand up again. "This is a great view." Their private living room had big picture windows looking out over the beach, just as the main living and dining rooms did upstairs, and the guest rooms on two floors above that. The house was built into the side of the hill, and since she couldn't see any ground outside the windows, she felt like they were suspended in mid-air.

"So, how are you liking the B&B business?"

"Fine so far, but I'm exhausted! How do you two do it all the time?"

He chuckled, his white beard and red cheeks making him look a lot like Santa Claus. "It can be tiring, I admit, but we think the rewards are worth it. Living here year-round, getting to know our wonderful guests, having so much free time . . . It's also much better for our mental and physical health - especially all the stairs we have to climb. You're young. You'll adjust in no time."

She smiled. "I'm sure I will. I've loved Myrtle Beach and Martha's Madness since I was twelve, so this is a dream come true. Is there anything else you'd like me to do today?"

"I don't think so. I'm sure Phyllis will check one or two of the bathrooms when she gets back - she always does if anyone other than her does the cleaning. But you don't need to wait around for her. You'll be back in the morning?"

"Six o'clock sharp. And thanks again for giving me this opportunity. I really appreciate it." She regained her feet with a minimum of struggle and headed upstairs and out to her car. She was sure that Ralph and Phyllis enjoyed having such a private space of their own, but for herself, she was thankful she didn't have another flight of stairs to climb.

**

Tony spent Saturday afternoon and early evening at his brother Robbie's house. It was the kind of time he dearly loved - warm and casual, with some of his favorite people in the world. It also reminded him of exactly what was missing in his life, so there was a definite edge of sadness to his pleasure.

Robbie and Sal lived in a development on the east side of Aquidneck Island, about fifteen minutes from Tony's condo in Newport. Their house was at least three times as large as the house Tony and Robbie had grown up in, and at less than six years old, something like one-twentieth the age of that house. Sal was from a still older, smaller house, and Robbie had confided that they'd specifically set out to buy a large new home to break from the past.

Tony was pleased to see they'd finally finished furnishing the living room. The family room had come first, because that was where they hosted large gatherings for their families on every possible occasion. Until this spring, the living room had been virtually empty. Now it held a sofa, a loveseat, and several chairs made of incredibly soft brown leather, as well as a number of attractive wooden tables of various sizes, some topped with vases of flowers or other decoration. The lighting was ample and easily adjusted, making it the kind of room that invited any guest to relax.

Trina and Gina, Robbie's daughters, were almost four and a little more than two, respectively. They were adorable and seemed almost perfectly behaved. Trina, short for Catarina, was named after Grandmother and Gina after Sal's grandmother.

Grandmother and Aunt Luisa considered Sal the perfect Italian girl. She was petite and pretty, and unflinchingly devoted to home and family. She respected her elders and tradition implicitly, and despite her sweet somewhat retiring disposition, she ruled her home and family. When Tony suggested on Thursday that he and Robbie go out for a couple of drinks after work, Robbie replied, "Tonight's my night for watching the girls while Sal goes to bingo at the church. She'll kill me if I'm late." Tony doubted the literalness of the threat, but he cared too much for his brother's welfare to chance it.

Tony and Robbie had known Sal as long as either could remember. They attended the same church and the same middle school and high school. Robbie and Sal had dated steadily in high school, but had drifted apart once Robbie went to college at the University of Rhode Island half an hour away. Part of the reason for that was sex. Sal was a good girl and intended to remain a virgin until her wedding night. Robbie didn't want to wait, and found the uninhibited atmosphere at school very much to his liking. Nevertheless, once he started work at Fiore Marine, he began seeing Sal again. She still wouldn't give in, and although Robbie had never admitted it, Tony felt sure he was secretly proud of having married a virgin. As similar as the two brothers were in many ways, Robbie was at heart much more old-fashioned.

Today was Sal's opportunity to hear all about Carolyn's wedding, and Tony dredged every detail possible out of his memory, but her curiosity still wasn't satisfied. After dinner, with Gina snuggled up next to him on the couch, he said, "Sal, I'm sorry, but I really can't remember any more. Maybe you should try asking some specific questions."

She frowned intently for a few seconds, then wrinkled her nose and looked at Robbie as though for guidance. "Well, there's one thing I'm real curious about, but I feel kind of funny asking. What's Scott like?"

Robbie rolled his eyes and muttered, "Come on, Sal . . . Just tell her it's none of her business."

"I don't mind," he told both of them. "He seems nice, but I don't know him more than just to speak. He treats Carolyn right, and I guess he takes work and things like that pretty seriously. He's real devoted to

Rachel, too."

"That's his daughter?" Sal asked.

"Well, he's actually her guardian. Her mother was engaged to Scott when she died."

Sal just stared at Tony. "And Carolyn's going to help raise her?" She might have said something more, but Robbie shot her a look that silenced her. After a few seconds, she brightened and asked, "What does Scott look like?" Robbie continued glowering at her, and she sighed. "I'm sorry, Tony. Just ignore my rude questions."

He smiled at her. "It's okay, really. Yes, Carolyn seems to have changed her mind about kids, although I'm not too sure how anxious she is to actually give birth and all that. And Scott could practically be another Fiore. He's a couple of inches shorter than me, maybe thirty or so pounds lighter, and his hair is curly and not quite as black."

"He must be all skin and bones!"

"Not exactly, although it's pretty clear he hasn't had an Italian mother or wife feeding him his whole life." Gina's head rested on his lap, and he smoothed the dark hair out of her eyes. She smiled sleepily and burrowed in closer.

"Well, I'll tell you both something," Robbie announced. "I'm nowhere near as interested in what Scott looks like as I am in what's happening between my dear sweet brother and Brittany."

Sal's eyes opened wide and she turned to Robbie to protest, "You said there wasn't anything going on!"

"There isn't," Tony answered firmly. "We're friends and now we're business partners, too. Michael left her in the lurch and he's apparently not interested in dealing with their problems, so it looks like they're through."

Robbie said, "I never understood what she saw in that jerk in the first place. She's always seemed like a class act, from what little I could tell with Michael around."

"Yeah." Sal glanced at Robbie, then wrinkled her nose. "I never said anything to you, Tony, but Michael said some awful things to me a couple of times."

"What kind of things?"

She squirmed in her chair. "Well - crude, I guess you'd say. Like about my . . . body . . ." She bit her lip, seemingly still trying to figure out how to explain without using Michael's exact words.

Robbie rescued her. "So, Tony, if the deal with you and Brittany is just friendship and business, how come I've caught you all moony-eyed a bunch of times this week?"

"You have not!"

"Have too!"

Sal laughed. "Before you two totally regress into little kids, maybe you could tell us about this house of Brittany's. It must be pretty big if she can run a bed-and-breakfast in it."

"Thank you, Sal. I'm glad to see that *some* members of this family have more to do than make up stories to amuse themselves. Her house is great. It's right on the beach - and the beach isn't like our beaches, either. It's nice and sandy and it goes on for a mile or more in both directions. The second floor is all

going to be guest rooms - three regular rooms and a two-room suite for families with children."

Her face lit up. "That's so neat! Do you remember we went out to the Cape for a few days last summer? I really wanted to stay in this bed-and-breakfast in Provincetown I'd heard about, but they don't take kids."

"The place we ended up wasn't too shabby," Robbie reminded her.

"I didn't mean it was! It was beautiful - the kind of place I'd only ever seen before on TV." She looked at Robbie with such adoration and trust that Tony felt like an intruder. "It was perfect, you know that."

He could almost imagine how it would feel if Brittany looked at him like that, even just once . . .

Robbie chortled. "He's doing it again! See, Sal? Doesn't he look like a moonstruck puppy?"

He retaliated the only way he could - he threw a sofa pillow right into Robbie's grinning face.

**

Brittany waited all day Monday for Fred and Kevin to show up. They'd finished putting in the new door last week, and Brittany had chosen the colors for each room on Thursday. At first, she thought they might have had to go to Tillamook to get the paint mixed, but that explanation lost much of its validity by mid-afternoon.

Finally she jumped in her car and drove to the hardware store where Angela worked, watching passing traffic for their beat-up truck the whole way. The store was nearly empty, so Angela came over and greeted her immediately. "Hi, Brittany. What can I help you with?" Interestingly, in this environment, she seemed much more self-assured than usual.

"I was just wondering if you knew where your dad and Kevin are today."

She stood taller and her eyes flared with anger. "You mean they aren't at your place? I'll bet those rats went fishing! I told them - none of their usual tricks on your job - but do you think they listen?"

"They went fishing instead of working?" That was a strange concept. There'd been plenty of days when she wanted to do something other than go to work, but she'd forced herself to ignore those urges. "They do this a lot?"

Angela sighed and shook her head. "If they think the fish are running . . . Of course, they sell the fish, so it's not exactly like they're goofing off."

"But it doesn't get my painting done! The furniture's supposed to come on Friday, and I was hoping most of it would be done by then."

Angela squared her shoulders, looking ready for hand-to-hand combat. "I'm really sorry, Brittany. I'll make sure they don't do this to you again."

"Thanks. By the way, would you like to come over some night this week for dinner? I've got a couple of recipes to try - they're intended for breakfast, but they're casseroles, so they should work for dinner, too."

Angela grinned. "That would be super! When do you want to do it?"

She shrugged. "Any night that works for you."

"Is tonight too soon? Not making dinner for Dad and Kevin would serve them right, after what they did

to you."

"Tonight's great. I'll just stop by the store and pick up the ingredients I need. Come by right after work, unless you need to go home first."

With a devilish smile, Angela said, "I'll stop home long enough to leave them a note. I think they're both broke, so they won't be able to go hang out with their buddies at the bar."

In the interests of saving time, Brittany shopped at the store in Myrtle Beach. It worked somewhat, although she probably spent as much time figuring out what to substitute for the ingredients she couldn't find, as she would have driving to the store where she normally shopped.

The casserole turned out to be delicious. It was an egg, bacon, and cheese mixture that vaguely resembled a quiche. To go with it, she made her old standby, cinnamon rolls. Another time, she'd practice making muffins from scratch and make the French toast casserole that Mrs. Pitney had given her the recipe for.

After Angela left, and every time she let her mind drift the rest of the week, she thought about her marriage. The current state of affairs - a single affair, in this case - wasn't a tenable long-term solution. Couples were meant to be together, not separated by several hundred miles.

Yet Michael didn't seem to acknowledge that anything was wrong. He'd talked like she had no right even to complain that he had moved Cyndi into their apartment. And, damn him, he thought Brittany's problem was that she was too horny to think straight!

She *was* horny, but she knew he was doing this all on purpose, just to make her desperate. She'd always crumbled before, when he pulled away from her like this. And when she crumbled, she stopped questioning his behavior. All she wanted was for him to forgive her - to hold her, to say something nice to her. And well, yes, sex was part of what she wanted then, too, but only part of it.

She wasn't going to crumble this time. She'd had it with trying to make the little crumbs of love he offered into a full meal. Either he started giving back as much love as he got and began dealing with the real issues, to boot, or she'd -

What? What was she going to do? And it had better not be some stupid threat she had no intention of carrying out, because it sure as heck looked like she was going to end up having to follow through on it.

Okay, well what about the d-word? Would she have the guts to divorce Michael? It was sure no treat being his wife most of the time. He was demanding and often surly and he never did his share of the housework. And whenever she needed tenderness or a friendly ear, his suggested solution was sex, and if she didn't want that, then she should just grow up and stop hassling him.

But she was pretty sure he actually did love her. He wouldn't have taken three months off work to come up here with her, otherwise. And one of the best parts was that he'd thought up the idea himself. It hadn't been like when she told him a dozen times or more that she wanted to spend a weekend in Monterey. He'd finally taken her there last year, but only to make up for breaking a small glass bottle of hers in a fit of anger. The bottle had been the last gift her father ever gave her, and no trip, especially not one when Michael alternated between showing off and being hateful, could make up for its loss.

Those memories made her realize that their marriage was effectively over for her. She'd forgiven way too much already. She might not like the idea of spending the rest of her life alone, but at least she could live it the way she wanted.

On Friday, after Fred and Kevin started on the day's painting - they'd been exceedingly prompt and courteous since Angela got her hands on them - she drove to Tillamook to see a lawyer. There were closer lawyers listed in the phone book, but she would feel more comfortable talking to another woman.

She learned that the procedures to get a divorce in Oregon were relatively straightforward. If she and Michael could agree on terms, it would even be fairly inexpensive. The only major hitch was that at least one of them needed to be an Oregon resident for six months before they filed the papers. That meant she'd have to wait until July before doing anything formally. The lawyer suggested she talk to Michael in the meantime to see if they could come to an equitable settlement on their own.

She'd already promised to help Ralph and Phyllis again that weekend, so she decided to wait until Monday to call Michael. She was surprised to find that the stairs didn't bother her nearly as much as they had the previous weekend. She also was able to make up the rooms and clean the bathrooms considerably quicker than before. Apparently she was getting the hang of the B&B business.

The furniture was delivered on Monday instead of Friday, and it was absolutely perfect. Fred and Kevin hauled the old living room furniture up to the lookout tower, and loaded the other old furniture into their truck for delivery to the embryonic women's shelter she'd heard about last week. She couldn't wait to tell Tony all about how great the suite looked now that it was painted and had its new furniture.

That call had to wait, though. It was time to call Michael - at work, since he didn't want her calling the apartment. He answered right away. "Yeah?"

"Hi, Michael."

"Britt! Coming down soon?"

She should just ignore his question and go into her planned speech, but she had to ask, "Do you miss me?"

"Jesus, what a question! Of course I miss you." Then, destroying any illusion she might have had that anything had changed, he said, "Cyndi can't cook worth a damn, and I'm broke trying to survive on just my measly salary."

As though this discussion hadn't gone on long enough, she said, "I would have thought Cyndi would kick in her share of expenses."

He snorted. "Right. Like her minimum wage job is going to make a big difference in paying the rent. She's a lot easier to get along with than you are, though. I've been thinking - when you come back, I don't want to hear any more of your bitching. You've got a damn good life with me, and I'm sick of your constant complaints. A lot of guys wouldn't sit still for half of what I take, just because I love you."

Anytime before, she would have focused on his final three words and decided he was probably right about the rest of it. She would have tried her hardest to be more understanding and less demanding. Not anymore. "Michael, I'm not coming back. You're not satisfied with our marriage and neither am I, although for very different reasons."

"What's your reason?" he sneered. "Still upset because I've got Cyndi to entertain me while you're gone? Because I'll tell you something - the way you've been drooling over that damn wop all these years, I'd a hell of a lot *prefer* you'd actually done something about it. The way it is, you turn your nose up at everything I do for you - like you think he'd treat you like he did the Ice Queen. Well, I've got a secret for you, Britt baby, you're just a slut, and the real reason he was never interested is 'cause you weren't worth slummin' for."

He might as well have punched her in the stomach. Not that she didn't know his words were true, but she hadn't realized he knew, too. Did everyone know? Was that really why Tony didn't love her?

"Cat got your tongue, baby?" How could she ever have laughed along with his cruel gibes at other people? "Could it be you didn't think I knew why you practically jumped me at that party? I mean, you say like two words to me all evening, and the minute they come waltzing down the stairs, you want to do it? But hey - I didn't mind, and I still wouldn't, if you'd just accept that I'm the best you can get. I'm damn sick of coming in second to a teenage fantasy."

She held her hand tightly over her mouth until the urge to answer his charges subsided. She shouldn't have let him get started. But at least, he'd proven he hadn't changed in the last two weeks. She'd get on with the purpose for this call. "Michael, I want a divorce." She raised her voice because it sounded like he was getting ready to argue. "I can't file the papers until July, but all I want is my car and the clothes and personal things I left in the apartment."

"A divorce? Jesus, you're a vindictive bitch! What the hell does it matter to you if I've got Cyndi, anyway?" He sounded disgusted, but not eye-bulging angry yet.

"I'm not being vindictive, Michael. The truth is that you and I don't have very much in common. If you really think about it, I think you'll agree that we haven't been happy together for a long time." She probably should mention her business, but that wasn't why she was making this decision, so she decided not to.

"It's your own damn fault - you're fucking impossible to please! I oughta just let you go and do it, and see how lost and miserable you end up. But hey, if I say I'm sorry about Cyndi, is that gonna fix things?"

"No, Michael. There's nothing you can say that'll fix things. I've made my decision, and I'm sad about it, but that's the way it has to be." This wasn't quite as hard to say as she'd expected, and she was not at all tempted to change her mind.

"Well, fine then," he snarled. "You go get your asinine divorce, but don't come crawling back to me later. And don't be expecting to get any of your crap back, either. Cyndi and I'll have a nice little bonfire this weekend, and burn up every last bit of it. Maybe we'll stuff some of your old clothes full of newspaper and pretend it's you. Toss you right on top and watch you burn!" He roared with laughter and, just before he hung up, he added, "It'd serve you right. You think you're so damn hot."

Not anymore, she didn't.

CHAPTER NINE

Tony took a long walk after dinner Monday night, just as he'd done almost every night for the last two weeks. The brisk weather didn't bother him, or the occasional raindrops. Newport had an interesting mixture of architectures, and by varying his route each night, he got a chance to enjoy them all.

The Point, the area where his condo was, was one of the older sections of town. A number of the houses dated from the 1720's, and most of them were privately owned and had been meticulously restored. Some were occasionally open for guided tours, when newcomers gawked at the colonial architecture and gambrel roofs. To Tony, one of the more noticeable aspects of the neighborhood was how close the houses were to one another. Driveways and garages existed a few places, but more often, it was house after house packed together, with no front or side yards.

His condo was in a converted brick schoolhouse, and what had once been a schoolyard was now a small parking lot for residents. Part of the charm of the place to him was the juxtaposition of old and new. The

building dated from the mid-nineteenth century, yet the interior was full of modern conveniences. He wouldn't have wanted to do without multiple bathrooms, a dishwasher and microwave, and loads of electrical outlets, but he didn't like the anonymity of the houses in the development where Robbie lived, so this was perfect for him.

South and west of his condo was Goat Island, a narrow island connected to Newport by a short bridge. A large resort hotel, a marina, and assorted condos filled most of the island, but the part he loved best was the small lighthouse at the northern tip. It was called the Green Light, and it didn't flash like most lighthouses. It simply burned with a steady green light. He often watched it from somewhere along Washington Street, the street two blocks from his condo. Washington ran along the edge of Narragansett Bay, from the north end of Newport Harbor to Newport Bridge. From there, he could stare across less than a hundred yards of placid water at the lighthouse.

Tonight was his night to call Brittany, and he stayed out walking until he thought she'd be through with dinner and whatever project she'd been involved in today. He was anxious to hear about her second weekend at the Inn on the Hill. Last week, he hadn't been sure she still liked the idea of running a B&B after discovering the type of work involved. If she seemed less than enthusiastic tonight, he'd have to ask her straight out. He didn't want to force her into a line of work she wouldn't enjoy.

When she answered the phone, she sounded depressed, but cheered up when he asked about the weekend. "It was a lot easier this time to climb all those stairs, and I finally got the hang of making beds and cleaning toilets efficiently. The best part, though, was when people checked in and Phyllis gave them her welcome speech. I kept imagining how great it'll be when I can do that for Martha's Madness! Do you realize it's less than three weeks away?"

"I hadn't thought about it, but you're right. Will you be ready?"

"I'm pretty sure I will. The painting should be done this week - and I almost forgot to tell you, the furniture came today!"

"How does it look?" He'd been amazed at the store by how well she'd seemed to visualize the furniture in place. He could only judge each piece of furniture on its own, and had no idea what would look good together, or in the setting of Martha's Madness.

Her answer came in an enthusiastic rush of words. "It's gorgeous! Thank you so much for talking me into doing the whole place right away. It was absolutely the right move. That little table fits in front of the window in the suite, just like I thought it would, and - well, you'll just have to see it for yourself."

He smiled to himself. What a perfect opening. "Would this coming weekend be good?"

"For what?"

"For me to visit - and maybe the weekend after that, too. I'm spending next week at that distributor I told you about." Often, the initial meetings took more than one week, since he'd need to examine all phases of their operation as well as discussing possible terms for the deal. He wouldn't mention that now, since he didn't want either of them to be disappointed if his meetings finished more quickly than usual.

"Tony, that's wonderful! I know you said you might be able to come back soon, but I didn't really expect it to happen. When will you get here?"

"I haven't made any arrangements yet, but I thought I'd try to fly out on Friday. I'll drive down the coast on Sunday, so I'd just be there two nights. Will there be a room I can sleep in?"

"I think all the guest rooms will be finished by then, so you can have your choice." She gave a small squeal of delight. "This is exciting! I'm really looking forward to having you see the changes."

"Me, too." And he was looking forward to seeing Brittany again, even though their relationship wasn't all he wished it would be. "I'll let you know what time I'll be there when I call on Thursday."

"Great."

He ought to just say goodbye now and hang up, but he wasn't ready to let go yet. "Is everything okay, Britt? You sounded kind of down earlier."

She made a noise somewhere between a gasp and a moan. "Yeah, I guess I am a little down, but it's stupid. I should be relieved that I finally decided to divorce Michael - and I am - but then I called him earlier and . . ."

She was going to divorce Michael? His mind said it was about time, but his gut understood the situation better. "You're having second thoughts. That's natural, and so is being really sad. Even if you haven't been getting along recently, you've been through a lot together and quite a bit of it was good."

"No, I'm not really having second thoughts." Her voice was thin and wispy. "I guess I wonder why I stayed this long - or why I ever got involved with him in the first place. He says and does the most horrid things, and then he acts like I'm crazy if I object."

His sense of fairness made him ask, "He wasn't always that way, was he?"

She sighed. "No, I guess not, at least not as much."

He didn't know if she was ready to hear his advice, but he'd try. "Britt, I know this is a real hard time for you, and please believe that I'll do anything I can to help you. But from experience, I've got to say that I don't think it helps in the long run to second-guess your whole marriage. It's probably safe to say that both of you have made some mistakes, and maybe even some gigantic ones, but none of that matters anymore. If you're serious about the divorce, then the best thing you can do is move forward with your own life. Try to learn from your mistakes, sure, but don't get caught reliving them or assigning blame."

She was quiet for a minute before saying, "I guess you're right. I hadn't thought about it like that." Her voice was muffled, as though she felt scolded.

"I didn't mean to sound harsh. It's just that I've been where you are. I spent a lot of time hating myself for asking Carolyn to marry me, for example. I knew at the time that she loved me more like a brother than anything else. But I figured we had more going for us than a lot of other couples, and that we'd be able to make it work."

"And you did. Until she met Scott."

He shook his head, despite the fact that she couldn't see him. "Not really. We stayed together, sure, and we were okay. But every time I came back from a trip, it was like she'd faded away a little more. She wasn't the real Carolyn anymore by the end." Just like Brittany hadn't been the real Brittany when he saw her at the wedding last month. He couldn't say that to her right now, but he could try to help her see.

"With us, what happened was that we tried so hard to get along perfectly that we gave up everything we couldn't share. Like I stopped sailing, because that would take time away from us being together, and I was already away so much. And she almost let my family pressure her into having a baby, even though the idea scared her to death."

"But she married Scott, and he has a child." Like everyone else, she missed the crucial difference

between situations.

"Rachel isn't a baby, and Carolyn didn't have to carry her for nine months, give birth to her, and nurse her. And maybe she'll be ready to do that someday, but she certainly wasn't when we were married. But the point I'm making is that she and I weren't really right for each other, and I knew it instinctively before I proposed. And for a long time after we split up, I blamed myself for the whole thing. If I hadn't been so selfish, I would have faced reality and just let our relationship die a natural death."

"But that's stupid!" she protested. "You can't know that things would be any better if you'd done that!"

He chuckled. "Exactly, Britt. That's why it's silly for you to worry about why you got involved with Michael, or when he started being difficult."

She groaned. "Okay. I get the point."

Unfortunately, he knew that she'd continue to wonder what had happened, long after it ceased to have any real meaning. He still did.

**

Brittany did her best to apply Tony's advice all night, and it worked well enough to let her sleep a fair amount. She couldn't forget about Michael calling her a slut, though, and saying that was why Tony didn't want her. She'd tried so hard to hide her past from everyone at Brown, and she'd thought she'd succeeded.

But then she realized that Michael didn't have to know the truth to call her a slut. He was big on labeling people hurtfully - his Ice Queen and Crown Prince nicknames were proof of that - and he might simply be referring to the way she had sex with him the night they met.

After Tony had fallen for Carolyn and Brittany had given up on him, he'd asked Carolyn to a party some off-campus friends were having one night. It was their first date, and Brittany should have known better than to tag along just because they invited her. But Carolyn had looked kind of scared - she'd apparently had virtually no experience with dating in high school - and Tony had seemed to want her to come along, too. Michael was a cousin of the host and rode to the party with them, but they hadn't known him before that.

The party was in a big sprawling house, and beer and joints were plentiful. Brittany, as an unescorted female, had plenty of guys hanging around her the whole evening, but she still noticed Tony and Carolyn heading upstairs. She later learned that the whole thing was Carolyn's idea - she wanted to get rid of her virginity and trusted Tony to take care of her. At the time, she didn't know what to think, and watched the stairs anxiously for what seemed like hours. Finally they appeared, and she knew what they'd been doing by Carolyn's embarrassed but pleased expression and Tony's protective possessiveness.

Brittany wanted to hate both of them, but she couldn't fault Tony for being entranced by Carolyn's innocent charm, or Carolyn for grabbing onto a guy as special as Tony. She hated herself, instead, for being an idiot when she and Tony went out that one time. Their goodnight kiss had been a real doozy, and they both wanted to go further. If she'd just kept quiet a few seconds longer, he would have suggested they go somewhere more private, and she wouldn't have ended up out in the cold. But she'd decided to turn over a new leaf in college. Sex would have to wait until she'd established a relationship.

Well, to hell with that! She looked around the room appraisingly until she spotted Michael. He seemed nice, and a definite cut above the guys who'd been vying for her attention all evening. She walked over to him and flat-out asked him to go upstairs with her. He was glad to comply, and they'd been together ever since.

But that period of her life was over now. She had too much to accomplish in the next days and weeks to waste time and energy on the past.

Especially with Tony coming for the weekend on Friday! It was Tuesday morning now, and while the furniture was here and the painting should be done soon, she hadn't bought the rest of her supplies yet. Sheets, towels, blankets, bedspreads, tablecloths, napkins - and probably a million other things. She'd better get moving.

No time like the present, either. It was only seven-thirty in the morning, so she'd jump right in her car and head for Portland to shop. Actually, she'd better take a change of clothes in case she didn't finish today.

A couple of hours later, she took the exit for Washington Square, a large mall where she and Tony had done some of their furniture shopping. She remembered that he'd pointed out the company where Carolyn worked, and on a whim, she found her way there. She'd been awful to Carolyn ever since she left Tony, and that wasn't fair.

She parked and hurried into the lobby before she had a chance to chicken out. The receptionist looked up and said, "Good morning. May I help you?"

She wet her lips and answered, "Is Carolyn - um, I'm not sure what her last name is - "

"Carolyn Richards, you mean? She used to be Carolyn Kelley."

And before that, Carolyn Fiore. "Yes. Is she in today?"

With a slight wrinkling of the forehead, the woman said, "I'm not sure, but I think so. If you'll give me your name, I'll call her."

"Brittany Stone." Would Carolyn want to see her?

The woman poked a few buttons and spoke softly, then gave Brittany a bright smile. "Carolyn will be right down."

She swiped her damp palms against her jeans and concentrated on looking calm. Maybe she shouldn't have dropped in unannounced like this.

"Brittany!" Carolyn whirled into the lobby and hugged her. "I'm so glad you stopped by - how long are you in town for?"

"Today and maybe tomorrow. I'm shopping at Washington Square, and I remembered that you worked nearby. I thought maybe we could meet for lunch later."

Carolyn sagged into a handy chair. "Oh, Britt, I wish I could. But we've got some customers coming in from the airport anytime now, and the demo will go through lunch." For the first time, Brittany noticed that Carolyn was wearing an attractive skirt, blouse, and blazer combination - definitely not her normal choice of attire.

She smiled weakly. "Well, that's what I get for not calling first. It was nice to see you, anyway." She took a step toward the door. Maybe she and Carolyn weren't meant to be friends again.

Carolyn frowned in concentration, then brightened. "I know! We'll do something for dinner tonight. Or do you have plans?"

"No, but you're busy. We can see each other another time."

She shook her head. "No, Britt, let's not wait. It's been too long already."

And it had been, she suddenly knew. "You're right. Should I call later to settle on the time?"

Carolyn jumped up and got a piece of paper and a pen. "Let's make it six o'clock, at Scott's - I mean our - house." She scribbled an address, phone number, and rudimentary map on the paper and handed it to Brittany. "It's off Scholls Ferry, no more than a mile from Washington Square, so you shouldn't have any trouble finding it. And why don't you plan on staying in the guestroom? It's very nice, and completely private." She blushed and added, "I mean, unless you'd rather not."

Brittany felt like blushing herself, even though she almost never did. Her disapproval of Carolyn and Scott's marriage must have been pretty obvious at the wedding. "Oh, no. I'd love to." Surprising herself, she meant her words.

A group of people, all but one of them men, came into the lobby then, and Carolyn smiled and nodded at a couple of them. Apparently, these were the customers she was expecting. Britt said, "I'm looking forward to seeing you later," and moved closer to the door.

Carolyn's smile was beautiful in its sincerity and openness. How had Britt ever cut herself off from their friendship? "Me, too."

Shopping wasn't as exhausting as she'd expected, even though she went back and forth between stores multiple times. Part of it was having that nice reassuring checkbook in her purse, and knowing that she'd soon have rental income to deposit into that account. Another part of it was that she didn't have to worry about pleasing Michael with every purchase - he'd never wanted to go shopping with her, but found fault with whatever she bought. But Carolyn was part of it, too. They'd been such close friends through college and for years later. She'd always assumed they'd be friends until the day one of them died.

And then she let self-righteousness rob her of one of her only friends. She thought Carolyn was wrong for leaving Tony - how could she love someone she'd just met more than Tony? And even if she did, how could she stand to hurt Tony so much? Maybe, thanks to Tony's patient explanations, Brittany was finally beginning to understand.

She found the house with time to spare and drove around the neighborhood for a few minutes, not wanting to arrive early. As she rang the doorbell, her stomach jittered anxiously. It wasn't just Carolyn, her long-lost friend whom she'd be dealing with tonight. Scott would be there, too. Scott, the man Carolyn left Tony for, and the man who broke Carolyn's heart by deserting her. Carolyn clearly had forgiven him, but Brittany wasn't sure she could.

The irony - and her presumption - hit her then. Just like she'd spent the last five years angry with Carolyn for hurting Tony, she was angry with Scott for hurting Carolyn. Her anger at both was out of place. They hadn't hurt *her*, and Carolyn wouldn't have married Scott, nor Tony attended their wedding, if their pain was still unresolved. She vowed to stop holding grudges against them.

Carolyn opened the door and pulled her inside. "I'm so glad to see you! Dinner's just a take- and-bake pizza, I hope you don't mind, and Scott took Rachel out so we can have a good visit. Would you like a beer?"

She accepted one and asked, "So, how are you liking being a mother? You never were terribly enthused about kids."

"Oh, Rachel's great. She's five and in kindergarten, and Scott's just the greatest father ever, so it's not that much work for me or anything. And it *has* only been a week since we got back, so things haven't

had a chance to go wrong yet." This nonstop rush of words was more like Brittany than Carolyn, but the complete lack of pretense behind them was vintage Carolyn.

Almost more to enjoy seeing Carolyn blush and squirm than to hear her answer, she said, "So, how was your honeymoon?"

And she *did* blush, including the tips of her ears. "It was *wonderful*." She seemed on the verge of saying more, but after pausing to put the pizza in the oven, she frowned. "Tony said you and Michael are having problems. I'm really sorry."

"Yeah. Me, too. I thought if I just wanted it to work bad enough, it would."

"Sometimes that's not enough." Her voice was quiet, and Brittany knew she was thinking about herself and Tony.

"No, I see that now." Quickly, before she lost her nerve, she said, "Carolyn, I'm sorry for being awful to you all this time. Tony kept telling me that you did everything you could to make it work with him, but I didn't believe him."

"I don't blame you. I know he took it real hard, and there were plenty of times when I wished I'd stayed." She came back to the butcher-block table and sat down. "Luckily, I'd already left by then, and I didn't have the nerve to ask him to take me back. It wouldn't have worked, but sometimes I got so lonely . . ."

Brittany said, "I know what you mean. I told Michael yesterday that I want a divorce."

Carolyn hopped up and hugged her. "Oh, Britt!"

The hug felt wonderful. Brittany wasn't used to going days and weeks without being held, and her emotions immediately threatened to overflow. She refused to break down in tears, so she said, "If you don't mind, I'll go wash up before we eat. I've been shopping all day and I feel kind of grimy."

Carolyn stepped back and said, "The guest room and bath are upstairs, but you can use the bathroom down the hall for now."

Even in the bathroom's relative privacy, she resisted her tears, and instead thought of something she wanted to ask Carolyn. "Promise you'll tell me the complete truth," she said as soon as she was back in the kitchen.

"About what?" Carolyn looked confused. "Did I ever not tell you the truth?"

She shook her head. "Well, no, but you'd try to spare me, if you thought I'd get hurt by the whole truth. And this time, I want the cold hard facts, no matter how awful. Okay?"

"Sure. What about?"

Suddenly, she didn't want to ask. Maybe it was better not to know. No, it wasn't. It was important to know for sure. "Um, I was wondering if Tony ever said why he stopped being interested in me - other than that he was crazy about you, I mean."

Carolyn stared at her for a few seconds, her eyes narrowed in confusion. "He didn't say, exactly, but when you weren't interested in him, I guess he figured he was wasting his time. And I don't buy the 'crazy about me' part - I was just handy."

It was Brittany's turn to stare now. "What gave you the idea I wasn't interested?"

Carolyn blushed. "That's what Tony told me. When he asked me to go to that party with him, I said no because he was your boyfriend. And he said you weren't interested in him that way. I wasn't sure whether to believe him at first, and he said I should ask you."

"You said he'd asked you out and you wanted to know what I thought."

She nodded. "Yeah. And you said to go for it, that he was a real nice guy. Of course, I already knew that part." Her mouth dropped open. "You mean you were still interested in him back then? Why didn't you say something?"

"What was I supposed to say? Don't go out with him because I want him?" She paused, reminding herself that all this had happened fifteen years ago and there was no need to get upset about it now. "I don't know why he said I wasn't interested in him, because that's not true. The thing was, I could see him falling for you, big-time, so I knew it was only a matter of time before he got around to asking you out. I'm sure he felt funny about switching roommates in the middle like that, so maybe that's why he said what he did."

"But he should have told the truth!" Carolyn looked furious for a few seconds, then skeptical. "I still don't buy the thing about him falling for me back then. I mean, sure, after we'd been together a while - " The timer went off, and she ran to take the pizza out of the oven.

While she buzzed around setting the table and cutting the pizza, Brittany realized that there was no point in discussing this further. Carolyn didn't know what had happened, any more than she did. If she really wanted to know the truth, she'd have to ask Tony.

She changed the subject to Martha's Madness, a subject she could expound on for hours. Details about running a B&B kept popping into mind, and Carolyn seemed fascinated by the ones she shared. While they were taking care of the dishes, Carolyn said, "You're going to be great, you know. I'd go bananas making fancy breakfasts and being sociable all the time, but not you. And that house sounds super, too. Maybe we can stop by sometime when we're staying at the Worthingtons' place south of Cannon Beach. They're the people whose house we had the wedding at - Rachel's grandparents, and Seth is Scott's and my boss, but they treat Scott like a son."

Brittany suddenly grinned. "I've got a great idea! How about coming out for the weekend - not this weekend, but the one after? I have to practice being a hostess, because we open for business the following weekend, and the place is going to be full. Tony's supposed to be there, but just one guest isn't much like a whole houseful. You and Scott and Rachel could have the suite, with your own bathroom and a combination sitting room/child's bedroom."

Carolyn took a few seconds to answer. "Are you sure you want us?"

"Sure." But what about Tony and Scott? "Unless you think Scott and Tony might feel uncomfortable about the situation."

"I'll check with both of them and then call you."

Brittany nodded. It was nice to be friends again.

CHAPTER TEN

Tony had learned to relax while traveling over the years. He allowed himself plenty of time on both ends and didn't rush. He read a good book and tried as much as possible to focus on the here-and-now, not his destination.

Yet, here he was, checking his watch every few minutes the whole way cross-country, counting down the hours and minutes until he saw Brittany. He was also anxious to see how the new furniture and paint had changed Martha's Madness, but Brittany was the real attraction. She'd sounded so excited last night, the enthusiasm pouring unabated through the phone line. Not that he would have been any less thrilled about seeing her if he expected her to be depressed . . .

The delay getting through the airport construction to his rental car was infuriating, but the car they assigned him was a pleasure to drive. He didn't hit any traffic tie-ups through the metro Portland area. The road over the Coast Range was dry, so he made good time and pulled into the gravel parking area in front of Martha's Madness just about three o'clock.

He grabbed his bag, leaving his briefcase in the trunk, and rang the doorbell. Brittany answered within moments, and her smile made his greeting die unspoken. She wore a pink sundress with a stretchy clingy top, and he could swear she wasn't wearing a bra. Her sandy curls were brushed back and caught somehow behind her back, leaving her neck and shoulders bare.

"Welcome back to Martha's Madness, Mr. Fiore. I hope your trip went well?" Her eyes were sparkling, and he realized she was playing a role.

He nodded, not able to speak yet.

"That's great. I'm Brittany Stone, your hostess, in case you don't remember."

"I remember," he managed.

"Please come in, Mr. Fiore. Now, you'll see that we're undergoing some renovations, so I'll apologize for any inconvenience right off the bat. Only one guestroom is currently ready for occupancy, so you'll be the only guest this weekend. I hope you won't mind."

"I won't mind." Definitely not.

She led him into the living room, and he was amazed to see that the new furniture fit perfectly. Not only that, it looked like it had been there for years. "Since we've made some changes since you were here before, I'll go over the house rules and so forth quickly. Normally, we ask people to be quiet if they come in after eleven at night, but since it'll just be the two of us this weekend, I don't think you need to worry about that."

She crossed the living room and entered the dining room. "Our breakfast buffet is available between eight-thirty and ten each morning. When you come in, you should find plates and everything else you need right on the sideboard there, but don't hesitate to let me know if you need anything else. I'll probably be right through there, in the kitchen." She pointed at the swinging door between rooms, exactly as though he'd never been in the house before. "I don't know if you're an early riser, but I put out coffee, muffins, and fruit at seven, and I keep the coffee hot until noon."

"You don't need to go to all that trouble for just me."

She gave him a brilliant smile. "No trouble at all, Mr. Fiore. Now, let's go upstairs. I'm sure you're anxious to get situated in your room."

He walked behind her, admiring her shapely legs. They were bare, and he was tempted to see if he could peek up her flowing skirt. She must be wearing *something* under that dress!

The first room upstairs had a key dangling in a lock that hadn't been there three weeks ago. It also had a sign with the word "Rose" on it. "As I said, this is the only guest room that's finished." She unlocked and

opened the door, then gestured for him to precede her.

It was a far cry from the room he'd stayed in before. The walls were a delicate shade of rose and the furniture was different, but he'd expected that. What he hadn't expected was for the whole feel of the room to be different. This wasn't a almost-never-used guestroom; it was a home-away-from-home. "This is great!"

"I'm glad you like it. Your bath towels are here on this rack, and there's already a hand towel for you in the bathroom." She crossed the hall and stepped into the bathroom. He followed. "The rose towel by the sink is yours, and we'll replace it with a fresh one in the morning. That shelving unit over in the corner is for guests to use, and the shelf that's painted rose is reserved for you." The other shelves were yellow, orange, and beige. She smiled again. "Is there anything I can do for you right now? Otherwise I'll let you unpack."

He suddenly realized she wasn't wearing her engagement and wedding rings anymore. She had to know how luscious she looked in that dress, so maybe he dared take a slight risk. If it didn't work out, he could pretend it was all part of the roles they were playing. "Well, Ms. Stone, I can't help noticing that you have things nicely color-coded here, and my color is rose. Your dress seems to be about that same color, so I was wondering - do you come with my room?"

She was shocked, no doubt about it. Her eyes opened wide and she stared at him blankly. He wasn't even sure if she was still breathing. He forced a laugh. "I guess not. I hope I didn't offend you too badly, Ms. Stone. I suppose there's no chance you'll let me buy you dinner to apologize for my rudeness?"

She stared at him for a moment, then gave him a cool smile. "I'm sorry, Mr. Fiore. My business partner's in town for a brief visit, and I'll be tied up in a meeting all evening." She retreated into the hall. "Please let us know if there's any service we can provide."

"Where and when is your meeting? I wouldn't want to wander in accidentally."

With her smile threatening to turn into a grin, she answered, "That's very considerate of you. We're meeting in the lookout tower - " She glanced at her watch. "About half an hour from now." And she scurried downstairs.

He unpacked with the familiarity of long experience. He knew to hang his suits and dress shirts immediately, and was pleased to discover plenty of high-quality hangers in the closet. He didn't need them for himself, but not everyone who'd stay here would have learned how rarely good ones were provided in hotels.

As a test, he flopped down on the bed - it gave with his weight, but had a pleasantly sturdy feel - and reached to turn on the light on the bedside table. No unwieldy contortions were required, and he had no worry that he'd be dumped unceremoniously on the floor before he could fumble for the switch. The bed was covered with a quilt using rose and off-white as its dominant colors. So far, this was a place to come back to, even if he hadn't been a part owner.

He finished unpacking and went into the bathroom to wash up. He placed his shaving kit on the shelf she'd indicated and wiped his hands on the rose hand towel.

On the way back to his room, he detoured into the suite. It looked great. He'd wondered whether all the doors - the new suite door, the sitting room door, the bedroom door, and the private bathroom door - would prove to be a logistical mess, but they didn't. There was enough space in the area that used to be part of the hallway for all the doors to stand completely open without interfering with any other. Even if the doors were all left partially open, there was no problem.

Brittany had been right about the sitting room. The small glass-topped table fit perfectly in front of the window, and its intimacy made him yearn to sit there dawdling over breakfast with his lady-love. He turned away from the reminder of what he was missing, and looked into the bedroom.

He knew from talking to Brittany that this was "The Seashell Suite" and that the walls were a color called seashell. To his eyes, though, it looked more like beige with a slight hint of pink. The bed wasn't made and it was obvious Brittany hadn't even started to decorate the room.

He stuck his head into "The Sunshine Room" and "The Tangerine Room" and decided he liked the colors she'd chosen, but those rooms were incomplete, too. He headed upstairs, even though it hadn't been half an hour since Brittany left him. The old living room sofa was in the middle of the basically square lookout tower, and it was a vast improvement over the beanbag sofa, both in terms of looks and comfort.

The sun had come out while he was downstairs, and the water sparkled with an intensity that was rare in Newport. He wasn't used to having such a wide sweep of shoreline to watch, either, so didn't know where to focus his gaze. In reality, he couldn't look for long at any one spot, because the sunshine reflected off the water with a brilliance that hurt his eyes.

The beach was flat and sandy in both directions as far as he could see, but they were far enough from the public beach access in downtown Myrtle Beach that no strollers were visible. As spring progressed into summer, he felt sure that the beach would no longer be deserted. Maybe he should feel sorry for the loss of privacy for Martha's Madness and her guests, but he didn't. Such a beautiful beach should be enjoyed.

He hoped he hadn't upset Brittany earlier. She'd seemed okay when she told him about their business meeting, but she was more fragile than he'd thought all these years. Maybe she'd forgotten about that one date they'd had and assumed he'd done the same. It might not have occurred to her that he was a man and she a very attractive woman.

He'd better be especially careful with her this weekend. Their friendship was something he couldn't afford to lose.

**

Brittany took one last look at herself in the full-length mirror. Yes, this dress made her look hot, and apparently Tony agreed. Except he probably didn't really care what the answer was to his question, and she'd undoubtedly made a fool of herself by taking him seriously for even a second. Thank heavens Tony had laughed when he did. Otherwise, she would have said something idiotic like "If you want me to" and they'd have been stuck in awkwardsville forever.

She slipped off her sandals and went to the kitchen to finish preparing the tray. She had a nice bottle of champagne - nothing too expensive, but not the cheapest stuff, either - and a platter of prawns with cocktail sauce and crackers ready to take upstairs. They'd toast their business venture, and if she was very, very lucky, maybe something more personal might develop.

She paused at the top of the stairs to take a deep breath before stepping into the lookout tower. Tony was already there, right up next to the glass wall looking out at the beach. He was wearing jeans today, and they fit perfectly - not skin-tight, but not loose, either. If their relationship was different, and if her hands weren't full with this tray, she'd walk up behind him and slip her hands into his back pockets.

He turned then, and when their eyes met, her knees started to wobble. She licked her lips and stayed right where she was. She couldn't possibly manage the few feet to the table right now. It was all she could do to say the words she'd planned earlier. "Want some champagne, partner?"

It took him a while, but he finally said, "That sounds good." He crossed the room and took the tray from her, setting it down on the table. "Should I open it?"

"Sure." She certainly wouldn't want to attempt anything that required coordination right now. Simply taking the last few steps to stand next to him was tough enough. "The glasses are right there, too." Of course, he had eyes, so that shouldn't be a surprise to him.

He wasn't any too calm himself. His fingers slipped while untwisting the little wire basket that covered the cork, and the cork flew across the room when it popped out.

She concentrated on not dropping her glass when he handed it to her. She raised her glass to his and said, "Here's to Martha's Madness Bed & Breakfast." They clinked glasses lightly and drank. The champagne tingled in her mouth and seemed to evaporate on the way down her throat, and every place it touched felt cool and moist.

"And here's to my lovely partner, who's done miracles over the last few weeks." He looked right into her eyes and took a sip.

"And to you, because I never could have done this without your support." A second sip for her.

He shook his head. "That's not true. You could have managed without my money. It's your drive and imagination that are making this fly, Britt."

She took a gulp this time and broke eye contact. "I mean your moral and emotional support. If you hadn't been here right after the wedding, I would have packed up and gone to California like Michael wanted."

He put his hand on her arm. "I didn't mean for you to do anything you didn't want to."

"I didn't." She struggled to put her feelings into words. "It's just that I wouldn't have thought twice about it. I was so used to going along with Michael that I never realized I had a choice. But then you and I spent some time together and it suddenly dawned on me how tense and miserable life with Michael had been for such a long time." And how much better it could be with someone like Tony, but she couldn't say that.

"I never would have seen that, if you hadn't been here and encouraged me. And I'm really grateful for that, because I've got a whole new chance at life now." She peeked up at him and saw a smile start and soon broaden.

"That's another good thing to drink to - new chances." They drank, emptying their glasses. "Time for a refill - these are great glasses, by the way. I love the hollow stems."

While he poured, she explained, "They're from the saloon my great-great-grandfather had around the turn of the century. The glass itself isn't very high quality, but the way the champagne keeps bubbling up through the middle all the time is what I think is so neat. Aunt Martha had these glasses packed away in one of the boxes I've been going through lately."

"I can't believe everything you've accomplished in less than three weeks." He moved to the sofa and sat.

Her legs felt less rubbery, but she was glad for the chance to sit, too. "Don't forget that Fred and Kevin have done a lot. Angela helps out, too."

He nodded. "Yes, but you're the one who made my room seem homey and comfortable. Even up here, I can see that you've been busy." He reached to one side and picked up a small pillow she'd bought earlier in the week. "This, for example. It wasn't on the sofa when it was in the living room, but it makes this

boring upholstery come to life."

"You're very observant." She'd never realized that about him before.

He shrugged the compliment off. "It comes in handy in business."

Well, it was now or never, and never was a very long time. "Tony, Carolyn and I were talking the other day, and I'm a little confused about something."

"Something I can clear up for you, you mean?"

She nodded. "If you'll be completely honest with me."

He looked a little alarmed, and his agreement sounded cautious. "Okay."

"I guess it seems kind of silly, but I've been thinking a lot about Brown recently - you and Carolyn, me and Michael, stuff like that."

"It doesn't seem silly to me. You're wondering why things didn't turn out like you'd hoped back then."

"Right." More so than he realized. "And it occurred to me that I don't know why we stopped dating - you and I, I mean."

His forehead wrinkled and he almost looked annoyed. "Because you stopped being interested."

"Carolyn said that's what you told her, but it's not true and you know it."

"It certainly *is* true. You weren't even bothering to stick around when I was there anymore." His annoyance was plain now.

She leaned over and set her glass down, angry that he'd try to lie his way out of this. If this was how he treated her when he promised to be completely honest, maybe he wasn't as wonderful as she'd always thought. "I didn't stick around, Tony, because I'd had all I could stand of you trying to pretend that you weren't crazy about Carolyn. Maybe you felt kind of funny that you'd asked me out first, but didn't you think I'd notice the way you were with her?"

"How I was? I liked her and enjoyed talking to her, but that's it." He challenged, "If it wasn't okay to be friendly with your roommate, you should have told me."

"Being friendly is one thing - hanging on her every word and practically drooling on her is another!"

He stared at her incredulously. "You thought I was attracted to her - as more than a friend, I mean?"

She forced her jaw muscles to relax. "Of course. And I was right - as soon as I stepped out of the way, you made your move." With a jolt, she remembered her original purpose. "But that's okay. Maybe things wouldn't have worked for us, anyway. The part that bugs me is that I don't know why it happened."

He looked at her steadily for several seconds, then seemed to come to a decision. "I'm telling the truth. I wanted you so bad I couldn't stand it, but at the same time I really liked you and I wanted to do things the right way. I didn't want to be like all the other guys I figured you'd known - the guys whose approach to relationships is to say, 'If I said you have a beautiful body, would you hold it against me?' The ones who only cared about getting you into bed with them."

He suddenly drained his glass and set it down. "Don't get me wrong. I wanted that, too. You're the embodiment of every fantasy I've ever had. But I wanted more. I wanted to know what you were like

inside, and what you thought about things. And I was scared, because you seemed too good to be true. If by some miracle, you were for real, then I was *really* in trouble, because I didn't deserve anybody as wonderful as you."

He seemed so sincere and honest. Could his story actually be true? She desperately wanted to think that her feelings for him were reciprocated, but she didn't dare believe it. "But you never even asked me out, after that one time. Why not, if what you're saying is true?"

"Because I was a horny bastard. I knew better than to trust myself alone with you. You were right that night. We were moving way too fast, and I knew it would be the same story the next time we went out. When we were in public or in your dorm room and Carolyn was there, it was safe. We could talk and get to know each other without danger of ending up in bed."

"Why was it important to avoid that? You weren't against premarital sex, and I certainly wasn't." She'd been determined to wait a while, but he hadn't known that.

It took him longer to reply this time, and when he did, he didn't seem very sure of his answer. "Maybe because I thought sex would short-circuit the whole process, and make our relationship like all the ones I'd had before - completely one-sided and based entirely on sex. And another thing was that talking to you and Carolyn was really interesting."

"At least, talking to her was. You asked her ten questions for every one you asked me." Until she said those words, she didn't realize how much that had always bothered her.

He laughed. "You're not going to hold that against me, are you? Stop and think what you two were like back then. Carolyn didn't talk much, and you made up for her share. If I hadn't asked her a lot of questions, she would have been perfectly content to sit there listening quietly all evening."

She had to admit he was right. Except when Carolyn got super-curious about something and asked enough questions about it to drive a person to distraction, she tended to be a listener. "But that still doesn't explain what happened later. You said you liked her and enjoyed talking with her, but you've got to admit you felt - and still feel - something more than that."

He grimaced and, after a moment, got up and went to stare out the window. "This is tricky, Britt. I want to be completely honest with you, because it sounds like we made a big mistake by not doing that before. But I really don't want to bring my relationship with Carolyn into the mix, either. That's totally separate."

"I guess I can see that. What if I ask something else, instead? Like what do you think would have happened back then, if I hadn't started leaving you two alone after dinner?"

He answered immediately, "If you'd waited one more day, I would have asked you out again. I had it all planned and everything - dinner and a drive . . . But you disappeared right after Psych class, and after dinner, too, so I never got the chance." His back was to her, but his posture seemed stiff.

It suddenly occurred to her that she'd been asking all the questions. He had no way of knowing how she'd felt when she thought he preferred Carolyn. "I didn't want to do that, but I figured you must be sick of me horning in all the time with her. And I could see how somebody like you would find her attractive. She was so unspoiled - still is, for that matter - and so completely unable to play games. Every time you were around, I'd watch you, and I'd see how you paid such careful attention to her, and how mesmerized you were when she blushed so intensely. I'd analyze the whole evening later, and I'd look for things indicating you might still be attracted to me, and I wouldn't find any."

"You missed a bunch, believe me." Much more softly, he continued, "And you have been ever since,

too."

A rock landed in the pit of her stomach. He really *did* care! She moved up next to him at the window, and put her hand on his arm. "I sure hope you think we know each other well enough by now, because fifteen years is about my limit."

Some of the tension dissipated out of him and he turned toward her, smiling. "You have a beautiful body."

She smiled back at him. "I'll hold it against you, all you want." And then she did.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tony floated happily, entwined with Brittany, content beyond imagination. He was glad now they'd come downstairs to her bedroom. It had seemed so far, such a long time not to hold her or kiss her. But that brief separation meant it would be all that much longer before he had to let go of her again.

He'd been right all those years ago. Making love with Brittany was unlike any experience he'd ever had. She gave of herself generously, without limitation, while at the same time she took with equal fervor.

She nestled close now, wearing only a soft, satisfied smile, one hand lazily exploring his chest. Her body felt completely natural leaning against him, like she'd been there every day for the last fifteen years. Only his mind knew the difference.

He wanted to thank her, except it would sound wrong, like he was thanking her for performing a service. She'd taken a chance today, a chance he'd been too scared to even consider taking. He hugged her closer and said, "I'll tell you something, Britt. That was far and away the best business meeting I've ever attended."

He felt her laugh, and she squirmed out of his embrace and lay flat on top of him, her face less than an inch from his. "I've got news for you, partner. That was only the first agenda item." She punctuated her sentence with a quick kiss to the corner of his mouth.

"Oh, good. Long meetings are so much fun." He kissed her, loving the way her mouth felt incredibly alive on his. She tasted of champagne, and champagne's sparkles were a pale imitation of the sparkles he felt when kissing her.

Much later, she slipped out of bed. He assumed she'd gone into the bathroom until she returned, carrying the remains of their champagne and the platter of jumbo shrimp. "I thought we could use some dinner."

"Maybe later. Come back to bed first." He reached out lazily for her arm.

She eluded his grasp, then approached him a few moments later, a cocktail-sauced prawn aimed right at his mouth. He opened wide and bit down, leaving just the tail gripped in her fingers. While he chewed, she said, "See? You're hungry." She picked up another prawn and popped it in her own mouth.

He swung his feet out of bed and stood up. Casually, he dipped a prawn into the sauce, picking up as much sauce as he could. With his other hand, he shoved Brittany onto the bed and straddled her narrow hips. "I'm hungry, all right. For this - " He swiped the prawn across her cheek, leaving a trail of sauce. "And this - " Her mouth, this time. "And this and this and this and this - " He painted sauce on her neck, her breasts, her stomach, her shoulders - any part of her he could reach. When all the sauce was used up, he fed her the prawn and proceeded to lick up every last bit of sauce. She giggled at first, but soon joined in the fun. They ran out of cocktail sauce before long, but it didn't really matter.

They fell asleep hours later, and in the morning, he awakened in bed alone. He looked around the room quickly. Yes, he was in Britt's room. He hadn't dreamed the whole thing, as amazing and fantasy-like as the night had been.

He dressed and went to the kitchen. As he'd suspected, she was making breakfast. "You don't need to do that."

She glanced over her shoulder at him. "I don't? I'm running a bed-and-breakfast, Mr. Fiore, and that means breakfast is customarily served. I'm running a bit late this morning - "

He cut in with, "Yes, I know how those business meetings drag on and on sometimes."

"I wouldn't exactly say this one dragged . . ." He couldn't see her face, but it didn't sound like she was wearing the dreamy grin he didn't seem able to wipe off his own face. "In any case, Mr. Fiore, I'll ask you to go into the dining room and pour yourself a cup of coffee and eat a muffin. The rest of the meal will be ready soon. The morning paper from Portland is on the table."

That professional voice and attitude again. He'd like to think it was simply more of her playacting, practicing for her real debut as a hostess. But after last night, it could mean so much more. If it did, he wasn't ready to hear it. He slipped into his own role. "Whatever you say, Ms. Stone."

There was a promising sign in the dining room - two plates, napkins, and sets of silverware were stacked on the sideboard. He hoped that meant she'd be joining him for the meal. He read the paper with more enthusiasm than usual, hoping to distract himself from the suddenly-real possibility that Britt was sorry for going to bed with him. The diversion didn't work particularly well, but it filled in the time until she pushed through the doors from the kitchen, carrying a bowl of scrambled eggs and a plate of bacon.

She apologized as she set the food down. "Normally, I'll serve fancier food than this on weekends, and in any case, people can have hot or cold cereal if they'd rather. I kind of thought you wouldn't mind, though, and the recipes I'm using make too much for just us."

"This is a lot more than I was expecting. You're going to eat, too, aren't you?" He had to ask, because she was still standing next to the table.

She seemed startled by his question. "Sure. Just - well, you help yourself first."

He did, and she took a little food and started pushing it around on her plate. "You usually have a bigger appetite than that in the morning."

She confessed, "I ate a couple of muffins when I first got up, so I'm not that hungry anymore. I guess the thing for me to do in general is eat early, before I get busy making breakfast for the guests."

"That makes sense, if you're hungry that early." He ate another couple of bites, amazed at the strain something so wonderful was putting on their friendship.

"Um, Tony - I wanted to say that last night doesn't need to change things for us." She cut off a laugh, almost before it started. "Well, I guess it *did* change things, but what I mean is that we can keep on being just friends, if that's what we want."

He wanted to pretend that she wasn't talking about this, but he couldn't do that to her. He'd survived losing Carolyn; he could probably survive this. "I certainly want to stay friends, but what do you mean by 'just'?"

"I mean we don't have to have sex anymore - if we don't want to, that is." Her nervousness might be

amusing in another situation, but the way she kept darting glances at him this morning made him feel like an insensitive brute.

"Of course we don't, Britt." Still, he had to hear her say the words. "If you'd rather not, just tell me and we'll pretend it never happened." He wouldn't actually do that, but he'd never let her know it.

Her eyes opened wider than he'd ever seen them and she shook her head. "Oh, no. I - I just thought that maybe you were feeling like I pressured you last night, and I know you wouldn't tell me . . ."

He relaxed enough to smile and take her hand in both of his. "You didn't pressure me. In fact, I've been thinking how incredibly lucky I am. I've wanted to be with you ever since I met you, and getting to know you and care about you has only made my feelings more intense. I just didn't think you had any interest in me that way, and I would never have dared ask."

She frowned slightly. "But why not? Even if I felt completely differently about you than I do, I wouldn't have been upset if you asked."

"I was afraid you'd think I had ulterior motives for being friends with you, and you wouldn't ever trust me again."

"Now *that's* silly," she answered firmly, back now to her usual self-confident self. "You have *never ever* done anything that would make me even *think* about not trusting you."

Almost delirious with relief that the crisis was successfully resolved, he grinned. "That's good, because I wouldn't want you to be afraid I'd drop you - " He stood suddenly, picked her up, and started toward the bedroom.

"What are you doing?" She giggled, robbing her question of its intended outrage.

"Taking you back to bed, of course. We never adjourned that meeting."

**

Brittany had never been cherished by a lover before. To even call most of them "lovers" was a triumph of euphemism over reality. And while Michael was skilled, inventive, and almost always obliging in bed, she never felt like the center of his universe.

But with Tony, she knew she was. Her happiness, her satisfaction, her preferences were what mattered to him. Every single moment they spent together was special and distinct, and she would remember each one forever. It had been just about thirty-six hours now, and in a way, it felt much longer. But in another, the time passed in a whirl, and he'd be gone before she could impress this wonderful weekend in her memory for all time.

They had much more than a purely physical rapport; although that alone would have been great. Because of his relationship with Carolyn, she'd always thought that Tony must be somehow lacking as a lover. That wasn't the case at all. He made the simplest touch or kiss an event, and she was already addicted to the incredibly special way he made her feel.

Now she lay, nestled in his arms, fighting her body's need for sleep, wanting to be awake for each precious minute with him. He tightened his arms around her and asked, "You're not planning on getting up to make breakfast soon, are you?"

She hadn't even thought of it, but she realized that it was getting to be the right time. If she had a houseful of guests, she'd have to do it. "I don't know. Why?"

"Because I want to sleep for a few hours, but I want you right here next to me the whole time. Will you promise to stay?"

How could she refuse? She didn't ever want to leave his side. But the devil in her made her reply, "What if I won't?"

He growled and rolled on top of her. "I'd have to tie you to the bed - and I warn you, my experience as a sailor means that my knots are fool-proof. You'd be completely at my mercy."

Another time, when she wasn't so tired and so dreading his departure, she might push the issue and see what would develop. Not now. "Okay. I promise."

He smiled very solemnly. "Good. I wouldn't want to have to tie up the woman I love."

All traces of exhaustion disappeared. Had he said what she thought he said? That sounded awfully much like a declaration of love, and she couldn't believe he actually meant it. Or maybe he meant the word in a different way than she would have, if she'd said the same thing. But he *did* call her the woman he loved - *the* woman, not *a* woman.

He must have seen her confusion because he said quietly, "I *do* love you, Britt. I think I always have. But I understand you probably - " He broke off, his eyebrows drawn together intently. He shook his head before continuing, "I was going to say that you probably don't feel the same way. But it just dawned on me that we got into trouble before by assuming things about each other."

Her brain felt completely disconnected from the rest of her body. She should be happy - thrilled, in fact. Instead, she stared at him, not able to fully catch her breath. "I love you, too."

Emotion flared in his eyes, telling her without words that he hadn't expected her to respond that way. "God, Britt, I - I've been such a fool all these years. You should hate me for wasting so much of our lives ..."

"You have just as much reason to hate me."

"I'd never hate you! I couldn't!"

"Well, I can't hate you, either." Even when he was busy courting her best friend, doing all the things she secretly wished someone would someday do for her, she couldn't hate him.

She lifted her head off the pillow and kissed him. The kiss spiraled them into the depths of passion again, but deeper this time, into places she'd never suspected the existence of.

When they slept, their souls were as closely intertwined as their bodies.

**

Tony lay in bed refiguring the drive to Coos Bay, dividing the number of miles - something like a hundred and twenty - by an estimate of the average speed he could make - forty, or maybe a little more if he pushed it between towns. That worked out to three hours, except he doubted the trip would be that fast. Driving along any coast rarely was. He'd better allow four hours.

He wanted to spend a couple of hours today getting to know the area around Blackburn Boat Supply, the company Fiore Marine might buy. It was important to do that before dark, so he'd better get down there by five or so.

Since it was noon now, that meant he'd better get his butt moving right this minute, even though Britt was

still asleep next to him. He slipped out of bed cautiously, but she opened her eyes anyway. "You made *me* promise to stay in bed!" she protested.

He felt a thump in the pit of his stomach when he looked at her, a yearning that he needed to ignore. "I'm sorry, Britt. I've got to shower and hit the road."

She looked so sad suddenly that he thought seriously about changing his plans. What would it matter if he drove down there tomorrow instead of today? But it wouldn't be any easier to leave tomorrow.

She sighed and sat on the edge of the bed. "What should I fix you to eat? Do you want a sandwich to eat on the road, or do you have time for something here?"

He couldn't leave her like this. "I've got a better idea. Come join me in the shower."

She started to smile, then hesitated. "But you need to eat . . ."

"I'll take a couple of those wonderful muffins with me. That'll be plenty. Come on." He extended his hand to her, and she took it.

Their shower lasted a lot longer than he'd planned, but the drive went a little quicker than expected, so he still managed his tour of the area before darkness fell. He called Britt as soon as he got to his hotel room, and they talked for a long time about nothing much at all.

He spent the rest of the evening resolutely reviewing all the information they'd been able to assemble on Blackburn Boat Supply. The company was the baby of Glen Blackburn, a second-generation Scot who'd gone into business in the late '50's. Glen had died unexpectedly just before Christmas, leaving behind his second wife and a couple of daughters who lived in the Seattle area.

Glen apparently had the same independent spirit as Grandfather, since he'd shared as little of the control of the company as possible with his employees. Consequently, no one had been prepared to take his place when he died, and the company was slowly losing its way, like a ship without its crew. If no one took over within the next several months, it would probably be too late.

Tony would hate to see that happen. Blackburn Boat Supply was a lot like Fiore Marine, a company that valued its customers and suppliers in an old-fashioned way. Tony had devoted his career to preserving businesses like this one, and giving them the necessary tools to survive in the modern business world of large multi-national corporations.

Each subsidiary of Fiore Marine retained its own name and much of its own identity. Headquarters in Newport provided accounting services and as much of the administrative overhead as made sense, and all subsidiaries offered the same broad range of products to their customers. Tony always claimed that customers would have only pleasant surprises when their distributor became part of the Fiore Marine family. So far, that claim had been challenged a handful of times by unusual situations, and each time, Tony had made everyone involved into a believer. He was confident he could do the same with Blackburn Boat Supply.

On Monday, Tony discovered that his information was correct. The company was basically sound, but lacking direction and focus from its leader. Glen's longtime executive secretary and office manager was keeping things running on a day-to-day basis, but orders were much slower than usual. When Tony talked with customers, he heard concern for the company's future. They wanted to be loyal during this difficult time, but they couldn't afford to ignore their own needs. If Blackburn wasn't going to survive, they needed to establish a relationship with a new distributor - before the summer season hit. Suppliers were concerned, too, although the simple fact that Tony was involved made most of them feel more confident.

Fiore Marine was well-known and highly respected, and their interest in Blackburn gave a measure of trustworthiness to the smaller firm.

Tuesday morning, he got up early to call Robbie in Newport. Robbie reported no problems in the other subsidiaries, but said that Grandmother had asked how long Tony planned to be gone. When Robbie told her a week or possibly two, Grandmother grumbled, "Antonio does not understand. I am an old woman. He needs to find a wife and settle down, not spend all his time gallivanting around the countryside."

He called Grandmother then, knowing it would be foolish to ignore her displeasure. He explained that Blackburn looked like a good acquisition, and that its current state meant that they could get it for a reasonable price. As expected, she was less than enthusiastic.

"Antonio, why do you persist with this mania for expanding? The company is already large enough, and when you take over, Roberto certainly will not be willing to travel constantly to watch over the subsidiaries."

He dropped his head forward onto his chest. How many times had they discussed the same issue? "Robbie won't need to do much traveling. I'm setting things up so they'll be self-sufficient - that's one of the reasons I visit so frequently now. You know all about the networked software we've just installed, and e-mail, and the built-in faxing capability on the PC's everyone has. Besides, I'll still be able to handle some of the trips."

"Such as the ones to Oregon?" Surprise, surprise, she was still annoyed about his business venture with Brittany.

"I told you before, Grandmother. I'll need to visit Martha's Madness a few times a year, but I think that's quite manageable. I could even use some of my accumulated vacation time for those trips." The moment he heard himself say those words, he realized he was in trouble. Deep, deep trouble. He could handle the business issues that way, but what about their personal relationship? He loved Britt, and he would always love her. He couldn't stand for them to be apart almost all the time.

"Just remember your future responsibilities, Antonio, that's all I'm saying." Her voice was suspiciously mild. "I went to see Mrs. Ragazzo after Mass on Sunday. Her granddaughter Rose is still there - so helpful to her grandmother, and such a lovely girl, too." Ah ha! She was matchmaking again.

He'd better be diplomatic about this, or Grandmother would never let him off the phone. "Grandmother, I'm sure she's very nice, but that doesn't make her right for me."

"What do you expect? You want the perfect girl to walk up to you and propose marriage? I tell you, Antonio, the world may be a different place than when I was a young girl and my father and my Antonio's father arranged our marriage - "

He couldn't help himself. He had to ask, "Your marriage was arranged? I thought - Grandfather said he loved you the first moment he saw you . . ."

She snorted. "My Antonio said that, I know. But I do not think he ever saw a woman he did not love. And our fathers had made their plans before we were introduced - do not forget, Warren and Newport were a long distance apart in those days. But what I intended to say, Antonio, before you so rudely interrupted me, was that the world has not changed all that much. It is still the man's responsibility to find the girl he wishes to marry and then court her. You will get nowhere waiting for her to drop into your lap."

"I know that, Grandmother." Although, if you looked at it in a certain way, Brittany had dropped into his lap this weekend.

"Then devote more of your energy to finding a wife and less to expanding the business!" Her point made, she said, "When you come home, I will make you lasagna. Goodbye."

He had no doubt that Rose would "just happen" to be at Grandmother's house when he arrived for her special lasagna. And since she was there, it would only be polite to invite her to stay for dinner. After dinner, Antonio would be ordered to see Rose back to her grandmother's house, even though Mrs. Ragazzo lived less than a block away. Coincidentally, Rose would have made a special dessert for her grandmother that day - one of the tricky Italian desserts Carolyn had never gotten the hang of making - and he would be invited in to sample it. Rose was undoubtedly a wonderful cook, and the whole evening would be carefully plotted out so that Tony would feel like it was his own choice to ask her out for dinner later in the week.

Except he wouldn't do it. Oh, he'd be polite, certainly - he'd been raised that way - but he wouldn't ask Rose out, and he wouldn't accept a later invitation to Mrs. Ragazzo's house for dinner. Tony loved Brittany, and he had no interest in any other woman.

But what was he going to do about it? Britt loved Martha's Madness and Myrtle Beach, and Tony lived all the way across the country from them. He couldn't ask her to give them up, not after the way she'd given up things time and again for Michael. She wouldn't do it, either. And he couldn't quit his job and move to Oregon.

Except maybe he could! What if he bought Blackburn Boat Supply himself, instead of having Fiore Marine buy it? He didn't have the money, but he could sell his condo in Newport for some of the cash he'd need. He should be able to find a bank willing to give him a business loan - marine supply distribution was his field, after all, and he'd done extremely well at it - or perhaps a venture capital firm would be interested in investing.

He could do wonders with a company like Blackburn, and it would be loads of fun. He'd have plenty of time to spend with Brittany, too - although unfortunately it would be exclusively weekends, when she'd be busy with her B&B.

But to do that, he'd have to walk away from Fiore Marine, his birthright. He'd spent all these years working to make it flourish and grow. It seemed wrong to give it all up.

And for what? Brittany said she loved him, and he was sure she did, but what about the future? She was still married to Michael. He couldn't assume she'd want to go right from that into a marriage with him.

His dream last night of her nursing a baby with his dark hair and olive complexion notwithstanding, their life-long happiness was far from assured.

CHAPTER TWELVE

At noon on Friday, Brittany finally forced herself to stop fussing over the guestrooms. She'd done everything she could think of to make them attractive and comfortable, and all she was accomplishing now was making herself frantic with worry. What if she'd forgotten something really basic?

Logically, she knew she hadn't. Tony had been impressed with how Rose looked last weekend, and she'd finished Tangerine and Seashell in basically the same way. Besides, Angela had been over on Wednesday night, and they'd gone over the procedures for cleaning the guestrooms in between guests. They would have noticed if something as important as pillows were missing, and anything less major

would be easy to fix.

The problem was that she had too much time to kill today. Her guests weren't due until late afternoon, and she'd gotten up before sunrise this morning. She wasn't too nervous about Carolyn, Scott, and Rachel coming. Carolyn was her best friend, after all, and Scott seemed much nicer than she'd expected.

It was the Worthingtons who worried her. They were Rachel's grandparents, and apparently almost like parents to Scott. The part that daunted Brittany was that they were frequent travelers who always stayed in the best hotels and resorts. How could a brand-new B&B on the Oregon Coast even hope to compare?

Of course, that was the whole point. They would help her discover what needed changing before she officially opened for business. In her past life in the computer business, she would have termed this weekend a debugging run, and hoped some bugs - problems, in other words - turned up.

But Martha's Madness was a lot more than a house to Brittany, and she was scared that not everyone would love it like she did. And because of that, she was driving herself so crazy with nerves that she couldn't enjoy her incredible luck at being allowed to live here.

That silliness would stop right this minute. She took herself up to the lookout tower and ordered her mind to shut up. The sun was out today, and the lookout tower was bright and warm. She settled on the sofa and stared out at the gentle rhythm of the ocean waves. The water flowed in to shore, and then it retreated, only to advance again. In - out - in - out - the sequence was no different than ever, but somehow it felt new each time she watched it. Had it ever been this exact way before, with the sun turning the water into molten silver while the tops of the waves barely seemed higher than the troughs between them?

The sunshine warmed and comforted her, and she started getting sleepy. She didn't want to actually take a nap, but she was too content to move. And then, one time when she pried her eyes open, Tony was standing there! "Are you real?" she mumbled.

He nodded and sat next to her so he could wrap his arms around her. "I've missed you so much, Britt!"

She smothered him with kisses and swore, "Not as much as I've missed you!" Suddenly, she realized that if he was here, her other guests would be arriving soon, too. "I must have fallen asleep! What time is it?"

He tightened his embrace. "It's only twelve-thirty, sweetheart." He kissed her then - a no-kidding-around kind of kiss.

Her stomach went into free fall and she felt a surge of lust that would have knocked her on her ass if she hadn't already been sitting down. They made love right there, removing only the barest minimum of clothes first.

Later, while his arms still securely surrounded her, he asked, "You want to know something?" She nodded and he continued, "I did something today I've never done before in my whole life. I had this meeting set up for this morning - to go over some of Blackburn's financials with the office manager - and I just canceled it."

"How come?" The feeling in her stomach this time wasn't a pleasant one.

He smiled. "Because when I woke up this morning, I knew I couldn't stand it until I was here with you. So I called her and said I had to change my plans and we'd go over the numbers on Monday."

She'd been right. He was letting their relationship dictate too much of his life. "You shouldn't have done

that."

"Why not? Are you sorry I got here early?" He was practically laughing, knowing she could never say that.

"Of course not, but it's not like you to be irresponsible. Your job is important, and it isn't fair to change your plans at the last minute like that." She was careful not to say what she really meant - that she wasn't worth it.

He frowned slightly, but still seemed amused. "I'd hardly call it irresponsible, especially when I've spent every night this week going over the information I've gotten from them, as well as from the customers and suppliers I've talked to. And don't forget, Martha's Madness is partially mine, too, so it's important for me to be here to help when you have your first guests."

This was no time to argue the issue, so she asked, "And how do you plan to help? Should I teach you how to clean bathrooms, so I don't have to pay Angela to do them tomorrow?"

"No, thanks!" He leaned even closer and whispered in her ear, "Actually, the kind of help I had in mind was keeping your mind off your nerves. Like maybe giving you a little kiss from time to time - " He demonstrated a couple of types of kisses, both guaranteed to make her forget her worries. "Or maybe copping a feel once in a while - " He snaked one hand in between their bodies.

She clamped her hand around his wrist. "You even try that, buster, when anyone's around, and you'll be in deep doo-doo."

He just laughed. "I can do it in private, though?"

She had to think a few seconds to come up with a safe answer. "Only in the bedroom." She was pleased with her answer until he suddenly dropped his arms and she nearly fell off his lap. "What did you do that for?"

The innocent look clued her that something was up. "You said only in the bedroom, so I let go of you. I wouldn't want you to think I can't follow the rules."

She could have explained that the rules didn't apply when they were alone in the house and likely to remain that way for several hours, but she exercised considerable restraint instead and stood up. "I'm going to take a quick shower and make us some lunch."

She scanned the tower quickly and gathered up their stray clothes before heading downstairs. It would be quite embarrassing if someone saw her panties half-draped on the table where they'd landed earlier. Someone like Carolyn, for example - or Rachel - or even the Worthingtons, for that matter.

Tony followed her downstairs, seemingly matching her restraint by not goosing her on the stairs or insisting on joining her in the shower. She didn't let herself regret her decision. Getting their business off to a good start was more important than indulging her sexual appetite, even though this might be their last weekend together.

And maybe it wouldn't be. Tony said he loved her and she believed him. She just wasn't sure what he'd meant on the phone last night, when he said he'd stay after everyone else left on Sunday. He said he'd been thinking and had some ideas he wanted to run by her. What kind of ideas? Why would it matter if he talked to her about them today instead of Sunday? The only reason she could imagine was that he thought she'd be upset, and the thing that would most upset her would be if they couldn't be together anymore.

But she refused to worry about the future. They'd talk on Sunday, and life would continue after that, regardless of what he said. Her job now was to be a hostess and that's what she'd be.

After their very late lunch, she mixed up a batch of muffins and baked them. She needed to have muffins available at seven every morning, yet the rest of the buffet didn't need to be ready until eight-thirty. She wouldn't get up early enough to bake muffins fresh each morning. She'd do them the afternoon or evening before, and then just make coffee and put the fruit and muffins out the next morning. Besides, if she did her baking around the time guests were checking in, the heavenly smell would help welcome them to Martha's Madness.

The Worthingtons arrived right on cue, and by the time she finished giving them the grand tour, she was over her case of nerves. Seth and Annabelle - they insisted she call them by their first names - were friendly and not the least bit intimidating. Sure, the clothes each of them wore cost more than Brittany spent in several years on her own wardrobe, and from what Carolyn had said, they owned a house at least this impressive on an even more expensive section of the Oregon Coast, but they seemed like regular people. No wonder Carolyn didn't mind them as de facto in-laws.

A little later, the phone rang. "Thanks for calling Martha's Madness Bed & Breakfast. This is Brittany speaking. May I help you?"

"Hi, Britt. This is Carolyn."

"Oh, hi." They hadn't gotten lost, had they? She'd thought her instructions were clear enough.

"Listen, we stopped at the cheese factory because I'd never taken the tour, and now Rachel wants an ice cream cone." In a more secretive voice, she confessed, "Well, I want one, too, but I never would have said anything about it. But anyway, Scott said we shouldn't have any so close to dinner, so Rachel said let's eat dinner here. So that's what we're going to do, and the reason I'm calling is that I wanted everyone to know not to wait for us to get there for dinner. Okay?"

"Sure. I'll tell Seth and Annabelle right away - and you're right, they're both very nice."

"I knew you'd like them," she replied. "I can hardly wait to see you again, Britt - and your house! I don't think I ever heard Tony rave about any house as much as he did about your place when we talked last week."

"I'm looking forward to seeing you - Scott and Rachel, too." She was a little surprised at that. Being friends again with Carolyn was one thing, but she hadn't thought she'd ever get beyond grudging acceptance of Scott.

"We'll be there soon. Bye for now."

It was less than an hour later when they arrived. They were enthusiastic about the suite, and Rachel was fascinated by the bunk beds. She stared in wonder at them for a few seconds, then turned to Brittany. "Can I sleep up there?" She half-whispered, pointing at the top bunk.

"It's up to your -" She faltered, not sure whether she was supposed to call Carolyn and Scott her parents, or Scott her father, or what.

Scott rescued her. "I don't think you'd better. It's a long way down, if you fell out of bed."

"I won't fall, Daddy! You're being silly!" Rachel tossed her almost-white blonde pigtails and started trying to climb the attached ladder. That proved more difficult than she'd expected, and Scott unobtrusively gave her a hand up. She plopped onto the upper bunk and looked around, first in amazement, and then

with growing alarm. "This is way high." She clearly had no intention of coming down, even if being up there scared her to death.

"You know, Rachel, when I was younger, I used to come here in the summertime to see my Aunt Martha, and so did a lot of my cousins. Of course, everybody wanted to sleep in a top bunk, but one time my cousin Richie woke up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom, and he forgot he wasn't in his regular bed at home. He landed on the floor with a huge clunk that woke the whole house, and the doctor said he almost broke his leg. So after that, Aunt Martha said that you had to be at least ten years old to sleep in a top bunk." She could tell from Rachel's serious expression that her story was making the little girl rethink her bravery. And the story hadn't even been much of a fabrication - only the part about the doctor and the implication that Brittany had been there at the time. Unfortunately for her, Richie had been a thirteen-year-old with a serious breast fetish - and Brittany a twelve-year-old with a suddenly sprouting chest - the first time they'd met.

"Do you suppose it would be okay for her to climb up in the top bunk during the day?" Carolyn looked at Scott, an uncharacteristic plea for approval in her face.

Scott smiled at Carolyn and told Rachel, "If you're careful."

Rachel nodded solemnly. "I promise, Daddy." She edged toward the ladder and cautiously worked out the procedure for backing off the upper bunk onto it.

Scott watched her progress tensely, apparently without taking a breath. When Rachel safely reached the floor, Brittany couldn't tell which one of them was more relieved.

Carolyn changed the subject quickly. "We wanted to bring you a little something, but I wasn't sure what, so we got a couple of bottles of Oregon wine at the cheese factory. I hope you still like wine." She reached into the mound of suitcases and bags on the floor and handed Brittany two individually bagged bottles of wine.

"Definitely, but you didn't need to bring me a present. You're the ones doing me a favor, after all."

"You might want to wait to say that until *after* you spend a weekend with Rachel," Scott warned, but he was smiling.

"I'm sure already," she answered. "Look, I'll leave you alone now so you can get settled. If you like, come downstairs later and we'll have a glass of wine."

"We'll do that," Carolyn promised.

Brittany went down to the living room and found Tony starting a fire in the fireplace. He looked up and said, "As nice as it was outside today, it'll get chilly tonight. I thought a fire would feel cozy."

She nodded. "I'll have to remember to do that. We didn't get to have fires very often in the summertime when I'd be here, but I love them. I was probably the only one of the nieces and nephews who liked it when it sometimes got cold and rainy for several days at a time. Aunt Martha and Uncle Harry would light a fire and get out old board games, and we'd settle right in front of the fire for hours. We even popped popcorn in the fireplace. It was great."

Carolyn, Scott, and Rachel came downstairs about the same time that Seth and Annabelle returned from dinner, so they were prevailed upon to join them for a glass of wine. The conversation was casual and fairly impersonal, and Brittany pinpointed the exact moment when Carolyn realized that Brittany and Tony were more than friends. It was when Brittany sat down after passing a platter of crackers and

cheese. She sat next to Tony on a small loveseat instead of in a chair by herself, and neither of them shifted position to allow each other their own space. Carolyn looked almost puzzled for a moment, then wide-eyed, and finally she blushed and seemed about ready to burst.

Luckily for Carolyn's peace of mind, Seth and Annabelle soon finished their wine and offered to help Rachel get ready for bed. Scott thanked them, but said he'd do it, so - after a few half-hearted protests from Rachel that she wasn't at all tired and it was too early to go to bed - all four of them went upstairs. Carolyn turned to Brittany and Tony immediately. "You sneaks! What are you doing, trying to keep secrets from me?"

Tony grinned and asked, "What kind of secrets?" But he couldn't keep himself from laughing then, and after that, he apparently decided not to tease her anymore. "But we're not. It's just that neither of us has talked to you since this happened."

"I talked to both of you last week! You mean . . ." Her expression became more guarded, as though she'd decided it was rude to ask for all the details. "Well, in any case, I'm glad you finally figured out how perfect you are for each other. I never understood how two people as smart as both of you could miss something so obvious."

Brittany wasn't sure how to respond. As much as Tony's explanation last week had made sense, she still felt uncomfortable about his feelings for Carolyn. It shouldn't matter that he'd unmistakably loved her deeply - after all, she'd loved Michael. But she couldn't totally shake the idea that she was his second choice, and as much as she knew she didn't deserve any more, she wanted it.

Tony chuckled. "Maybe we should have asked you, then." He added seriously, "But I'm not sorry for the years I spent with you, and I never will be." He gave Brittany's hand a squeeze, but she still went cold inside.

Carolyn turned red again and blinked a few times, then murmured, "I'm not sorry, either." She put her glass down on the table and stood up. "I guess I'll go upstairs now. It's been a long day."

Brittany almost wished Tony had his own room to go to. She loved him madly, but she didn't know how she could pretend that his words hadn't hurt her. If he loved Brittany as much as he claimed to, how could he not regret his years with Carolyn? She certainly begrudged wasting so much time and energy on her relationship with Michael.

But that brought her right back to her previous thought. The difference was that Carolyn had been Tony's first choice and Brittany his second. For Brittany, Tony was everything, and Michael just a fill-in.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Tony didn't understand what was wrong with Britt, but it was definitely something more than simple nerves. She'd been acting almost aloof since shortly after he got here today, and now she seemed sad and maybe a little angry.

Since the fire was still going, they didn't take everyone else's lead and go to bed. He poured more wine and decided to see if she'd talk to him. "Britt, are you mad at me?"

"Of course not. Why would I be mad?" She didn't meet his eyes, and her denial wasn't convincing.

"I don't know why. I just know that you're not being yourself tonight, and I want to help with whatever's wrong."

She shrugged one shoulder and tried a smile, but it didn't stick. "I'm just kind of stressed out. There are so many details about running a B&B, and they keep creeping up on me behind my back. I'm sorry for not being better company." With an obvious effort, she faced him and said, "Why don't you tell me about your week? Does the company you've been visiting look like a good one to buy?"

He nodded. "Very much so. I forgot to tell you on the phone that I'll spend all of next week there, too, so I can be here for our Grand Opening next weekend."

"Really?" she asked with an eager smile. "I hadn't dared hope you could make it."

Could it be that she was dreading him going back to Rhode Island every bit as much as he was? Maybe that was the reason for her odd mood. "Actually, I realized this week that if the deal to buy Blackburn goes through, and I expect it will, I'll need to be there most of the time for a few months. Do you think you could put up with me coming to see you most weekends?"

She narrowed her eyes, as though she wasn't sure she'd heard him right. "Of course! But how could you do that? Don't you need to be in Newport, or around visiting your other sites?"

"It'll be a bit tricky, but I've done it before, when we've acquired companies without a decent management team in place. Robbie may need to travel a little more than usual for a while, and I'll keep on top of things with faxes and frequent phone calls. I've got e-mail now, too, so that should be a help."

A little suspiciously, she asked, "You're not doing this just so we can spend more time together, are you? I really don't want to interfere with your job."

He shook his head. "No, this is what I need to do to get Blackburn running properly again. If I was arranging things to suit my preferences, I'd spend all week with you and just the weekend there."

She smiled in a pleased but slightly embarrassed way. "I'll be pretty busy with our guests, but you're welcome anytime." She slipped her hand into his and said, "Let's go to bed. I have to get up early tomorrow." She sounded perfectly content again.

Tony decided that tonight wasn't a good time to bring up their future. Spending weekends together was something she apparently felt ready for, but he had the feeling she wasn't going to like either of the plans he'd made for how they could be together permanently. She still didn't understand how important she was to him.

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The next morning, Brittany was awfully glad she'd had the foresight to plan her breakfast schedule so carefully. Each task was neatly listed, so all she or Angela had to do was check the list to find the next thing that needed doing. That was particularly beneficial for her, because she was nervous again.

Tony came into the kitchen after the first flurry of activity was over. He took the sponge out of her hand and kissed her, holding her close until her bones started to melt. "See how useful I can be? You're not nervous anymore, are you?"

She shook her head, wanting to protest that while desire was much more pleasant than nervousness, it still didn't make cooking breakfast easy. But Angela was nearby, and she didn't want to broadcast the fact that she couldn't resist Tony's kisses.

They were a couple of minutes late getting the buffet set up, but she figured that was pretty good for their first effort. The Worthingtons came down at a quarter of nine and she heard Rachel's voice just before nine. She left the dishes she was washing to go into the dining room and see if she should get anything

special for Rachel. Mrs. Pitney had warned her that children were often skeptical of fancy breakfast fare.

Carolyn was serving Rachel, who did indeed look uncertain about the egg casserole. "Try a little of it. See, Grandpa and Grandma like it, and I'm sure it's good. And you like pineapple, so I'll give you this slice. And Britt's cinnamon rolls are the best things in the world. I'll cut this one in half for you." She turned to put Rachel's plate on the table and saw Brittany. "Good morning. Everything looks wonderful."

"Thanks. Will this be okay, or should I get something else for Rachel?"

Carolyn smiled and shook her head, then turned back to fill her own plate. "No. She's good about trying new things. Do you have time to join us at the table this morning?"

Annabelle said, "Oh, yes, please do."

Tony caught Brittany's eye and gestured at the seat next to him. "There's a chair right here with your name on it."

"Thanks. I guess I will." After working with food for a couple of hours already, she expected to not want anything to eat, but suddenly she was ravenous. She took a little of everything and sat next to Tony. "Is Scott sleeping in this morning?"

Carolyn smiled again. "No. He went running earlier and got back just before Rachel and I finished dressing. I imagine he'll be down soon."

Running. No wonder Scott had the same long lean build that Carolyn had. She hadn't seen him in anything more revealing than a pair of rather tight jeans and a well-washed T-shirt, but the body they'd hinted at was certainly worthy of notice. It didn't match her tastes, though. She preferred a man with a little padding here and there - like Tony. She couldn't help wondering whether Scott and Carolyn ever bruised themselves on each other's bodies.

Scott breezed in then, offering greetings to all while piling his plate high. If he ate that way every morning, he'd soon have some padding of his own. "Brittany and Tony, we'd like to take you out for dinner tonight. Are you free?"

Brittany wasn't sure whether to answer for both of them, so she said, "I am, and I'd love to."

"Me, too," Tony echoed.

"Seth, Annabelle - how about you?"

Seth shook his head. "No, thanks. We're planning to do the Three Capes Scenic Loop today, and we'll stop someplace on the way back. Would you mind letting us take Rachel along?"

Scott frowned slightly. After a few seconds, he responded, "We wouldn't 'mind', but you don't need to -"

"We *want* to, Scott. Rachel is no trouble and it's so much fun for us to have her along." Annabelle spoke as sweetly as ever, but there was a firmness to her voice that ended the subject right there.

"Well, okay. Rachel, you'll be good, won't you?"

Rachel rolled her eyes and answered, "Of course, Daddy."

Seth, Annabelle, and Rachel left soon after that. Brittany wasn't sure whether or not to suggest that

Carolyn and Scott join her and Tony in doing something together during the day. In practical terms, she doubted that Tony had much interest in spending more than a couple of hours with Scott ever, and she didn't know how comfortable a conversation among the four of them could be. Still, wouldn't it only be polite . . .

Scott turned to look at Carolyn. "I saw somebody flying the neatest kite on the beach earlier - it was a whole bunch of little kites all connected together somehow. The guy said he got it at the kite shop here in town. I thought maybe we could go there and see about buying one."

"Okay. I forgot to bring a hat, so I'd like to look for one, too." Carolyn finished her juice and said to Brittany, "I'll take our dishes out to the kitchen. Should I put them in the dishwasher?"

She shook her head. "Just leave them here. Remember, you're at a bed-and-breakfast, not visiting friends."

Carolyn seemed about ready to protest, but Scott touched her arm and asked, "Are you ready to go?"

"No. I want to put on some sunscreen so I don't burn. Do you want to come up with me?" Carolyn blushed bright red when she apparently realized that everyone would immediately know her invitation had nothing to do with putting on sunscreen.

Brittany got up and started stacking dishes, deliberately paying no attention to whether Scott followed Carolyn upstairs.

Tony looked at the leftovers and said, "I don't suppose you can serve this again tomorrow?"

She laughed. "Hardly. Tomorrow I'm making an extra-fancy French toast deal. I'll save this stuff, though, and eat it all week, or until it comes out my ears. Maybe I'll eventually get the knack for guessing how much people will eat."

She and Tony spent the rest of the morning busy in the kitchen, and after that, in the bedroom, so she never knew how long it took Carolyn to put on sunscreen. Then again, she didn't really care, and Tony didn't seem to, either.

In the afternoon, the four of them spent some time trying to figure out how to fly the kite Scott bought. The process involved a fair amount of running to get the kite to take off, an incredibly short period when they thought that maybe *this* time it would really fly, and was inevitably followed by a sickeningly abrupt crash-landing. They each had a pet theory for how to make it work and eventually all of their theories were disproved.

The sun, fresh air, and exercise cut through their polite constraint and left them four friends with things to laugh and tease each other about. Dinner was ordinary but well-prepared deep-fried seafood washed down with draft beer.

Carolyn said, "This reminds me of that place down in Galilee where we went a couple of times."

Brittany remembered the restaurant in southern Rhode Island well. She and Michael and Carolyn and Tony had gone to one of the nearby beaches for the day two or three times. They'd had a dinner much like this one each time. The thing she remembered most was that Michael had looked down his nose at the menu, even though they couldn't afford anything classier at the time. The other memory was something she could share. "Remember how sunburned you got, Carolyn? You were the color of the lobsters the people at the next table ordered!"

She groaned and turned a similar shade. "God, yes! And one time, I had on that suit that had practically

no back. I couldn't wear a bra for a week after that."

Tony nudged Brittany and murmured, "Good thing that didn't happen to you."

On the way back to Martha's Madness, Brittany promised to get out her photo album. She wasn't enthused about looking at pictures of herself hanging all over Michael, or Carolyn on Tony, but Scott was curious about what Carolyn had been like back then, and the pictures would give him a start.

The message light was blinking on the answering machine. She pushed the button and a woman's voice said, "Um, hello. This is Jo Fiore, calling for my son. Would you ask Tony to call me as soon as possible, please? His grandmother's in the hospital in Providence and she needs surgery, but she's demanding to see Tony first."

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Tony couldn't seem to breathe right. Grandmother in the hospital? She never got sick.

"I'm so sorry, Tony." He blinked and saw Carolyn's concerned face.

And then he felt Brittany's arm around him, and the world became a little more normal. "Come on. Let's go call your mother." She led him into the bedroom and pushed him down on the loveseat. She was back with the cordless phone before he thought to wonder where she'd gone.

He had to get a grip on himself. Yes, this was a shock, but he could handle it. After all, if Grandmother was refusing to have surgery until he got there, she couldn't be in too bad shape. It sounded like her typical mode of operation, in fact - making outrageous demands for what seemed like no reason other than the pleasure of getting her own way. He sat up straighter and gave Britt's hand a quick squeeze. "Thanks. I'm okay now."

She smiled. "Good, but I'll still stay right here, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind." Not at all. He punched in the number for his parents' house and his mother answered on the first ring. "Hi, Mom. What happened?"

"Tony! I'm so glad you got back. Well, like I said in the message, your grandmother's in the hospital. She had a mild stroke this afternoon - a mini-stroke is what the doctors call it."

A stroke was what had killed Grandfather. "Where was she?"

"At home. She called here, and your father went over and took her to the hospital in town. They did some tests and decided that she needs surgery - one of her carotid arteries is almost completely blocked and they need to clear it. There was something about the right surgeon being away, so they sent her to Providence to have the surgery there. It's scheduled for Monday morning."

That sounded reasonable, and somewhat reassuring. If they sent her to another hospital and were willing to wait until Monday, she must be pretty stable. "But what's this about her demanding to see me first?"

He could hear the shrug in his mother's voice, the one she used when she was trying to explain the Fiore family's vagaries. "All I know is what your father told me when he called from the hospital in Providence. I got the idea that he didn't know what it was about, either. Maybe she just wants you to come home before her surgery."

He sighed. "Sure. That makes sense. I'll fly out tomorrow - my car's in the lot at the airport, so maybe I can even get up to the hospital before visiting hours are over."

"I hope you don't mind, Tony, but I called Elsa earlier tonight, and she got you on a flight leaving Portland at 9:30 tomorrow morning. Is that too early?"

"No. That's perfect. Thanks for thinking of it. What's the flight number?" Britt handed him a notepad and pen in time for him to jot down all the relevant information, including Grandmother's hospital room number. "Say hi to Dad for me. I'll see both of you real soon."

He packed quickly, as soon as he hung up the phone, and then he and Britt went out to the living room. Carolyn and Scott were still there, and he explained the situation briefly, adding, "It's so typical of Grandmother to make a demand like that. She ought to know that I'd go home right away, even if she didn't ask for me. But this way, she gets to be the big shot, and she flourishes on that."

"Don't you think she might be scared?" Britt asked quietly. "Making demands could be her way of trying to maintain control over a situation that's beyond her control."

Tony sank onto the sofa, knowing Britt was probably right, and illogically scared by the concept that there were things beyond Grandmother's command. She'd always seemed so all-powerful, with such an iron mastery of her emotions and the world around her. But so had Grandfather.

Britt got out her photo album then, and the four of them sat in a row on the sofa looking through it - Britt and Carolyn in the middle. He didn't pay too much attention to the pictures and their stories, but was surprised to notice a wary almost-hurt expression on Britt's face in several of the snapshots. It was the same expression he'd seen at the wedding and in the days after Michael left her.

He didn't remember her as being even the least bit fragile back then. Britt had been worldly-wise and tough, while Carolyn was naive and impressionable. At least that had been his perception at the time. He knew now he'd missed a lot of what she was really like.

The Worthingtons and Rachel returned soon. Scott took Rachel upstairs and Seth and Annabelle went for a walk on the beach, leaving just Carolyn sitting with them. She hugged Tony and, with tears in her eyes, told him, "I hope the surgery goes well. I know she hates me, but I still care about her. Call if you need to talk." She gulped and hurried upstairs.

Tony didn't feel the least bit tired, and for the first time in his relationship with Britt, he wasn't eager to make love, either. Britt must have understood, because when they went into her bedroom, she didn't get undressed. She also didn't speak, even when she bent over and untied his shoes and he asked what she was doing. Instead, she shoved him gently onto the bed, removed his shoes and socks, and began to massage his feet.

It felt okay, but not all that great at first. Her touch was gentle enough that he worried she'd tickle him. She didn't, but the concern kept his mind busy for a while. By the time he realized he didn't need to worry, she was pressing slightly harder and his feet seemed to be floating somewhere, no longer attached to his earth-bound body.

Somewhat later, she got up and undid his belt and, with his help, removed his jeans. He expected his briefs to come off next, and he was willing and eager to assist by then, but no such luck. She sat at the end of the bed and massaged first one leg and then the other. She stroked and squeezed and rubbed his muscles until they seemed to turn into mere puddles of goo.

She removed his shirt next and gave the same treatment first to his hands and then both arms. At that point, she tried to get him to roll over onto his stomach so she could work on his neck and back, but he clumsily surrounded her with his rubber-like arms and pinned her on top of his body. "I'm not rolling over unless you're under me."

She giggled and they stayed in that position kissing until they were both breathless with need. She broke away finally and scattered her clothes wherever they happened to land. He tossed his briefs onto the floor and reached out for her.

Her alarm rang at five-fifteen, and she immediately silenced it, but he was already awake and aware of the significance of this morning. They made love gently, like both of them were trying to memorize all the details. Afterwards, he held her for a couple of minutes that he wished could be hours or days, and just before he let her go, he looked deep into her eyes and said, "I love you, Britt, and I always will."

She went very still and tears pooled in the corners of her eyes. "I will love you for the rest of my life." There was a heavy, fatalistic sound to her words, but before he could respond, she hurried to her feet and into the kitchen.

He'd told her she didn't need to get up and make him breakfast, but she'd insisted. He'd be traveling all day and might not have a chance to eat later, so he needed a cup of coffee and yesterday morning's leftovers before starting out.

The food would have settled in his stomach better if Britt didn't seem on the edge of tears the whole time. She was unnaturally quiet and wouldn't look directly at him. Maybe she was simply unhappy he had to leave so suddenly, but it seemed like more than that.

But it also wasn't something he could fix right now. As they embraced near the front door, he struggled to find words that might help. "I'll call tonight when I get back from the hospital. And I'll miss you every minute of every day until I get back."

"I'll miss you, too." She closed the front door behind him, and he had the strange feeling she was bidding him goodbye forever. Yet that wasn't the situation.

He loved Britt and she loved him. Everything else could be worked out.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Brittany leaned against the front door, holding it closed so she didn't go running after Tony. He had to leave this morning, no matter how much she needed him to stay.

And really, it was for the best. If he'd followed his plan of visiting here most weekends for the next couple of months, she'd have started counting on him always being here.

He wouldn't be, she reminded herself brutally. His life and his job were both in Newport. It was time she got used to that fact, all over again.

She gritted her teeth and took a shower, then gathered up their towels and dumped them in the washing machine. She ought to change the sheets, too, but - damn her sentimentality - they still smelled like Tony and she couldn't give up that meager comfort.

By the time Angela arrived, she'd managed to cheer up a bit. Tony would be back. He loved her. And by the time he got back, she would be more used to living alone. She'd be able to accept their affair as what it was - the once-in-a-lifetime fulfillment of her dreams - rather than hating that it would never lead any further.

When her guests came down for breakfast - minus Scott who was out running again - she joined them, saying, "Now's the time for the truth. What have I done wrong this weekend?"

They all looked slightly startled and Seth said, "Nothing."

Annabelle added, "Everything's been lovely. The rooms, these wonderful breakfasts, your hospitality . . ."

"But there must be *something* I could improve," she insisted. "Did you need more towels, or should we have made your beds yesterday morning, or - I don't know -"

"I didn't get to watch cartoons," Rachel volunteered.

"We talked about that, Rachel, remember?" Carolyn said. "When grownups come to places like this, they don't watch TV."

She wrinkled her nose. "I know. They kiss and junk, like you and Daddy."

Brittany ignored Carolyn's blush. "Thank you, Rachel. I hadn't thought about a TV. You probably like to watch videos, too, don't you?"

Rachel nodded enthusiastically. "I have a whole bunch at home."

"I'll bet you do," Brittany answered, then turned to the other adults. "But how would that work? I doubt that one TV in the living room would help much, because people would want to watch different shows, or just enjoy the fire or the view. But putting a TV and a VCR in each room would take up a lot of space."

Annabelle frowned thoughtfully. "It would spoil the rooms, too. The whole house would feel more like a hotel then."

"What if you put a TV and a VCR on a portable cart that guests could move into their rooms?" Seth asked. "We did that at the office, even though in practice we rarely move it."

"Maybe more than one," Carolyn suggested. "You could rent them out by the night."

Annabelle nodded in agreement. "And you could offer a selection of videos, too, perhaps on a shelf of the bookcase in the hall. I meant to say what a lovely idea that was - having a supply of books so conveniently available."

Brittany smiled. "This is great! What else is missing? Should I install phones in the rooms?"

Seth shook his head vehemently. "No. This should be a haven from the everyday world. Have a phone available for guests to use when necessary, but don't make it too inviting. Some people almost need to be coerced into slowing down."

"Like you, dear?" Annabelle asked with a knowing smile. "I absolutely agree about the phones, by the way, and for heaven's sake, don't offer fax service! The world would be a much more civilized place if that machine had never been invented."

Seth teased, "And who's been using our fax machine at home recently?"

"I didn't say they weren't useful," she replied, her cheeks pinker than they'd been a minute earlier.

Brittany heard the front door open and close, and then heard steps on the stairs. "It sounds like Scott's back. I'll get some fresh coffee." She stood, but before she got to the swinging door to the kitchen, he was coming downstairs again.

As he crossed the living room, he called out, "Sorry, I'm going to have to skip breakfast. I met that same guy on the beach this morning - the one with the kite." He stopped a couple of feet from the dining room table, still wearing his sweats and now carrying his kite. "And he said the wind wasn't good for kites yesterday afternoon, so it wasn't our fault we couldn't make it work. I said maybe we'd try again this morning, and he said if I bring it down there, he'll show me how." He looked at Carolyn and asked, "Is that okay?"

Carolyn nodded. "Sure, but don't be gone too long. Check-out time is noon."

"You don't need to worry about that," Brittany assured them. "And I'll keep breakfast warm for you, Scott."

"You don't need to do that." He looked more like a kid than a man in his thirties, especially the way he bounced in place with ill-concealed eagerness.

"Can I come?" Rachel asked. "I didn't get to fly the kite yesterday."

Brittany watched with interest as the father in Scott battled against, and defeated, the child in him. He visibly calmed himself and said, "Okay, come on."

She raced to the door, beating him decisively. "Hurry *up*, Daddy."

The dining room seemed unnaturally silent after they left. Seth and Annabelle excused themselves to pack, and Carolyn offered to help with dishes. Brittany laughed. "You don't learn very quickly, do you? When you're at a B&B, you don't help with dishes, or anything else for that matter. Angela and I will take care of everything later. Let's go out on the deck and talk a while."

She agreed and they filled their mugs and found a sunny spot to watch a man flying a kite way down the beach. They hoped it was the same man who was going to help Scott and Rachel learn to fly theirs.

"You and Scott are happy, aren't you - really, truly happy?"

Carolyn just beamed. "Oh, Britt, we are! I used to think maybe it wouldn't be wonderful anymore after we got married - you know, being together all the time, being partially responsible for Rachel, that kind of thing. But it's so much better than it was before! And having Rachel makes it all so much more meaningful somehow - like it's not just about us, but about the future of the world, too." She grimaced. "That sounds hokey, but I mean it."

Brittany knew what she meant, although she'd never expected Carolyn to feel even the least bit maternal. "I understand. Do you think you guys will have kids of your own?"

Carolyn looked pensive for a moment, then pointed an accusing finger at Brittany. "Don't you do that! You're trying to keep me from asking about you and Tony, and that's not going to work. Now that he's not around, you can tell me the whole story."

"What whole story? He's divorced, I'm going to be, we're having a fling, and that's that." She doubted that would satisfy Carolyn, but she didn't want to bring up their college days again.

"That's that, huh? Well, I've got news for you, roomie. Tony doesn't *do* affairs and neither do you. And even if you did, the way you two've been looking at each other all weekend isn't about sex - " Blushing, she added, "Well, maybe part of it - " She shook her head and squeezed her eyes shut. "I can't believe I'm asking this, but - well, *is* that good with him?" She was lobster color again, and this time it had nothing to do with sunburn.

Brittany opened her mouth to tell the truth, that Tony was the best lover she'd ever had, but she didn't say it. Carolyn didn't need to know that. "You want to know if it was his fault sex wasn't good for you all those years. And it wasn't, but it wasn't yours, either. The two of you just didn't have the right chemistry, and he and I do. It's as simple as that."

She opened her eyes and looked straight at Brittany. "Why call it chemistry, Britt? It's love, and we both know it. You can't think I want Tony to miss out on the best part of life."

"No, of course I don't think that. And okay, you're right, we love each other." She glanced down the beach toward the man with a kite. "Oh, look - Scott and Rachel are down there watching that man."

Carolyn nodded, but she didn't drop the subject. "I hope you're more willing to admit that to him than you are to me."

She groaned. "You won't give up, will you? Yes, I've told him I love him - but he said it first."

"Well, that's a relief. What are you going to do about this bi-coastal living arrangement of yours?"

"Nothing," she answered firmly, but her insides were quivering. "There's nothing we can do. He's got to stay in Rhode Island, and I'm not about to give up this place - not that he's asked me to, or ever will."

Carolyn stared at her in amazement. "Let me get this straight - you love Tony and you're just going to let it fall apart? And you actually think he's going to sit there and let you do it? You obviously don't know him as well as I do, even after all these years. He's not going to give up until you marry him."

Tears filled her eyes. Had she ever been as naive as Carolyn still was? "He doesn't want to marry me. That's crazy."

"Why not? He loves you. Being married and having a family is the most natural thing in the world, especially for a guy like him who's been trained from birth that family is the important thing in life."

She pointed down the beach. "See, Scott's got the kite up." Her voice was shaky.

Just then, it crashed. "Not anymore. Come on, answer me."

"Because I'm not the kind of girl guys like him marry," she snapped.

"What the heck does that mean?"

It wasn't Carolyn's fault she kept asking these questions, but Brittany couldn't just keep answering politely forever. Not when every question only reminded her of the truth. "Trust me, Carolyn, you don't want to know, and I'm not going to tell you. Let's just watch Scott and Rachel fly the kite."

Carolyn started to protest, but when Brittany glared at her, she quickly shut up. They stared down the beach and saw that Scott had apparently gotten the hang of flying the multi-colored kite, and now he was teaching Rachel. Carolyn wiped away tears and said, "I'm sorry, Britt. I don't mean to be so nosy. It's just that I care about both of you so much, and I really think you're perfect for each other."

Brittany reached over and squeezed her hand. "I understand, and I'm glad you care. And who knows, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe things will work out for us."

She didn't really believe that, but somehow, saying the words made her heart soar like the kite Rachel was now flying.

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When Tony arrived at the Providence airport, Robbie was waiting by the gate for him. He wasn't supposed to be there . . . "What happened?"

But then Robbie grinned and the world shifted back to normal. "Nothing. Grandmother's okay - and driving everybody up a wall, as usual. The thing is, she won't say why she insists on seeing you tonight; and all of a sudden at six o'clock, she told us all to go home. Dad's afraid she doesn't want the surgery and is going to try to get you to take her side against the doctors."

"Why would I do that?"

Robbie shrugged, but didn't seem as casual anymore. "I don't know. She's been kinda strange today, real quiet, almost like she's saying goodbye to everybody."

"How bad is she?" he demanded. "Mom said she'd had a little stroke and needed surgery, but . . ." He wasn't ready for her to die.

Robbie frowned. "Well, it's pretty serious, but they're pumping drugs into her so she doesn't have another stroke before they can operate, and the surgery isn't considered real risky. So maybe Dad's being unnecessarily paranoid, but he figured it was worth me stopping off to talk to you."

"I can see his point, but she's not going to bulldoze me into anything that would jeopardize her health."

Robbie grinned again. "Okay, that's great. You'd better get going now. She made him tell her your flight number and arrival time and all. I'll lay odds she'd been checking with the 800 number and knows *exactly* what time the plane touched down."

"Super." He headed off to the long-term lot that was his car's second home, onto Route 95, and within fifteen minutes, into the hospital parking lot. He knew Grandmother's room number, so went right to the elevator and followed the directional arrows to her room.

He peeked in, ready to duck back out if she'd been moved since last night. An old woman lay on the bed, mouth hanging open and eyes shut. For a moment he wasn't sure the woman was even alive. Then he saw the sheet move slightly as she took a breath. He took a deep breath of his own as his heart pounded harder.

The old woman was Grandmother! Without her ever-present makeup and jewelry, with her hair seemingly uncombed, and without the lively animation that always lit her features . . .

He stood there for another few moments, grappling with emotion. Suddenly he felt like he was spying on her. Respect demanded that he step back outside and knock on the door. After several seconds, he called out, "Grandmother?" He looked in.

She was sitting up partway now and looking toward the door. "Antonio, is that you? Come in here this minute!"

He moved to her side and kissed her cheek. "Hello, Grandmother."

She gripped his arm with bony fingers and said, "You sit right there, where I can see you. These fool doctors say I have to stay in bed, nearly flat on my back all the time." She was nowhere near flat on her back, but for someone who sat only in perfectly straight-backed chairs, the exaggeration could be forgiven.

He sat down, as directed, but she didn't let go of his arm. He said, "You need to do what they say, you know."

She made a disgusted sound and waved her other hand. He realized for the first time that she had an IV attached to that hand. "Don't say the same as all the others! Do your father and your Uncle Frank think I have no brain? I may be an old woman, but I am not feeble-minded."

"Of course not, Grandmother. We just worry about you."

She grumbled in what seemed like a pleased way, then said, "So, you came home. I didn't know if you would."

"Grandmother! You're very precious to me. Of course I came home." He wouldn't mention the threat. Perhaps he'd misinterpreted what his mother had said.

"You neglect your job - why should your poor grandmother be any different?"

He made an effort to control his annoyance. "I'm not neglecting my job, and you know it. I'm working on a deal to acquire Blackburn."

She glared at him. "Not when your mother called you. You were with a married woman. That is *not* done in this family." She paused, waiting for him to crumble and beg forgiveness.

He wasn't going to do it this time. He was a grown man, and his life was his own business. He forced his voice to sound much calmer than felt natural. "Brittany is my friend, Grandmother, and I am an adult. If you wanted me here just to scold me, then this trip was a waste of time."

He felt like adding that he'd leave for Oregon in the morning, but he knew he wouldn't really do that. Grandmother was having surgery in the morning, and he would be here for her, no matter what.

She continued glaring at him for a short time, then said, "That is not the reason." She looked across the room at a crucifix that hung on the wall, and her mouth seemed to tremble slightly. "I am an old woman, Antonio, and I need an operation. It is time for you to take over the company."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Brittany cleaned and did laundry all day. She didn't have any guests arriving until Friday, so didn't really need to do all the work in one day. She thought it would be a good idea to practice for the summer season, though. Then, she would often have a full house one night, followed by another full house of different people the next. Luckily, Martha's Madness had a minimum stay of two nights, so she wouldn't have to turn around and do the same the following day.

Martha's Madness already had a lot of reservations for the summer. Every weekend until the end of July was fully booked, as was Fourth of July week. Other weekdays were still close to empty, but Mrs. Pitney assured her they wouldn't remain that way.

Brittany would call in the morning to see how soon the cable company could install hookups in each of the guestrooms. If there was any chance it would be this week, she'd shop for a TV, VCR, and cart later in the day in Tillamook. She liked the idea of making a TV and VCR available to her guests, but she wasn't convinced it would be used often enough to warrant having more than one.

She filled her plate with leftovers and zapped it in the microwave, then carried it up to the lookout tower. She would spend the evening curled up on the sofa, reading a new book by one of her favorite authors. Pretty close to the perfect way to end the day, as far as she was concerned.

She'd tried not to think about Tony today, but she hadn't succeeded. He was already much too important

for her to take the sensible approach about their relationship - enjoy him when they were together, get on with her life when he wasn't. Besides, it was only natural to worry about him. His grandmother's illness had hit him pretty hard, and by now he should have had a chance to see her in the hospital. She hoped the visit had left him feeling encouraged.

The phone rang, and she felt suddenly connected to him, all the way across the country. "Hello?"

"I miss you, Britt."

She'd known it was he. "I miss you, too. How's your grandmother?"

He sighed, a laugh mixed in the middle of it. "Okay - pretty much herself, as a matter of fact. The first thing she did was complain about the doctors, then she tried to make me feel guilty and ended up scolding me. And she finally said why she wanted to see me - to tell me to run the company for her while she's laid up. Like I'd let the place fall apart, if she didn't say anything!"

"She's going to have surgery tomorrow?"

"Yeah." He chuckled. "She got everyone all worried she was planning to back out, too. Half the family must have been at the hospital this afternoon, before I got in, and she wouldn't tell them word one about why she wanted to see me." He dismissed the situation with, "But that's just one of her typical power moves, demonstrating that she's in charge. And that's why I had to show up, too. Because she never lets me forget - I may be next in line to run the company, but I don't take over until she says I do."

Or until she dies, Brittany added to herself. "And this is just temporary?"

"Yeah. She's nowhere near ready to retire."

She asked a question that she'd wondered about a number of times recently. "Why are you next in line? I mean, I don't doubt that you deserve it, with how hard you've worked over the years, but that's not why, is it?"

"No, it's not. In fact, I guess it's kind of the opposite. Since I've always known I'd take over eventually, I've worked extra hard to make us successful." He paused for a few seconds. "As for why me - do you know that Grandfather announced before I was born that his first grandson would be named after him and eventually take over the company?"

"Yes. You talked about that when we went for ice cream after the movie." The night of their first date. She guessed he'd been trying to impress her, although it certainly hadn't been necessary. "But why not your dad? He's worked for the company his whole life, hasn't he?"

"Yeah, he has." She could hear the smile in his voice when he went on, "When I was a kid, I thought it was because Dad wasn't named Antonio. But the real reason is that Dad's too easygoing and he's not a strong leader. He wouldn't have cared about expanding the business, either."

"Is your dad okay about it? I'd think he might resent being passed over like that."

Tony didn't answer for a moment. "I guess so. I never really thought about it, but he sure seems comfortable with the way things are."

"He probably is," she replied. "I was just curious." She felt embarrassed now for asking, so she changed the subject. "How was the trip?"

"Fine. We got in a little early. How was your day?"

"Good. Breakfast went well, and we got great reviews from everybody. Rachel brought up the fact that we need a TV for the guests, so I'm planning to get a TV and a VCR and put them on a cart that can be wheeled into any of the guest rooms."

"That's a great idea. I remember I kind of wished I could watch TV the first night I stayed there. You say Rachel suggested that?"

She smiled. "It was so cute. At breakfast, I asked what I'd done wrong or should have done differently or whatever. And Seth and Annabelle said everything was perfect, but finally Rachel said she hadn't been able to watch cartoons. Carolyn was really embarrassed, but I was just glad someone mentioned it. She's such a sweet little girl!"

"That blonde hair of hers makes her look like a little angel, too." He cleared his throat and spoke hesitantly. "Britt, this probably isn't any of my business, but why didn't you and Michael ever have kids? You used to talk about it."

The hand on the phone felt slippery with sweat all of a sudden. "It just never got to be the right time, I guess. I always had this picture of us being settled first, maybe even owning a small house somewhere."

"That makes sense."

She could have left it at that, but she wanted him to know more. "Looking back at it now, I don't think Michael ever had any interest in being a father. It would have meant more responsibility for him, and less freedom. But I guess I didn't want to admit it would never happen."

"It's not too late, you know." There was a simple sincerity to his words that made her imagine he was saying something much more than the words themselves.

And imagination is all it was, all it could possibly be. She answered, careful to sound casual, "I suppose not. But it's getting late where you are and you've got a busy day tomorrow. I'd better let you go now."

It also had to be imagination that made him sound a little disappointed when he said good night.

**

The next morning, Tony called the florist and ordered a dozen long-stemmed red roses sent to Britt. Something about their relationship was troubling her, but at this distance, he couldn't tell what it was. Well, actually the problem had started on Friday afternoon, but if he hadn't had to hurry back to Rhode Island, they might have resolved it by now.

He then drove back to the hospital, where he found the surgical waiting area practically overflowing with Fiores. Aunt Luisa reported that Grandmother had been taken down to surgery just before nine o'clock, and Dad added the fact that the surgeon said the procedure would take a couple of hours.

Uncle Frank looked to make sure Aunt Luisa was within earshot before asking, "Hey, anybody bring a deck of cards? Play a few hands of seven card stud and the time'll pass real quick."

"You'll do no such thing, Francis Fiore." Her glare was no match for Grandmother's, but it was still powerful.

"Aw, Lu, you know I don't mean any disrespect. Firemen play cards all the time." Uncle Frank had been a fireman, but now that he was retired, his major occupation seemed to be annoying his younger sister. He turned to Dad. "Larry, how about a game?"

"No, thanks." Dad quickly turned to Tony and asked, "Don't you suppose we ought to make some

business plans?"

Tony nodded. "Good idea. Robbie, come on over here, will you?" The three of them found a round table slightly away from the rest of the group. "I haven't talked to Elsa since Friday morning. Is there anything new we need to handle?"

Robbie shook his head. "Not that I know of."

Dad said, "Not me, either. How's that deal of yours going?"

"It's making progress. I'd hoped to get the basics of an agreement in place this week, but I'm going to be stuck here until Grandmother's better." He sat back and watched both men's expressions. "What do you think about sending Frankie to finish the financial analysis and start negotiations?"

Dad frowned, but answered carefully - and softly so his brother didn't hear, "I'm not sure. She could handle the number crunching, no problem, but negotiating a deal?" Frankie, short for Francesca, was Uncle Frank's daughter.

"Yeah, Tony. She's a good kid, and real smart, too, but still kind of green."

He had to laugh. "She's a year and a half younger than you, Robbie! Anyway, if we want to grow her into our CFO, we've got to start sometime."

"I still don't see why we need a CFO," Dad complained. "Elsa handled the books just fine until Frankie came home last year."

"I don't care what you call the job, but Fiore Marine's a lot bigger than it used to be. When I take over, I'm not going to have time to double-check our financial statements, like Grandmother still does." He was suddenly reminded of Britt's question last night. Did it bother Dad - or Robbie, for that matter - that he could say things like "when I take over"? "In any case, I wasn't thinking about just throwing Frankie into the negotiations without any help. I thought she could be the conduit between Blackburn's family and me. I could try to do the deal over the phone, but that would take too much time."

Robbie was the first to respond. "That makes it more feasible, I'd think."

Dad nodded. "I do, too, but have you talked to her about this yet? I'm not sure if she'd want to leave Jasmine all alone with Terrell."

"No, I haven't talked to her yet, but she's offered to go on site visits with me a few times. I assume she thinks Terrell's ready for the responsibility." If Tony was ever lucky enough to have kids, no one would ever need to wonder about that. He would be a hands-on daddy from the start, and his wife would know he was prepared for any eventuality. "I'll talk to her when I get to the office today."

"What can I do to help, Tony?" Dad asked. "You're going to have a lot on your plate for the next while."

He shrugged. "Just be there, in case I need a hand, I guess. And Robbie, if you could handle the existing subsidiaries pretty much by yourself, that would be great."

They both agreed, and Dad and Robbie went on to give summaries of their respective areas of the business. As they'd said, nothing was urgent, but this mini-staff meeting was definitely preferable to sitting around, nervously waiting to hear how the operation had gone.

Some time later, Tony sensed a change in the surrounding noise level. He turned to see a man in blue scrubs approaching their table.

Dad stood and offered his hand. "Hello, Doctor. This is my son Tony, and you've already met my other son Robbie."

The doctor shook Tony's hand, too, and by then, Uncle Frank and Aunt Luisa had joined them. "We just finished a few minutes ago, and she's fine. In fact, she was awake and asking how it had gone." He went on for several minutes, explaining about the carotid surgery and that she'd spend the rest of the day in Intensive Care, merely as a precautionary measure. "We often send patients home the next day, but in Mrs. Fiore's case, given her age, I think another day in the hospital would be best."

Everyone agreed that would be a good idea, and Aunt Luisa said, "She lives alone. Should I plan to take her home with me for a few days?"

"Yes, I think so. Now, is one of you Antonio?"

Tony nodded. "That's me."

"She asked if you were here today, and got a little perturbed because we didn't know. You might want to go down to ICU and say hello. With so many of you, you'll need to take turns visiting her, and perhaps some of you could wait until tomorrow. She'll be quite groggy the rest of today, anyway." He shook hands again and left.

Uncle Frank cracked a smile and said, "See, I told you the other day - no stroke's got a chance against Mother."

Their laugh was explosive, primarily a mechanism for releasing tension. Dad said, "I'll go call everyone. Tony, you go down and see her first."

Everyone else nodded, so Tony said, "Okay. I'll see you in a while." He followed the signs and arrows down a long corridor to an impressively paneled waiting room. He spoke to the volunteer at the desk and was directed into a maze of glass-fronted rooms.

Finally, he found the proper room and watched while two nurses settled Grandmother into bed and attached numerous monitoring devices. She was barely awake, so he stood off to the side, uneasily wondering if he should leave and come back later.

One of the nurses smiled at him and asked Grandmother, "Now, who is this handsome man who's come to see you?"

For the first time, she glanced around the room and noticed him. "Antonio. They said you weren't here." Her voice was hoarse and it seemed to hurt her to speak.

He moved up next to the bed and put his hand on her arm. "Of course I'm here, Grandmother."

Her eyes drifted partially closed. "Don't stay. Company doesn't run itself - should know that by now." Her head sagged forward and she no longer seemed to be awake.

He'd been dismissed.

**

The box from the florist was waiting when Brittany got back from the store. She knew right away the box would contain roses - that's just the kind of guy Tony was. The fact that it was a dozen, long-stemmed red roses didn't really surprise her.

Still, they were for her, and she stared at them nestled in their box for a very long time. She smoothed the

crisp green paper with hands that shook, and finally she reached for the card. "All my love forever, Tony."

Sara, one of the girls down the hall from Brittany and Carolyn freshman year, had received flowers from her high school boyfriend for her birthday that year. The whole hall had watched her open them, and then she'd ceremonially placed the card in a small locked box. She'd shown them a few things already in the box - the ticket stub from her first movie date with Jimmy - or was it Jason? A picture of the two of them dressed for their senior prom, a matchbook from the restaurant they ate the night before she left for college. Brittany had laughed about the whole thing, behind Sara's back. What was the point in saving junk like that?

Now she understood. In twenty years, she could pick up this card and read it, and she would instantly remember how it felt to be loved. She would once again feel the world spin out from under her, the way it did whenever Tony kissed her. She would know that, no matter how lost and alone she was at that moment, she'd been special to someone once. And maybe the world wouldn't seem so cold anymore.

She didn't have a special locked box like Sara did, of course. She'd never needed one before. So instead, she slipped the card under everything else in her jewelry box and put the box in the back of her sweater drawer.

After she arranged the roses in a tall vase, she placed them on the mantle over the fireplace and sat down to call Tony. It was mid-afternoon in Rhode Island, so she tried Fiore Marine first. "May I speak to Tony Fiore, please?"

She expected to be asked who was calling, but the next voice she heard was his. "This is Tony."

"I love the flowers! Thank you so much."

She could almost see his smile. "I'm glad you like them."

"Oh, I do." She felt like gushing on and on about that and about how wonderful it was that he cared, but stopped herself in time. "How's your grandmother? Did the surgery go all right?"

"It went fine, and I saw her for a minute after it was over. She told me to get to work, so that's why I'm here."

"That's great news. Will she be in the hospital long?"

"Probably until Wednesday. Listen, can I call you later? I'm in the middle of something right now." There was a burst of noise in the background - one or two voices followed by laughter.

"Of course. I'm sorry for bothering you at work. I just didn't think - "

He interrupted with, "Don't apologize. I'm really glad you called. I'll call as soon as I get home tonight. And remember, I love you."

"I love you, too." After she hung up, she realized that he'd said he loved her loud enough for whoever was in his office to hear. Who was it?

She asked him when he called back later. He sounded confused when he answered, "My cousin Frankie. I'm sorry I couldn't talk then, but she's flying out tomorrow to work on the Blackburn deal. I was bringing her up to speed as much as possible, and we were pretty pressed for time."

"Oh. I didn't mind that you couldn't talk long. I just wondered - you said you loved me right in front of

her . . ."

"Well, I do. Why shouldn't I say it?"

His matter-of-fact response made her feel silly. "I don't mean that you shouldn't. I was just surprised."

He was quiet for a few seconds. "Britt, I get the feeling that you don't really believe I love you."

"Oh, no! I believe you."

"Do you understand what I mean by that? It's not a passing feeling like lust. When I say I'll love you forever, I'm totally serious. And I'd beg you to marry me, if you weren't still married to Michael."

The breath whooshed out of her. "You can't mean that."

"Why not? I want us to be together for the rest of our lives." He paused, perhaps to give her a chance to respond. When she didn't, he continued, "But I understand it's too soon for that, and not just because of your divorce. You need a chance to decide what you truly want out of life, and I know that might not be marriage to me."

A part of her deep inside was screaming "Yes, it is!" But she wouldn't let those words come out. He was talking like she was the one who needed an escape hatch out of their relationship, but she knew he was the one who'd eventually use it. "It's good not to jump into things."

"It doesn't feel good now. I want to be with you so much!"

"Maybe you'll be able to come back fairly soon."

"I will, Britt, I promise." His voice hummed with sincerity. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about on Sunday. I'm going to turn over our East Coast subsidiaries to Robbie, and move to Oregon."

"Move to Oregon?" That sounded stupid, just echoing his words, but forming sentences seemed impossibly hard. "You mean, not just while Blackburn's getting going again?"

"That's right. I'll live with you, if that's okay, or else rent an apartment somewhere close, so we can be together a lot."

"You can't do that! Your job is in Newport."

"Only because it's been convenient. I spend a lot of time on the road, and that probably won't change. But it's time for us to devote more effort to our West Coast operations, so living on the West Coast only makes sense."

"That's okay with your grandmother?" After the words came out, she realized he might not like the implication that his grandmother had the final say on a decision like this. But wasn't it the truth, if she was still in charge?

"We haven't talked about it yet," he admitted. "So it won't happen right away. I'll have to wait until she's back at work, at least, before I leave - but I bet that'll be well before the end of the month."

"You expect her back at work that quickly?" Luckily, her mouth was still functioning. Her brain certainly wasn't, and her stomach hadn't stopped flipping since he mentioned marriage.

"Definitely. She has no patience with being sick, or with anyone else who gets sick, for that matter. But Britt, that's not why I brought all this up tonight. I want you to know how I feel. I don't want you to think

there's a chance I'll change my mind about you. Now that we've found each other - " His voice cracking with emotion, he vowed, "I won't let you go - unless I'm sure that's what you really want." Much more quietly, he added, "And to be honest, I'm not sure if I could do it even then."

She didn't tell him that would never happen, that her wildest fantasy was to become his wife and the mother of his children. She also didn't say that she realized his plan to move to Oregon was his own fantasy, born out of desperation. Neither fantasy would come true, but there was no harm in indulging them for now. Reality would destroy them all too soon.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Tony walked down the hall toward his office, pausing at Elsa's desk to greet her. "Good morning, Elsa. Is there any news about Grandmother?"

"She's doing fine," she answered, but her serious expression made him wonder. "Your father wants to see you right away."

"Oh?" She didn't elaborate, so he said, "Okay, I'll stop by now." Dad's office was on the other side of Grandmother's from his own office, so it only took a few seconds to get there. "Hey, Dad. Something come up?"

Dad looked up with a worried frown. "Have a seat, son."

Tony sank into a chair, knowing that he wasn't going to like this conversation. Dad hadn't called him "son" in years, probably not since he'd taken his turn at trying to talk Tony out of the divorce that hadn't even been his idea. The whole family had tried, and their arguments had all been similar - basically, he was reminded that the family still loved him, but that divorce was against God's will. He and Carolyn had made a life-long commitment to each other. They should honor that commitment. Today, the subject most likely would be Brittany, and how he was interfering in the sacred vows of matrimony she and Michael had made.

"I had a long talk with Mother last night, after the anesthetic wore off. Quite frankly, I'm confused. You've known your whole life that this company was to be yours eventually, and you've seemed eager for it. Now that the time has come, why are you hesitating?"

Tony's first reaction was relief. This was business, not personal. He didn't have to tell someone he loved to butt out of his private life. But then Dad's question penetrated. He was talking like Grandmother intended to retire. "What do you mean? Grandmother's not retiring!"

Dad's eyes narrowed, as if he'd caught Tony in a lie. "Yes, she is. She told me that herself, and she said that's what she talked to you about on Sunday."

He shook his head. "No - " That sounded panicky, so he started over. "She told me to take over the company, but that's just until she's better."

"It's permanent, Tony. She's ready to retire, and she has been for some time." Dad looked a little less severe now. "I think she's been hoping you'd settle down first. She thought - well, we all thought - that with Carolyn getting married again, you'd realize it was time for you to do the same."

Logically, he knew it was irrelevant, but he was fed up with all the assumptions everyone made about him. "Tell me, is there anyone in this whole idiotic family who *doesn't* think I'm still wishing Carolyn would come back to me?"

Dad jerked back slightly in his chair. "We understand, Tony. You can't stop loving someone just because they stop loving you. But it's been a long time . . ."

"Almost five years, and I have to say that you obviously *don't* understand. I no more want Carolyn to come back than - " He couldn't think of a good analogy, and finally settled for one that wasn't particularly accurate. "Than Robbie wishes he'd married that girl from URI he brought to a family party one time."

"Denise?" Dad looked horrified, which was Tony's intent. Denise had been too loud, too outspoken, and too rude that day for the family to remember her with any degree of fondness. "But you've always said - "

He sighed. "I know. I've said we're still close friends, and we are. But my point is that marriage was never right for us, and I wouldn't wish away our divorce, even if I could." He thought about mentioning Britt, but knew it was best to wait.

Dad raised his eyebrows, then shrugged. "Be that as it may, the fact remains that the company is now yours. Take it over, like the leader we all know you are." He half-smiled and looked misty-eyed for a brief moment before standing and offering to shake hands. "Congratulations, Tony. You've earned it."

Tony felt a warm glow of satisfaction in the pit of his stomach then. Dad was right. He'd worked his whole life to deserve the privilege of running Fiore Marine, and he'd finally done it. He'd succeeded.

He probably had a silly grin on his face when he walked into his office and discovered that the top of his desk was empty. He looked around and noticed other things missing here and there - primarily personal possessions. He was still standing there when Elsa bustled in, full of purpose. "What are you doing?" he asked.

She stopped short and drew herself up to her full height - all the way up to his shoulder. "I'm moving your things into your new office. Not most of the files, of course, since you won't be needing them, but your personal files and pictures and things like that. You'll move Robbie in here, won't you?"

"I don't know."

"Well, he's just got that awful hole-in-the-wall, and you'll want him close at hand." She frowned suddenly. "You *are* giving him your old job, aren't you? He deserves it."

"I don't know," he said again. The euphoria was gone, and now he felt like his brain was filled with cotton. He couldn't think, and the warm glow in his stomach had turned into an inferno. "Do this later, will you?"

She peered at him for a couple of seconds, then took his arm and pulled him out the door. "You go sit in your new office and relax for a few minutes. I'll bring you coffee."

He let her lead him into the other office and behind Grandfather's desk. He even sat in his chair, at her insistence. The chair squeaked, as it had done as long as Tony remembered. He'd always wanted to sit in this chair, but he'd never dared to do it, even when Grandfather was away. And now, it was his chair to sit in.

He was vaguely aware of Elsa bringing the coffee she'd promised, but he let it grow cold. He might have sat there all day, staring at nothing, except that Robbie came in and plopped down right across the desk from him.

"Hey, bro, congrats. How come you didn't tell us yesterday?"

He forced himself to smile ruefully. "Well, believe it or not, I didn't realize what Grandmother was talking about. She said she needed an operation and I was supposed to take over the company. I figured she meant temporarily."

Robbie frowned disbelieving. "And you didn't ask to make sure? That doesn't sound like you - the way you've been waiting for her to hang it up all this time."

"I don't know. I guess I was more worried about the operation than anything else. And then, the minute I walked in, she was on me about B - " He stopped himself, but too late.

"About Brittany? What about her?" Robbie sat up from his customary slouch and leaned forward.

He tried for casual, knowing that was the only way to throw Robbie off the scent. "Well, you know I was at her place for the weekend when Mom called - kind of a dry run for the grand opening this coming weekend." Robbie nodded. "And we all know Grandmother's got some pretty archaic ideas about friendships between men and women." He nodded again. "So she can't get it through her head that Britt and I can be friends, and that Britt can be divorcing Michael, and it's not my fault."

"They're getting a divorce, huh? That's new."

"Yeah. She hasn't filed yet, but only because she hasn't lived in Oregon long enough." This was going surprisingly well. Not that he wanted to hide the truth from Robbie, or at least not for very long, but he didn't want to deal with his questions this morning.

A broad grin broke across Robbie's face. "Okay, so now you can admit it. You're crazy about her, aren't you?"

He thought about denying it, but he made it a practice to never lie. He nodded instead, and grinned right back at Robbie.

"I knew it!" he yelped. "And that grin makes it pretty clear she feels the same about you. So double congratulations are in order - when's she coming out here?"

His elation drained away, and he realized why taking over the company didn't feel as wonderful today as he'd expected. "She's not. She can't."

Robbie stared at him, stricken. "How awful."

Tony couldn't agree more.

**

Tony had a brainstorm on the way to the express delivery place. He'd just spent an enjoyable half-hour at the bookstore, finding the perfect book of love poems to send Britt. He was surprised at the selection and amazed at how well the poets had managed to convey the profound but earthy nature of love. Along with the book, he bought a small gift card and wrote, "Loving you makes me wish I could write poetry. When you read these poems, know that I love you in all these ways and more." He'd send the book and card for delivery tomorrow.

His brainstorm had nothing to do with the gifts he was sending Britt daily. It had to do with Grandmother and her threat to retire. Dad talked like it was a done deal, that Grandmother was through with Fiore Marine and that was that.

Tony suddenly realized that he didn't believe it. Okay, he could buy that she *said* she was going to retire, but actually doing it was a very different thing. What would she do all day, for one thing? She used to do

a lot of cooking - and a lot of catering to Grandfather, who was not the world's easiest person to please. Now she lived alone and there just wasn't that much for her to do around the house. She might think she'd spend more time with the family, especially her great-grandkids, but how likely was that, really? She enjoyed seeing them, but she was a real authoritarian and would never put up with what she considered "allowing children to run wild."

And then, there was the point that Grandmother wouldn't be going right home from the hospital. She'd be going to Aunt Luisa's house for a few days, according to the family's plan. In practice, it was a recipe for disaster. Grandmother and Aunt Luisa never got along particularly well, probably because they were too similar and both wanted to run everything. Give Grandmother a day or two at Aunt Luisa's, and she'd do anything to get away from there.

And that's when Tony would go talk to her about this retirement thing. He'd just happen to take some business letters and reports along with him, and he'd show them to her casually. He was betting she'd rip them out of his hands. Maybe he'd take her for a ride, since the incision on her neck meant she wouldn't be allowed to drive for a few weeks. They would stop by the office, and he'd offer to give back her office. He'd suggest she work fewer hours and offload some responsibility on himself or Robbie.

If she refused, and with someone as stubborn as Grandmother that was a possibility, he would just have to grit his teeth and wait a couple of weeks. He'd give everyone at work strict instructions not to tell her a thing about what was happening at the office. After a while, he'd get Sal to approach Grandmother and hint that Robbie was terribly unhappy with the changes Tony was making. Grandmother would march into his office within the hour, and her retirement would be over.

At least, he hoped so.

**

That night, Tony almost dreaded calling Britt. Not that he didn't want to talk to her - he couldn't ever imagine feeling like that. But what could he say about the situation at work? He couldn't promise that Grandmother would come back to work, yet neither was he willing to admit that he might not be able to return to Oregon soon.

"You're spoiling me," she accused, but he heard the smile in her voice. "That chocolate is so good!"

"I'm glad you like it, sweetheart." He'd gotten it at a candy shop in one of the upscale tourist areas downtown, on the way to work from the hospital yesterday.

"But really, Tony, you shouldn't keep sending me gifts."

"Why not? I miss you all the time. Buying gifts for you makes me feel a little closer to you, and I need that."

"I miss you, too," she confessed, her voice trailing off wistfully. With sudden briskness, she changed the subject to Martha's Madness, and what she'd done today and what she still had left to do before Friday.

What was it about their relationship that bothered her? It couldn't be that she didn't love him, and he didn't see how she could fail to believe that he loved her. Maybe it had to do with the future. Maybe she was leery of commitment, of making promises that she might not want to fulfill.

Perhaps it was something to do with Michael. They'd been married a long time. She could be feeling sadness over ending their marriage. Or maybe Michael was giving her trouble about it.

A little later, he asked, "Have you talked to Michael recently?"

"No. Not for a couple of weeks. Why?"

"I just wondered how he's taking the divorce."

Her voice sounded kind of pinched. "Okay, I guess. We haven't talked since I told him, but that's no surprise."

Considering his reaction when Carolyn told him she wanted a divorce, he couldn't imagine Michael just accepting it. "Why not? Did something happen that I don't know about?"

She almost laughed. "Oh. I guess I didn't tell you about Cyndi."

"Cyndi?" He suddenly remembered Michael's threat that first day he spent at Martha's Madness. "Did he -"

"Yes, he did - and he still is. He even moved her into our apartment!"

"Oh, Britt! I'm so sorry. I didn't know - I thought you were staying at Martha's Madness because you wanted to . . ."

"I am. I could have gone back - I guess he even wanted me to - as long as I behaved the way he wanted." She added bitterly, "After all, Cyndi only makes minimum wage, and she can't cook worth a damn. He'd be willing to overlook my extra ten years and ten pounds in exchange."

"He's even more of a jerk than I thought he was!" That wasn't enough to say, but Tony didn't know what else would be appropriate. No matter what kind of scum Michael was, his behavior had hurt Britt. And she was probably still at least a little in love with him.

She laughed harshly, then stopped with a quick intake of breath. "You're right. He's a jerk, and I'm glad I finally admitted it to myself." A little more softly, she added, "I guess I should have told you this before." There seemed to be a question mark at the end of that statement.

"Only if you wanted to, sweetheart. Just because I love you doesn't mean you have to tell me everything." He wished that she'd wanted to, though. The emotional distance she kept between them was even worse than the physical distance.

**

On Thursday, Brittany took advantage of the sunny day to plant some flowers around the house and in large pots on the deck. She gave up in early afternoon, though, and not because her back was aching from the constant crouching position, either. Her excuse was embarrassing - she was afraid she wouldn't hear the doorbell when the deliveryman brought her package from Tony.

She wouldn't admit it to him, but it was very exciting to get a present everyday. Michael hadn't believed in wasting money on gifts, especially for her, so getting even a single present from Tony had been wonderful. Having the gift be long-stemmed roses was just icing on the cake. Then on Tuesday, the chocolates, and yesterday that book of love poems!

She wondered what would arrive today. She knew he'd sent something, because last night he said he hoped she'd like it, that it had reminded him of her. She'd wanted to ask what it was, but in reality, what he sent wasn't important. The part that mattered was that he cared enough to spend his valuable time buying a gift and sending it to her.

She washed up quickly, forgoing her shower until after the deliveryman had come and gone. Luckily for her nerves, he came soon after she sat down. The package was small and not bulky. Inside was an

attractively wrapped box, complete with bow. The gift card said, "I hope this pleases you as much as having you in my life pleases me."

She unwrapped the box carefully, determined to savor the idea of receiving a present as long as possible. The box was rectangular, hinged, only about an inch high, and was covered with something that felt like velvet. With sudden certainty, she knew it was from a jewelry store.

Why hadn't she realized he'd buy her jewelry? Of course he would. She'd seen enough of the expensive necklaces and bracelets he'd given Carolyn to know how much he enjoyed buying them. If she'd thought about it ahead of time, she could have told him not to do it. She could have said she wouldn't accept any presents worth more than - well, maybe fifty dollars. That way, they still could have had plenty of fun with gifts, and she wouldn't have had to deal with this problem.

She knew now that she had to tell him the truth about herself. Actually she'd known it for a couple of days, ever since he said he wanted to marry her and told her about his plan to move out to Oregon. She'd been putting off the moment of truth, figuring that as long as his grandmother wasn't ready to come back to work, she had time. But time had just run out. She would tell him tonight.

And there was no point in even looking at the undoubtedly beautiful piece of jewelry he'd sent. She couldn't keep it. She set it aside and got to her feet. She'd go back outside and drive her body to the point of exhaustion.

She made it as far as the sliding glass door before turning back. All right, she understood she couldn't keep it, but it was asking *way* too much to expect her to not take a quick peek at it. She was only human, after all.

Oh. Wow! It was the most beautiful necklace she'd ever seen. Quite simple, too, although she hadn't known that "simple" could be anywhere near that exquisite. Just a gold chain with a diamond pendant, the gold chain so slender that it made the diamond stand out more than it otherwise would. It was also so fragile-looking that she'd be afraid to wear it - not that she had to worry about that, since she was giving it back.

She didn't want to. It had been a mistake to look, she realized now. It made her wish things were different. She felt like a fish caught on a hook, twisting and turning, trying to find a way to get free. In her case, she was searching for a way to justify not leveling with Tony. He loved her and she loved him. Wasn't that enough? But she knew it wasn't.

She also knew that telling him about herself was only the beginning of the strength and courage she'd need. He'd be shocked by the truth, but he wouldn't admit that it changed the way he felt about her. She would have to be the one who drew lines, the one who said yes to sex and no to commitment. And then later, when he allowed himself to stop calling and visiting her, she would have to let him go, ignoring her desperate need for him.

She didn't go back to her planting. She didn't take her shower. She didn't even look out and watch the waves lapping at the beach. She sat huddled on the floor, staring at the diamond necklace shimmering just beyond her reach, the perfect metaphor for her life.

When Tony called, she told him, "It's lovely, but I can't accept it."

"Why not?"

"Because you shouldn't spend that much money on me."

"It's my money. I can spend it on whatever I want to, and I like buying you jewelry. But if you don't like it, I'll be glad to get you something else - whatever you want."

She shook her head, impatient with how wonderful he was being. He was always that way. Why couldn't he be rude and thoughtless sometimes? It sure would make this easier. "No, that's not it. It's - well, I guess you think you know me pretty well, after all these years . . ."

He chuckled. "Nowhere near well enough, actually, but I'm looking forward to learning."

"Not when you find out what you don't know."

"If you mean something like that you get kind of irrational sometimes, that's not going to bother me."

"That's not it." This was like removing a Band-Aid. It was best to get it over with all at once. "Before I met you - starting when I was twelve - I was pretty close to a hooker. Except I wasn't smart enough to make guys pay for it."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Tony stared at the phone, at a loss for how to respond. Britt wasn't kidding; he knew that, yet he couldn't really believe her. "I - I'm afraid I don't know what you mean."

"I mean I had sex with any guy who asked - and more than a hundred of them did." Her voice was flat, like she'd practiced saying these things.

"A hundred?" he echoed. "But why?"

She paused. "Why's not important," she said, a little shakily. "It's just something I did. I wish I hadn't done it, but I can't change the past. But I can't let you think I'm somebody I'm not, either. You talk about wanting to marry me, and you spend all sorts of money on me, and that's just wrong."

He thought he saw what she was doing. "And you think that if you tell me these things about yourself, I'll change my mind about loving you?"

"Of course. Maybe not right this minute, but eventually you will. It's only natural. You need to be proud of your wife, not ashamed of her."

"Britt, I could never be anything *but* proud of you - even if your story is true, and I'm not sure I believe it." She must be exaggerating.

"It's true!" she insisted. "Do I need to tell you the gory details? All the sleazy places I did it, all the guys who laughed at me at school?" She was daring him to say yes.

He stayed silent for a few more seconds than felt natural, hoping she'd be ready to listen. "Another time, Britt, I hope you'll tell me all that and more. But right now, I'm more concerned with your assumption that knowing your past would make me stop loving you. It's not going to happen. I love you because of the person you are today, deep down inside, and the person I've known for fifteen years."

"You can't claim you don't care how many guys I've had sex with." He heard a question mark at the end of her statement, one he was sure she hadn't intended.

"I honestly don't care about that, Britt, except that it upsets you, and anything that upsets you is a concern to me." He wished he was there with her, so he could see how she was reacting to his words.

"You say that now, but you'll change your mind." Was he imagining the uncertainty in her voice?

"I won't, Britt, really I won't. But if somehow it happened that I did, I promise I'd tell you right away."

"You would? You swear you would? I couldn't stand it if you felt stuck with me." She definitely sounded hopeful now.

"I swear I would," he assured her.

"Okay. But I still can't accept the necklace."

He sighed. "Why not, Britt? It has no strings attached. It's just something that I thought was pretty and would look really nice on you."

"It's too expensive." Very quietly, she added, "And much too nice."

That was it, he suddenly realized. "You don't think you deserve it, do you? You think that because of something you did more than fifteen years ago, you should never have anything nice. You probably think you don't deserve to be happy, either." Simply saying those things made him angry. "No wonder you stayed with Michael all those years - even though he made you miserable, you were convinced that was the best you could expect out of life."

"Don't tell me how I feel - " Her voice, full of desperation and anger, lashed into him. "You always had money. You always had your family on your side. You were always loved. I never had any of those, and maybe Michael wasn't all that great, but at least I wasn't completely alone anymore."

He'd never guessed. Even recently, when he realized how fragile she'd always been, he hadn't understood why. "Britt, you don't have to be alone anymore. That's what love is all about. Please, sweetheart, believe that I love you, and let me in."

Her breathing sounded ragged through the phone line, but eventually she said, "I guess you do, but it's going to take me a while to get used to it."

"That's okay. You can start by accepting the necklace."

After a few moments, she laughed. "All right."

Despite his determination, he was surprised that she agreed. "Now, put it on, and wear it always."

"It's too fragile. The chain might break."

"It's stronger than it looks, just like my love is stronger than you think it is."

She spoke almost too softly for him to hear. "Okay."

"Do it now, sweetheart. Take it out of the box and undo the clasp." He shut his eyes, imagining the scene as he wished it could be, with him placing the necklace around her neck.

"It's really beautiful," she murmured.

"Nowhere near as beautiful as you are. Put the phone down now and fasten it around your neck." Why couldn't he be there with her now? She needed him, so much more than he could have imagined.

He heard various sounds through the phone, and then finally, her voice again. "I did it, Tony."

He swallowed hard and blinked away his tears. "Thank you, sweetheart. Now, every time you feel the necklace around your neck, remember that I love you."

"I will." Shyly, she added, "Thank you, Tony. It's the most wonderful thing I've ever seen, and you're the most wonderful man in the universe. I love you."

The tightness in his chest disappeared. They'd made it through this hurdle, and he was buoyed by sudden confidence that they'd make it through all the others just as successfully.

**

Brittany gripped the receiver tightly in her hand. She was the luckiest woman who'd ever lived, and she would never forget it. She'd been so sure that telling Tony the truth would ruin everything, yet now that she'd told him, it was clear it wouldn't. He loved her, the real Brittany deep inside, the person no one else even knew was in there.

She also knew she could trust him to listen to the rest of her story and understand why she'd done those awful things - and not to pity her, either. She hated it when people felt sorry for her and looked at her like she wasn't a human being just like them. "Do you still want to know why?"

"Of course I do, sweetheart. But I don't want you to talk about anything you're not ready for."

"I'm ready now." And honestly, she'd be glad to get it over with. He might be able to accept what she'd done, but she couldn't. "I told you about my father dying and us moving to an apartment?"

"Yeah, but not much more than that."

"Well, I was twelve, and a real spoiled brat. I had all these great clothes and dolls and toys and everything, and we took ritzy vacations all the time. And my friends were all just like me. We went to a private school with bunches of really rich kids, and we got all upset when we found out that some of them had their own stables, so they could go riding anytime they wanted. Not that any of us cared about riding, but we felt gyped."

These memories were part of why she hated remembering her childhood. She'd been such a self-centered idiot! She hurried on, "Anyway, my dad died suddenly, right after Christmas that year. It turned out he owed tons of money - I guess he wasn't as successful as he wanted us to think. So pretty much everything got sold, and my mother had to get a job. She didn't have any skills, so she wound up being a second-shift waitress at an all-night place."

"A big adjustment for both of you."

"Especially because the only apartment she could afford was a dump in a not-very-nice part of LA. And I had to go to the public school, which really pissed me off. The kids there probably wouldn't have accepted me, anyway, but I made it tons worse by acting like I was better than them." She stopped, realizing she could keep talking for hours about those first few months after her father died. And that wasn't the part she needed to tell him tonight.

She touched her new necklace for an infusion of strength and love. "That summer was the first time I came to Martha's Madness. Aunt Martha and Dad - well, Dad was estranged from his whole family, but that's a whole different story. Anyway, Aunt Martha sent a plane ticket for me and I spent the whole summer up here. It was really great for me, and I got used to the way she made me feel loved. When I went back to LA, I decided that if I had at least one friend, I'd be okay and could survive until the next summer. So I picked this guy, Jeremy, who lived down the hall from us. He was fifteen, but kind of geeky, so he didn't have many friends, either."

She continued, "Mom worked almost every evening, so he'd come over and we'd watch TV. And I guess I didn't say that my breasts had all of a sudden popped out over the summer, so I didn't really look twelve anymore."

Tony said, "And fifteen-year-old guys being what they are, I'm pretty sure I see where that ended up."

"You're right, except you probably don't realize what happened after that. See, Jeremy wasn't happy being on the outside all the time, so he started bragging to other guys about how he had this girl who'd do anything he wanted. They didn't believe him, no matter what he said, so finally he told a couple of the guys he'd show them." She steeled herself for a second before continuing. "He brought them over to the apartment one night, and - " This was stupid. She shouldn't have such trouble saying what had happened.

"Did they force you?" His voice was taut and jagged like barbed wire.

"Oh, no. Not really. Just - I knew how much Jeremy wanted them to accept him - and if I refused, it would be worse than ever for him. And he was my only friend, and he wouldn't be my friend anymore, either."

"He was pimping you, Britt! And you let him keep doing it, didn't you?"

She knew he was blaming Jeremy, and that wasn't fair. "I guess maybe for a while, but I got pretty popular on my own real quick. All these different guys would show up, and usually they'd be somebody from around the neighborhood or school - not that they'd speak to me other times, of course. Once in a while, they'd take me out someplace, like a drive-in movie, but usually we just did it in the apartment."

"But if you wanted friends, why do it with guys who ignored you the rest of the time?"

Her stomach tensed. This might be the worst part to admit. "Because as awful as it all was, it was better than being alone. I tried to stop sometimes - like right after I'd get back from the summer at Martha's Madness. I'd decide that what I was doing was sick, and that no one could possibly need love enough to make it worth what I was going through to get it. So when guys came over, I'd say no. But then, I'd sit in that awful apartment and every minute would last an hour. I suppose it was a little like going cold turkey from drugs, because I'd never last more than a couple of days."

"Britt, that's awful! I - I just wish I could have protected you from that somehow." His sympathy was clear, and so was the fact that she hadn't suddenly stopped being human in his eyes. "I need to know something, though. Do you still feel the same way about sex?"

Her jaw dropped open, and she realized that he must be thinking about all the time they'd spent in bed the last two weekends. "Oh, no! It's totally different now. I love everything about it, because we love each other and because you care about whether I like it. Those other guys were just using my body."

"Are you being completely honest about that? Because I seriously want to know the truth." He was probably the only man she'd believe meant those words. Of course, she'd never known another man who'd even ask.

"Definitely. Everything is great with you - even kissing, which I never liked before." And that reminded her of their first date, when she first found out how his kisses could feel. "There's something else you're probably wondering about - why I stopped you that night after the movie."

"You said we were moving too fast . . ." His voice trailed off, like the reality of her past had just dawned on him. What was too fast for someone like her about making out in the hall after a date?

"See, what happened is that when I went to Brown, I decided I was going to be a different person. I'd gotten stuck back in LA, because once I got a bad reputation, I had no chance for anything else. No guy would ask me out on a real date, and they wouldn't bother to get to know me or anything. So, going away to school was the perfect moment to change my life. I wanted to have real friends, and most of all, I wanted a boyfriend."

"So you were making sure I'd come back for more?" There was a hint of disappointment in the way he asked.

"No, that's not - well, actually that *is* what I'd planned to do." Suddenly, she was aware of how tricky this might be. She had to be honest with him, though. "Okay, first of all you've got to remember this was before I knew you. All I knew was that you were incredibly good-looking and definitely very classy. And then we went to the movie and you didn't jump me, which just added to the classy part. And when we went for ice cream, I found out that you were really nice and seemed interested in me. I couldn't believe how lucky I was, even though I never in a million years thought it would last."

Her mouth was dry now, but she had to continue. "When you kissed me, it was like every movie cliché you've ever seen in your life - waves crashing, thunder and lightning, all that stuff. I never wanted you to stop, and I was so turned on I didn't think I could survive if we didn't do it right away."

"So did I. We were both wrong." He sounded slightly cynical, hardly a surprise.

And here was the really awful part, the part where she told him what she'd thought about him at the time. "And then that girl walked by and made a comment, and I saw what was happening. I was setting myself up the same way as before. We'd end up having sex on our first date, and that's all you'd ever be interested in anymore. You'd forget that we liked each other, and I'd never be good enough to be seen publicly with you, and you'd get bored with me, and I'd be all alone again. So I'd go out with somebody else, and we'd have sex, too, because there'd be no point in not doing it, and I'd end up with a bad rep -"

He cut her off. "That's enough, Britt. I see what you mean. And the worst part is that I can't say you're completely wrong. Not about being seen with you, because I never would have been anything but thrilled about that. But I wasn't ready for a real relationship with you at that point. Our conversation that night was great, but sex would have doomed it. That's why I didn't argue with you, or suggest going for a drive just to talk or some dumb line like that. I would have done that with any other girl I wanted, but you were special and I knew it even then."

Chills ran up and down her spine. He really, truly understood her! "I need to tell you one thing more. I was really sorry later, especially when we didn't go out again. I spent a lot of nights wishing it had happened differently."

His voice was warm and reassuring. "Me, too, sweetheart. But that's all behind us now."

She remembered his voice all night long, and all day Friday. She finished planting her flowers and did all the last-minute preparations for Martha's Madness Bed & Breakfast's Grand Opening, and all the while his love was right there in her heart.

When the doorbell rang in mid-afternoon, she wondered if it could possibly be her first paying guests. It wasn't, though. It was her new friend, the express deliveryman.

The package was larger than usual today, for good reason. Tony had sent her a large container of clam chowder from one of the wonderful waterfront restaurants in Newport. They'd eaten clam chowder here one time recently, and she had said how much she missed the good chowder she remembered from

Rhode Island.

The note was also longer than usual today. It said, "Darling Britt, I know that you'll be too busy to think about eating this weekend, so I thought this might help. I also know you'll be nervous about pleasing your guests, and I wish I could be there to help you relax. You've always been a wonderful hostess and you've made Martha's Madness into a warm, inviting retreat. No guest could ask anything more of you or the house. Enjoy yourself, and call me anytime you want to talk. All my love forever, Tony"

She stored the chowder in the refrigerator and disposed of all the wrappings and stay-cold materials. She wanted to call and thank him, but knew better. She'd never be ready to hang up, and she had guests arriving anytime. She'd make muffins now, and call him tonight.

And even though she was the only person in the house right now, she was no longer alone.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Tony picked up the phone and punched in Aunt Luisa's number. He'd hesitate before calling some people at nine o'clock on Saturday morning - Robbie, for example - but not Aunt Luisa or Grandmother.

Aunt Luisa answered promptly. "Good morning."

"Good morning, Aunt Luisa. This is Tony."

"Antonio, how nice to hear from you! Did you want to speak to Vinnie? I'm afraid he's not up yet, but I'll be glad to call him for you."

Tony smiled to himself. He just bet Aunt Luisa would love an excuse to get Vinnie out of bed. Vinnie was twenty now and doing an excellent job at Fiore Marine, but to his mother, he was still a lazy slug-a-bed who spent his nights out carousing. "Actually, I was calling to ask whether I could stop by and visit Grandmother sometime this morning."

"You'll have to call her house," she answered, suddenly snappish.

"She's not still with you?"

"No. She absolutely *insisted* on being taken home yesterday. When I knew she was serious, I offered to take her myself, but do you know what she did instead? She waited until I was in the middle of making dinner, and then she carried her own bag right out to Vinnie's car, the minute he drove up. The poor boy had no choice but to do what she said."

Interesting how Vinnie had suddenly become a poor boy in his mother's eyes when up against Grandmother - accurate, too, as Tony knew from personal experience. "I'm sure she just didn't want to put you to any more trouble on her account."

Aunt Luisa made a disgusted sound. "You obviously don't know Mother, if you think that."

"Well, I'm sure she appreciated all you did for her, even though it's hard for her to express it." Before she had a chance to challenge that statement, too, he continued, "And thanks for telling me about Grandmother. I'll call her at home."

"Goodbye, Antonio."

As he punched in Grandmother's number, he wondered whether he needed to alter his plan. Now that she wasn't staying at Aunt Luisa's, she might be less eager to get back to work. That wasn't necessarily

true, though. Perhaps she'd wanted to go home because she was feeling healthy and ready to dive back into things. He'd have to wait and see.

"Good morning."

"Good morning, Grandmother. This is Tony. How are you feeling?"

"Antonio! I wondered if you'd ever call."

He barely kept himself from laughing. Piling on the guilt was as natural as breathing to her. "I decided you probably had enough people checking up on you all the time. Anyway, the last time I saw you, you told me in no uncertain terms to get to work, that the company doesn't run itself. So I've been doing exactly that. But since it's Saturday, I'm hoping you wouldn't mind me coming for a visit today."

"Come for lunch, Antonio."

"But I don't want you cooking on my account. Perhaps I could bring something, or even better, take you out to lunch. How does that sound?"

"My sauce is already on the stove. We will eat here. But stop at the store and buy a loaf of fresh bread. Vincenzo took me to the store by Luisa's house yesterday, and you would not believe how stale their bread was."

"I'll be glad to, and I'm looking forward to seeing you, too."

"Lunch is at twelve o'clock sharp," she said as she hung up.

The reminder was unnecessary. She always served lunch at noon, and when he was ten, he'd been two minutes late for a meal at his grandparents' house. It was his favorite, Grandmother's special lasagna that no one else in the family could make, and he'd been looking forward to it for days. He didn't get to enjoy it that day, though. He spent the entire meal standing in the corner of the dining room, hearing and smelling everything. And then, Grandmother put away the leftovers and ordered him into the kitchen, where he washed dishes for what seemed to be hours.

His parents would have thought that was adequate punishment, and he'd have been allowed a small portion of lasagna before bedtime. Not so with Grandmother. She'd stared into his eyes and she'd said to him, "Now, Antonio, go home and put yourself to bed. Perhaps by morning, you will have learned to respect mealtimes."

He'd wanted to cry that early evening, as he walked the two miles across town to his house. He hadn't eaten lunch that day, wanting to save room for dinner, and his stomach was growling. He had to pass by numerous shops and restaurants, and each one called out to him with smells too delicious to be real. He knew he didn't have to do what she said. He could find something to eat at home, or spend the dollar bill he'd been hoarding for a candy bar. But he was a good boy, and he knew this lesson was for his own good. He would tough it out.

And he had learned his lesson. One was never late when dealing with Grandmother.

**

Brittany yawned as she began making breakfast. She'd stayed awake far too late last night, thinking about Tony and how incredibly lucky she was that he loved her. It didn't take her long to wake up, though, because this was her B&B's first real breakfast buffet, and that was exciting, too.

Her guests had all arrived before dark last night, a couple with a ten or twelve-year-old son, another

couple, and two singles, both men. They were all here for the kite festival, and they'd warned her they would be up and out early this morning. They were looking forward to breakfast, though, and would be sure to come in from the beach long enough to eat.

She heard the front door open and close just then, and wondered whether it was Angela arriving or her guests leaving. Since Angela didn't come into the kitchen right away, that answered her question.

Angela got there about fifteen minutes later and immediately asked, "Did Tony fly in for the weekend?"

"No, he couldn't get away. I promised I'd tell him all about it on the phone."

"But I heard - " She broke off, her cheeks blotching pink. "I'm sorry, Brittany, your social life is none of my business."

Brittany stared at her in confusion. "What did you hear?"

Angela looked very distressed. "I wasn't snooping, really I wasn't. But when I came in just now, I saw your bedroom door was open, not shut like you always leave it. So I went over to close it, and I heard someone snoring."

"Snoring? In my room? It must have been coming from upstairs."

She shook her head reluctantly. "No, I'm sure it wasn't."

Her insides felt very cold. "Watch things here. I'll go check."

She opened the bedroom door, but she didn't need to enter. She'd seen Michael asleep in bed enough times to recognize him from a distance.

**

When Tony bent to hug Grandmother, he noticed that she seemed smaller and more fragile than he remembered. Was it the effects of her surgery, or had he just not noticed the changes before this? She was dressed meticulously as usual, and was using a scarf around her neck to cover the long vertical incision.

"Good, you remembered bread. I'll slice it. You pour the wine." She took the bread and moved down the hallway into the old-fashioned kitchen.

He set the bakery box on a handy counter. "I brought you some cannoli. They're not as good as yours, of course."

She peeked into the box, then shook her head, a pleased smile softening her features. "Such a treat, Antonio! Especially after that awful hospital food, and Luisa's cooking was hardly any better. Everything healthy for her - no wonder young Vincenzo never eats at home."

They ate soon, sitting at opposite ends of the long table. Even if Grandmother herself seemed older, her cooking was as good as ever. "Your sauce is always the best, Grandmother. I made some last month and it was good, but it's never like yours."

"Did you use fresh tomatoes?"

He nodded. "That's how you taught me."

She rolled her eyes in disgust. "Since when does that matter? Do you know that Luisa - my own daughter, mind you - uses the canned ones?" With pursed lips, she continued, "She says it's because

they're more consistent in quality, but I think she just can't be bothered to do it the right way."

Or it could be that Aunt Luisa was showing her independence from her mother. It must be even more daunting to have Grandmother as a mother than a grandmother. "Will you teach me to make your special lasagna sometime?"

She inclined her head slightly. "Perhaps. I would rather teach your wife."

He wouldn't be drawn into that discussion today. "I'll take that as a promise, then."

When they finished eating, she offered the cannoli he'd brought, but he refused. "I brought them for you to enjoy, Grandmother. And after this wonderful meal, I certainly don't need anything more. But since you cooked, I'll clean up."

She pushed away from the table, chair legs scraping across the wood floor. "No. We will leave everything right on the table. Luisa is coming by, and if there's no work to do, she'll start nosing into my things."

Tony was curious how Aunt Luisa would interpret finding the dining room full of dirty dishes and partially eaten food. He'd have to remember to ask Mom or Sal how the story got passed around the family.

Grandmother led the way through the archway into the living room and chose her usual straight-backed wing chair. Tony sat opposite her, so she wouldn't have to turn her head to see him. "I brought this week's sales reports, Grandmother. I thought you'd be interested to see how things are going at work."

She raised her hand, stopping him in the middle of reaching for the reports. "I am not interested, Antonio. Lorenzo tells me that you seem not to believe I have retired."

The words sounded so final, but he would not believe that they were. "Dad isn't quite right. I can see why you made that decision, but the circumstances were different then. You were in the hospital facing surgery. Now that you're better, you'll be anxious to return to work."

"Why should I be? I am close to seventy-five years old, Antonio. I have worked hard all my life, as a wife and a mother, and then running the company on your behalf. Do I not deserve to retire?"

"Of course you do." Grasping at straws, he said, "But don't make such an important decision quickly. Perhaps you could come back to work part-time, just mornings or a day or two a week. You'd miss it otherwise, you know you would."

She frowned and her eyes bored into him. "What has gotten into you, Antonio? Fiore Marine is your company. I never wanted to run it, but I did in order to preserve it for you and for the rest of the family. You have been trained for this your entire life and you are ready for the responsibility. Why are you sitting here arguing with me about it?"

Because of Britt, but he couldn't say that. And as he sat there, cringing in her glare, he realized how ridiculous he was being. Even if he succeeded and Grandmother didn't retire, she wouldn't run the company forever. She couldn't. So he would eventually face the same situation - choosing between the woman he loved and the company he was born to run.

"It is that woman, isn't it?" Great. Britt had become another "that woman" to Grandmother. "You are infatuated with her, and you think she is the answer to all your needs." She paused, but not long enough for him to reply. "Well, I say that being infatuated is a long way from building a solid relationship with someone. If you needed this to get over your divorce, then so be it. But you are not going to let this company fall to ruin for the sake of your physical desires. It is time for you to show the maturity and

strength of character in your personal life that you demonstrate at work."

He opened his mouth to say something - anything - in his defense. She waved him silent. "We will not talk about this anymore. Instead, I shall tell you about the details I intend to finalize with my lawyer on Monday. As you know, I now own all of Fiore Marine. It will be split as follows: 14% to Lorenzo, for his many years of service; 7% each to Luisa and Francis, who have not worked in the company but are nevertheless my children; 7% to Roberto, for his hard work; 3% to Francesca, for her efforts this last year; 2% to Elsa, for her steadfast support, even though she is not family; and 11% to a family trust, to be used for the college education of family members and other worthy needs."

He'd been adding up the numbers in his head, and he'd gotten to 51% without hearing his name mentioned. Before he could ask, she pointed her finger at him. "The other 49%, Antonio, will belong to you. It is not a majority interest in the company on purpose, because this company is for the benefit of the entire family. So that you never forget that, you must get at least one other stockholder to agree with you before you can take action."

Glowing now, she added, "But you will not receive your shares yet. You must prove yourself first. Show us all that you are the man you were raised to be."

He felt like he'd been slapped. He had to prove himself? Hadn't he been doing that for more than ten years? Dad had said just the other day that he'd earned the chance to take over. Even Grandmother had said he was ready for the responsibility.

Clearly, the problem was that she disapproved of his relationship with Britt. She was determined to make him behave the way she wanted him to. But what was the point of that? Hadn't he been raised to be the one to make the decisions? Wasn't that what running a company was all about?

For two cents, he would have told her to take her precious company and stuff it. It was obviously what she cared about - not him, her first-born grandson, even though he'd spent his entire lifetime trying to please her.

But nevertheless, she was Grandmother, and he was constitutionally unable to be rude to her. And, as much as he hated to admit it, she'd occasionally been right in the past when he'd been wrong. He'd better think things through before he overreacted.

**

Brittany sat on the loveseat in her room, waiting for Michael to wake up. She didn't want to be here, but she didn't dare be anywhere else. If he woke up and she wasn't in the room, he'd come looking for her - probably naked - and she'd be embarrassed in front of her guests.

So, she'd reluctantly left Angela in charge of breakfast and cleaning the bathrooms. Reluctant not because she doubted Angela's abilities, but because this was her Grand Opening weekend. She'd looked forward to every single minute of it.

And now, it seemed like Michael was planning to sleep the morning away. She'd been here for two hours already, pretending to read a book she couldn't pay attention to, listening to the man who was still her husband snore loud enough to drown out all other sounds in the house.

Why was he here? They hadn't spoken for almost three weeks, since the day she told him she wanted a divorce. And that day, he'd been angry because she wouldn't behave the way he wanted her to, not at all sorry to lose her.

Well, maybe he'd changed his mind since then, but she hadn't. She had less interest than ever in

preserving their marriage, and not just because she was in love with Tony. She'd changed in the five weeks since she came home from Carolyn's wedding to an empty house. She'd learned that she was an intelligent, capable woman, and that she could survive without the emotional crutch that Michael had provided.

He moaned softly then, and she turned to look at him. His eyelids were fluttering slightly, just like they always did when he was waking up. She used to think that was cute, had even tried to kiss his eyelids so softly that he didn't know she'd done it. Her nose wrinkled at the memory of his awful morning breath. Tony's was as perfect as the rest of him.

He sat up, yawning widely and stretching. Then he caught sight of her, and the corner of his mouth crooked up in a self-satisfied leer. "Hey, baby. Come on over and crawl in bed. I've got a present for you."

"What are you doing here, Michael?"

He shook his head, amused at what he obviously thought was a show of self-restraint. "Came up for the weekend to see my wifey. Now, don't be a stranger, Britt baby. I've got a hard-on that won't quit."

"I'm not going to be your wife much longer, Michael. You know that."

His amusement fading into disgust, he said, "I know you're acting like a damn fool. What the hell do you think you're doing, staying up here all this time?"

"I'm running a business, Michael. You spent all my money, so I had no choice." She wouldn't mention Tony, at least if she could help it.

"A business?" His forehead creased. "If you mean you're turning tricks to pay your bills, I'm gonna be ticked."

She felt a surge of white-hot anger boil up. "How dare you say such a thing? I - " Just in time, she remembered. She hadn't told him about her past, so in a way, his accusation wasn't personal. It was simply a cruel insult, something he thought would anger and upset her. She pushed the anger back. "I'm running a bed-and-breakfast in this house. You may remember I read several books about that over the winter."

He stared at her, frowning as he studied her face. "You're serious, aren't you? You mean there are actually people stupid enough to pay to stay here?"

"This is a wonderful house and a wonderful beach, Michael," she said through gritted teeth. "I know you don't like it here, but that's your loss." And her gain. How had she managed to stay with this man for almost fifteen years without killing either herself or him?

He shook his head again. "Oh, Britt baby, as usual you're oversimplifying. I like this house and this beach just fine. It's being stuck in the middle of nowhere for months on end that I can't stand." With an indulgent smile, he continued, "And that's why I'm here this weekend. I've been thinking about this divorce thing of yours, and I realized that the whole problem is the way you feel I was trying to force you into leaving here before you were ready."

"That's not the whole problem, Michael."

Another shake of his head. "Don't get all bent out of shape, baby. I don't mean to minimize anything, and I'll be glad to talk everything through with you. It's just that the going back to California thing really stuck in your craw, and it made you think our whole marriage was bad. But you've been here a lot longer than

you planned now, so you don't have to feel like you lost face or anything. It'll be okay now for you to come back to the city with me, and we'll come up here for vacations all the time - even long weekends whenever we can."

She stared at him, speechless for a few moments. "You actually expect me to do that? To walk away from my business and go back to a marriage that fed my insecurity and self-doubt?"

He gave her a sly smile. "Don't forget the benefits. We make beautiful music together, and I figure that's worth saving."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Tony left Grandmother's without a thought for where he'd go, but he ended up at Brenton Point, the same place he'd gone so often before. Brenton Point was at the most southwestern corner of Aquidneck Island, and he loved to sit in the parking lot and watch the ocean waves dashing up against the rocks. They felt more primal somehow than the waves in front of Martha's Madness. The water here battered the shoreline, rather than the usual calm coexistence between ocean and beach there.

People often ventured out on the piles of rock and small spits of land to get closer to nature, but Tony was content today, as usual, to watch from the safety of his car just across the road. He remembered Britt dragging him out here one day for a walk. It was the dim, dark day after Carolyn finally moved out. He'd understood by then how empty their marriage truly was, and he'd wanted her to get on with her life - but only for her sake, since he couldn't imagine life without her.

He didn't get up the next day. He didn't go to work and he didn't answer the phone when it rang. Only when the doorbell rang for ten minutes straight did he go down and open the door. It was Britt, and she'd left work early because he wouldn't answer the phone when she called to ask why he wasn't at work. She was worried about him, and she didn't intend to let him waste his life mourning Carolyn.

He was too distraught to explain that it wasn't Carolyn he was mourning, but the emptiness of his life. In reality, he hadn't recognized the truth until much later. But he'd wanted Britt to leave his condo that day - quickly, before he ruined their friendship by throwing himself at her.

She'd been stubborn, though. She wouldn't leave until he'd showered and dressed. So, he went off to do that, figuring that if he refused, she'd probably drag him into the shower herself. When he came downstairs, soup and a grilled cheese sandwich was waiting for him in the kitchen, and she stood watching until every last bite was gone. Then, she announced they were going for a walk, and she wouldn't take no for an answer. She also wouldn't agree to walk around the neighborhood or anywhere close. Brenton Point was the only place that would do.

To be honest, it had helped. The stiff breeze buffeted them and made walking upright a challenge. He had to watch his step on the rocks, too, so he didn't slip and fall. And somewhere along the line, he'd forgotten his troubles long enough to see the majesty of the ocean and the calm of the land. Brenton Point had been there for hundreds, and probably thousands, of years, and winds and waves and storms of all kinds constantly assailed it. Yet, it was the same as ever. Perhaps Tony could withstand this one storm.

He had, of course, but now he faced another crisis. What was he to do? Grandmother didn't understand his feelings for Britt. She saw an inappropriate liaison. He saw the love of his life. Yet Fiore Marine was precious to him, too.

He felt disloyal even to consider it, but was it possible that his feelings for Britt weren't what they seemed? When they first met, the attraction was physical. Perhaps if their relationship had followed its

natural course then, they would have sated their physical desires and gone on to the deep friendship they'd since developed. Maybe even now, if they had sufficient time, they'd satisfy their curiosity about making love with a friend.

That would certainly be convenient. They could enjoy their love affair as long as it lasted, and not worry about the future. He could fly to Oregon for three-day weekends every weekend for a year or more without using up the vacation time he'd accrued.

Of course, that solution wouldn't completely please Grandmother. She would want him to give up Britt completely, marry someone like Mrs. Ragazzo's granddaughter, and start producing babies like clockwork.

Suddenly, he needed to hear Britt's voice, so he raced home to call her. Angela answered the phone instead. After she went off to find Britt, she came back and reported that Britt was busy and wanted to know if she could call him back in a few minutes. He agreed, but a small nugget of resentment lodged in his chest. Wasn't he more important than whatever she was doing?

She sounded a little funny when she called back, too, like she was still distracted by whatever she'd been doing. But she must have heard something strange in his voice, because she was suddenly completely involved in their conversation, and he found himself pouring out his troubles without conscious decision.

After he'd dumped the whole thing on her, she said, "Tony, this is one of the things I've been worried about. I've known you were spending too much time and energy on our relationship, and not enough on the company. And really, the company has to be your priority. It's what you've worked for your whole life. When it comes to choosing between it and me, you have to choose it."

"But I don't want to do that! I love you too much."

"I love you, too, but sometimes that's not enough."

She was assuming he'd never leave Fiore Marine, but that wasn't true. He'd do it for her. "I could quit. I could move out to be with you, and buy Blackburn myself. I'd love to run a small operation like that, dealing with the customers directly all the time and everything."

"You can't do that, Tony! Fiore Marine is your life, much more than I am. I won't have you throw it all away for me - just like I can't give up Martha's Madness for you."

"I'd never ask you to do that. I know how much it means to you."

"And Fiore Marine means just as much to you. Remember that first night we talked - " Interesting that she didn't refer to it as a date this time. "You told me about the company, and I told you about this place. The first things we shared were the most significant ones in our lives. I know it's hard, but if you think about it, you'll see I'm right."

"I'll think about it, but I refuse to believe that there's no better solution." There had to be.

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Brittany hung up the phone and returned to her car from the phone booth. What a stupid situation - having to leave her own house to make a phone call. But Michael would have listened in otherwise, and that would have caused a whole new set of problems. So she'd lied to him, saying she needed to go out on a couple of errands, and left him in bed.

And now, she was face-to-face with the situation she'd known would happen eventually. Tony was going to have to end their relationship, despite his current refusal to do so. As painful as it would be to lose him,

it was almost worse to be the one who made him see reason. Today's phone call was probably only the first of many. He'd insist they could make it work, and she would have to say no - when her whole heart and soul wanted to believe right along with him.

Brittany had only met his grandmother a couple of times, but she had no doubt that the woman was serious. She was retiring and would hold his shares in the company - his birthright - hostage until Tony knuckled under. And if he didn't, if Brittany encouraged him in his fantasies, he'd lose the company and his close family ties. Both were part and parcel of the man he had become, and he would be irretrievably changed by their loss.

He might think that life with her was an adequate substitute, but it wouldn't be in the long term. She had spent most of her life cut off from family, and the isolation was sometimes overwhelming. That was part of why Martha's Madness was so important to her. Even though it was inanimate, it constantly reminded her of Aunt Martha and the power of familial love. She couldn't let Tony choose the wrong path, even for the best possible reason.

She drove back to the house, resenting Michael for being there and interfering with her life. If he'd wanted to fix their marriage, he shouldn't have rebuffed her earlier attempts. Well, at least getting rid of him would provide a challenge to distract her from losing Tony.

Michael wasn't in the master bedroom or bath, and she had the horrifying thought that maybe he'd found one or more of her guests and was railing at them about all her faults. Instead, he was in the dining room, eating from a plate piled high with the food she'd prepared for this morning's buffet. For a second, she was afraid Angela hadn't remembered to put it away at ten o'clock, but the sideboard was empty.

He looked up as she entered. "This stuff is great. I'd almost forgotten how good a cook you are when you want to be." Typical of him, he had to include a dig along with the compliment.

"I'm glad you like it." She resisted the urge to comment that he'd apparently learned to serve himself now that she wasn't waiting on him anymore.

"That fat girl was in the kitchen when I went looking for something to eat - "

"Her name's Angela, as you know, and she's my friend as well as my employee, so use her name."

He rolled his eyes and sighed dramatically. "Geez, you're picky today. Anyway, she offered to get the leftovers out, and she even heated things up."

"That was nice of her." Personally, she wouldn't have minded if Angela had been a little less accommodating.

He gave her a nasty twisted smile. "She also told me where you got the money for all this new furniture and everything. And you claimed you didn't have anything going with that wop!"

"It's a business deal, Michael," she insisted, but honesty wouldn't let her leave it at that. "And we weren't involved when I talked to you last time, but we are now."

"So how is the Crown Prince in bed? Worth all the waiting?" He smiled, sure of her answer.

"It's none of your business, Michael, but yes."

He slapped his hand against the edge of the table, slopping coffee. "It damn well *is* my business! You're my *wife*, for Christ's sake."

"That didn't stop you from moving Cyndi into our apartment, now did it?" She shouldn't argue with him, but she didn't know how else to communicate with him.

He glared at her. "You're so damn two-faced - still in a snit about that, when you're doing the same damn thing and claim you want a divorce, to boot!"

"I *do* want a divorce, Michael, and as far as I'm concerned, you can move half a dozen bimbos into that stupid apartment. Just go back there and leave me in peace."

"But I want *you*."

She just stared, stunned at his words. After most of a minute, he shifted in his chair and looked down at the table. "You're - different. You don't just care about clothes and makeup, like Cyndi does. You - well, we talk about things - ideas and stuff like that . . ."

"Exactly how long has it been since we did that, Michael? A few years, maybe longer?"

He shook his head. "No, it hasn't. We talked about maybe moving up here - "

She couldn't stay silent long enough to hear any more. "I talked about it, Michael, and you just kept giving excuses for why we couldn't. And all the excuses boiled down to the fact that you didn't feel like leaving San Francisco. And maybe I could accept that, except that I never got a chance to say I didn't want to move somewhere. I followed you around the whole damn country, giving up good jobs every time, and all because you couldn't find a job where you fit in."

He was watching her, like she was someone he'd never known before this moment. Now that she had his attention, she kept going. "I thought you'd like running a business with me. It wouldn't have had to be a bed-and-breakfast, but maybe graphic design or desktop publishing. There's plenty of opportunity here for those things. But you'd never even *talk* about it. You just had it set in your mind what we were going to do, and to hell with what I thought!"

His face reddened with an emotion other than anger. She thought he might actually be close to crying. "We could do that - start a business together, I mean. And maybe live here part of the year and down there the other part."

She shook her head slowly. "No, Michael, we can't. The time for that is long gone. I don't love you anymore."

His jaw tightened and he said, "That's not it. It's that damn wop. You think he'll marry you and treat you like a princess for the rest of your life."

She sighed. This would be a good test of her self-control. Could she tell Michael the reality of things with Tony without breaking down? "No, Michael. Tony and I have an insurmountable problem. His business is in Rhode Island, and mine is here. I'm not divorcing you because of him. I'm divorcing you because our marriage hasn't worked for years, and I've finally stopped caring about fixing it."

"But - " He stopped suddenly, and she had the sense he'd finally heard the determination in her voice. "You really mean it, don't you?"

She nodded. "I do mean it. I'm sorry, Michael."

He looked at her bleakly. "Me, too." A spasm of emotion crossed his face and he pushed away from the table. "Excuse me." He hurried out of the room.

When she heard the front door open and not close again, she followed. He was standing in the middle of the quiet street, almost like a statue. As she watched, he seemed to waken from a deep sleep and started walking down the street, toward where it dead-ended.

She turned back inside, and busied herself with the work she should have done earlier in the day. Even though it didn't matter, she wondered what would have happened if she'd stood up to Michael before today.

She couldn't have done it, though. She hadn't believed she deserved anything better. She knew differently now, thanks to Tony, and that understanding would stay with her, even though they would soon be parted forever.

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Brittany had to admit she was surprised. Michael returned from his walk quiet and apparently resigned, and he actually asked if it would be okay for him to stay overnight. She would have preferred him to leave sooner, but agreed because she didn't want to disrupt their tenuous peace.

They spent the evening together, talking in the lookout tower because she didn't want to be alone in her bedroom with him. Her feelings for him were different now, but she was afraid his touch would seem too natural to resist. He was lost in their shared past, asking over and over whether she remembered this or that thing they'd done or place they'd gone.

Occasionally, they made tentative efforts to connect on a deeper level, to talk about what had been going on under the surface. She mentioned the throwaway comment he'd made about her looking at him like he was a loser all the time, and asked whether he'd meant it.

He craned his head around to look at her. "Shit, yeah. How do you think I felt, coming home at night and talking about how my job was heading south, when I knew the whole time you were thinking, 'So what's new?'"

"But I never said anything like that!" she protested.

He gave her a you're-so-stupid look. "Of course not - you didn't *need* to. You were so damn long-suffering. At least with yelling, it gets it all out in the open and over with."

She was speechless. He'd yelled and said awful things to her all through the years, and she'd internalized every one of those complaints. He might have brought them into the open, but they certainly weren't over with, as far as she was concerned.

But then she realized that the reason they still haunted her was that she'd never really accepted herself. Similarly, Michael interpreting her silence as blaming him for being a failure was a reflection of his own self-image. "Michael, I hope you find what you're looking for someday. We were wrong for each other, but I still care about your happiness."

He half-smiled. "Thanks. That means a lot."

She wasn't sure whether his comment was sincere or sarcastic, but opted to believe in his sincerity. "I'm going downstairs to get a few things out, and then I'll have to hit the hay. I need to get up early in the morning." She stood, feeling unusually awkward about this next part. "You can have the bedroom tonight."

"I thought we'd sleep together one last time . . ." His voice trailed off and he added, "We wouldn't have to do anything."

That was likely. He thought sex was a cure-all for everything from PMS to a sprained ankle. No doubt he would expect it to conquer divorce, too. "No, Michael."

She hurried downstairs before he had a chance to argue with her. She gathered clothes for morning, a pillow, and the quilt she'd put away for the summer. She'd sleep in today's clothes on the new living room sofa, and use the half-bath next to the kitchen. She couldn't take a shower when she got up, but she'd survive. At the last minute, she remembered to grab the battery-powered alarm clock Aunt Martha had always kept on hand.

As she nestled into the comfy cushions, she was glad her guests this weekend were the early-to-bed/early-to-rise type. She'd hate for any of them to happen on her now, especially if they'd been out partying.

She got up a little earlier than usual, so breakfast preparations were well under way when Angela arrived. "Thanks again for all your help yesterday. I'm sorry I had to dump everything on you like that."

The other woman shrugged. "It wasn't a big deal or anything. You did all the cooking."

"Yes, but you stayed a lot later than you planned - " She spun around, horrified. "You work at the hardware store on Saturdays!"

"Well, yeah, but I called my boss and asked him to fill in for me. I got there before one o'clock when he had other plans, so it was okay."

She sighed and shook her head. "I'm sorry, Angela. If I'd remembered about your job, I would have done something different. Please remind me if I forget again."

"That's okay. I know it's not any of my business, but is everything all right?"

"I think I made it your business by getting you involved yesterday," she corrected. "And things are surprisingly okay. Michael seems resigned to the divorce now, and that's a real relief."

"I'm glad. I would have wanted to stay around yesterday, even if you hadn't needed me. It was just too weird the way he showed up all of a sudden like that. Now, what do you want me to do? It looks like you're way ahead of schedule."

They went on to finish breakfast and then waited for people to show up to eat. Brittany realized she'd need to find something useful for them to do during those slow times on future mornings. It was boring and wasteful of their time to just hang around in the kitchen.

The kite festival was still on today, so she'd offered to delay checkout until late afternoon. That way, her guests could come back after their day on the beach and shower or change clothes before heading home. Since she had no guests arriving until the following Friday, her generosity posed no logistical difficulties.

An unexpected benefit was that she could let Angela go home early, since they couldn't start cleaning the rooms until much later in the day. She was careful to make it clear that Angela would be paid for her full day's work, despite being here only a couple of hours today.

Michael made his appearance in early afternoon. He came into the living room stretching. "Super bed - sure beats the hell out of the old one."

"It's the same kind I got for the guest rooms."

"Is there anything for me to eat before I leave?"

She thought of her refrigerator crammed with leftovers and wanted to laugh. "Help yourself. There's plenty left from both breakfasts."

He looked at her for a few seconds, obviously expecting her to jump up and fix a plate for him. When she didn't, he grimaced and went off to do it for himself. He was back in about fifteen minutes. "I guess I'll go pack."

She went into the kitchen out of curiosity. What had he eaten, and had he put the remaining food back in the refrigerator? He had, and had even replaced the plastic wrap on the dishes he'd uncovered. His dish was sitting in the sink unrinsed, though, so he hadn't become completely domesticated. On the top of the wastebasket, she noticed the paper cups from three muffins. He must like her muffins.

On impulse, she got out a paper bag and filled it with muffins, then took it into the bedroom. "I thought you might like these for the drive."

He looked into the bag and smiled. "Thanks." He hefted his gym bag tentatively, then set it back down. "Thanks for letting me stay. Give me a call sometime, okay? Just to say hi."

"Okay." She wasn't comfortable looking right at him, so kept her eyes on the bag. "At work, of course."

His gaze seemed directed at the floor near her feet. "Oh. No. The apartment's fine. Cyndi and I split up. It's like I was saying - she's all into clothes and makeup and crap like that."

She had to ask, "When did that happen?"

He shrugged. "A few days ago, I guess. It had been coming for a while, though." No wonder he wanted to get back with her!

While she fought the need to express her outrage, the front door opened. Tony's voice called out, "Britt, are you here?"

CHAPTER TWENTY

Tony crossed to the bedroom, knowing that Britt rarely left the door open when she wasn't inside. But then he stopped. Yes, Britt was there, but so was Michael!

She froze in place and looked horrified to see him. Michael sneered at her. "It's lucky I'm leaving. I wouldn't want to jam up your schedule."

Tony made his mouth cooperate long enough to say, "I'm sorry. I should have called . . ." And now that he was here, he couldn't stay. Yet he needed to talk with her, perhaps more than ever. "I'll go for a walk on the beach. We can talk later."

Her voice was weak. "Okay."

Michael called out after him, "Hey, I hear you're responsible for the new mattresses. I got a great night's sleep on this one."

He made his way through the living room, onto the deck, and down the steps to the sand. It felt like his body had suddenly been packed in cotton. The world seemed far away and unimportant.

He walked straight out to the edge of the water and stood there, inches from the mini-waves that lapped at the shore. He didn't get his feet wet - didn't even get covered with ocean spray. And there were no piles of dead fish to avoid, nor to smell. The Pacific Ocean was certainly living up to its name today.

He absolutely would not jump to any conclusions about what he'd just witnessed. So what if Michael was here? He and Britt were still married, and they'd have legal-type issues to discuss before their divorce. Assuming - no, he'd already decided he wouldn't speculate.

Britt's arms wrapped around him from behind. "This is a wonderful surprise. I've been wishing you could come out again." Her voice was full of warmth and promise, and she cradled him against her body.

"I should have called first." He hadn't called on purpose, wanting to see her delight when he walked in unannounced.

"Don't worry about it. Michael was ready to leave, and I would have been glad for an excuse to get him out of here, if he wasn't."

He was careful to use a neutral voice. "He came up for the weekend?"

Her weight sagged against him momentarily. "Completely unannounced - we hadn't even talked for nearly a month! I guess he thought I'd change my mind about the divorce . . ." Her voice trailed off a little uncertainly for Tony's peace of mind.

"Did you?"

She snorted. "Heck, no! Do you know why he picked this weekend to come? Because he just broke up with Cyndi!"

He turned to face her, hoping that he wasn't deceiving himself about her reaction. "You're probably glad about that."

Her eyebrows shot skyward. "Why? I mean, it's probably a good thing for Cyndi, to get out while the getting's good, but I can't say I really care - well, maybe that's not true. I think he deserves it. That jerk put me through *hours* of trying to explain how it wasn't ever going to work for us, and all the time, he's just looking for someone to cook and clean for him." With a bit of a smile, she added, "Besides, now that I know what it's like to love somebody, I could never live with Michael again."

A weight lifted off his heart. "I have to admit I'm glad to hear that."

"It's true. And another thing - we didn't have sex, despite what he tried to make you think."

"I - it would have been okay." Well, not completely okay, but he'd have understood.

"Not as far as I'm concerned." Her smile broadened. "I slept on the sofa in the living room."

He smiled back at her, wondering whether to give in to the urge to put off more discussion until later. "I noticed there are still several cars parked in front. Isn't it after checkout?"

"Yeah, but the kite festival's still on, so I said people could come back to shower or change clothes after." She turned her head to the right and gestured. "They're up by the public parking area - see?"

He looked up the beach and saw brightly-colored kites of all different shapes and sizes. In one area, a group of people was flying identical kites in formation, soaring and dipping right in synch with everyone else. From their experience with Scott's kite last weekend, he knew to be awed by their precision. "That would make a great picture."

"You're right. I'll have to get a camera and practice a lot. I could frame the best ones and use them to decorate." She looked him right in the eyes and asked, "Why are you here, Tony? You didn't come just

to see me, I know."

He curled his lips into an apologetic smile. "No, not entirely. I haven't stopped thinking since we talked yesterday, and I've decided I can't just walk away from our relationship. I understand what you said about the company being important to me, and I don't deny it. But what I don't think you see is that you're even more important. All these years, we were just friends - but only because I was convinced that was all you ever wanted to be. I thought if you even suspected how I really felt, you'd back away and I'd lose all of you."

He took a deep breath before continuing, "You asked me before about Carolyn, and I didn't answer. But I think I need to, because I think that's the only way I can make you understand. Yes, I was attracted to her physically - but that's no surprise. I was probably attracted to half the women at Brown in those days. And yes, I found her personality intriguing, with that mixture of innocence and intelligence and her completely unconventional way of looking at things. But I wouldn't have asked her out, even one time, if I'd thought you had the slightest interest in me."

Frowning, she asked, "You didn't ask her out to see how I'd react, did you?"

The question startled him. "Of course not. I would never have done anything to hurt either of you intentionally. But after I decided you just wanted to be friends, I figured I'd better start going out with other people. And since I hadn't been meeting any other women, I guess I thought Carolyn would be an okay person to start with."

That sounded awful. "I'm sorry, I'm not expressing myself well. The point is that I didn't mean it to turn into any big deal. She was a virgin and I wanted a sexual relationship, and - " He shook his head. "I guess I can't explain this as well as I thought I could."

Her smile was sympathetic, but sad. "I think I understand. You're saying you fell in love with her later."

"Not really. Not how I think of falling in love - sudden and passionate and impossible to stop. Like with you. With Carolyn, our friendship was always the most important part, and I felt incredibly protective of her." He swallowed and moistened his lips. "I don't think we'd have gone out more than a few times, except for what happened at that party. Did she tell you about it?"

"You mean that it was her idea to have sex?"

He nodded. "Randy came over to razz me about not taking her upstairs. I guess she hadn't realized what was going on before that, but the minute she did, she went right up. When I tried to talk her into going back downstairs, she said she wanted to get rid of her virginity, and she knew I'd take care of her. I wanted to refuse - well, part of me did - but I didn't think I could, without making her feel rejected. I don't know if you remember how insecure she was about her looks back then . . ."

Britt half-laughed. "I remember, all right. I couldn't figure it out."

"I think it was because guys didn't come on to her. Anyway, after that, I felt responsible for her, and since I cared a lot about her already, it gradually developed into love." He squeezed her hands, wishing he was better at explaining this. "We had a good life together, and you know how hard it was for me when she left, but I never loved her the way I've always loved you."

Her eyes looked deep into his, and he hoped she saw the honesty in his soul. After a minute, she said, "You said you weren't sorry for the years you spent with her."

His answer was simple. "I'm not. She's a wonderful person, and I learned a lot from being with her. If I'd

known how you felt back then, all our lives would be different now. But we can't know whether they'd be any better, so I feel like there's no point feeling bad about things that can't be changed."

At that, she smiled. "That's a good way to look at it. Now that you're here, is there anything special you'd like to do?"

"Two things, for now. First, I want to kiss you." She moved into his embrace like she'd been doing it forever. He heard the cries of the sea gulls floating on air currents high above them, and the murmur of the surf behind him, but Britt's lips and mouth were the center of his universe, and they drew him ever deeper into her spell.

By force of will, he finally broke their kiss and dropped to his knees in the sand. "And second is this. Britt, my love, will you marry me?"

**

Brittany answered immediately, because if she didn't, she wouldn't be able to say no. "Tony, we can't get married."

"I mean after your divorce comes through."

"I know, but we still can't."

He sighed and his jaw tightened. "Yes, we can. If you don't want to, okay - but don't think you're getting rid of me that easily. I've made my decision. I'm going to spend the rest of my life with you, unless you don't love me."

Could she say she didn't love him? As though he knew what she was thinking, he shook his head. "I warn you, you'd have to convince me that you meant it. And given how poor a liar you've always been, you're unlikely to manage that."

She knew he was right. "I won't try, then, but are you saying you're definitely going to leave Fiore? Won't you regret that down the road?" A thrill of excitement started deep inside. It was clear that his decision was made, and that all her reservations weren't going to change his mind.

He smiled a bit cautiously. "I'm saying I'm going to move out here to be with you. Whether that means quitting, I don't know yet."

"But how could it mean anything else?"

"I think I can run the company from out here. I'll need to go back for meetings, but phone calls, faxes, and e-mail should suffice for the most part. The problem is that I have to convince people to give it a try."

"Who do you have to convince?" If his grandmother was included, the idea was dead.

With a wry grin, he said, "Pretty much the whole family. With the way Grandmother's splitting up the company, Dad, Robbie, Frankie, Elsa, Uncle Frank, and Aunt Luisa are all involved. Plus, there are some shares that belong to the family trust, and I don't know who will vote them. I assume that Grandmother's going to be against the idea, so I have to get everyone else on my side."

"Is that possible?" She could see he'd need to try it in any case, to prove to himself that it couldn't be done. She didn't want to get her hopes up, though, if it couldn't work.

He shrugged. "Who knows? I'm guessing that it's possible, and I'm hoping I can come up with all the right

arguments for everyone. I started working on it on the plane. With Dad, Robbie, Frankie, and Elsa, the operational issues are what they're going to care about - how we'll communicate, who'll be in charge of what, that kind of stuff. Uncle Frank may care more about our position in the community - like whether me being out here will make people doubt our commitment to Newport, and I don't think that needs to be a big issue. Now, with Aunt Luisa, I just don't know. She's a real traditionalist, so she's not going to approve of me moving instead of you. On the other hand, she basically approves of me and wants me to be happy. Plus - and this is probably my best bet - she delights in taking the opposite position from Grandmother whenever possible."

"When will you be going back? I assume you'll present this to them in person."

He laughed. "I think you're getting a little ahead of things. You still haven't answered my proposal - and I have to say, I may be washed out to sea at any moment."

She looked down, and was stunned to realize that they were no longer on the beach, but in the ocean. The tide had come in past them while they were talking. "We'd better go in."

He grabbed her hand before she could turn away. "Not until you give me your answer."

She grinned. "Yes, I'll marry you! Now, let's go inside - your pants must be soaking wet."

"I'm starting to freeze, too," he confessed as he stood up and started toward the house, still holding her hand. "Maybe you can warm me up."

"Gladly." She would do anything in her power to make him happy, now and for the rest of her life.

**

Hours later, Tony remembered he'd never answered Britt's last question. "You asked earlier when I was going back."

She snuggled closer and protested, "You can't leave tonight!"

"No, not tonight. But probably tomorrow. I've got a memo half-written explaining what I'm proposing. I'll fax that to the office in the morning and get Elsa to set up a meeting for Tuesday. I want to get the whole thing resolved as soon as possible."

"You're really sure you want to do this?" She looked up at him, and he was pretty sure her half-smile meant that she finally believed him.

He smiled back at her. "I've never been more sure of anything in my life. But how would you feel about going with me? I'd love for everyone to get a chance to meet you."

"Your grandmother already hates me! And so will everybody else, when they find out what you're going to do."

"They're not that bad, really. At heart, they all want what's best for me, and that's you." He did have to warn her about their fixation on kids. "Of course, the minute they find out we're getting married, they'll want to know about us having kids, but I'm pretty good at telling them to lay off."

"Don't you want kids? I always assumed you did."

"Sure, but it's not as important as being with you. How do you feel about it?"

"I think it would be wonderful," she answered with an unusually shy smile. "And I guess this is as good a

time as any to meet everyone - I need to be back by early Friday, though."

"No problem. I promise we'll fly back Thursday at the latest." That was if everything went as he wanted it to. If not, it might be Tuesday night.

"Well, in that case, I'd better get busy cleaning and changing the beds." She started to sit up.

He pulled her back into his arms. "I have work to do, too, but you can't go yet. I'd miss you too much."

This was almost too wonderful to be real. He and Brittany would be together forever, and any separations would be short ones.

**

On Tuesday morning, on the opposite side of the country, Brittany followed Tony into a plain shed-style building near the navy base.

He kept up a running monologue the whole time. "This was built during World War II, but Grandfather didn't start leasing it until the early '60's. I don't know when he bought it - maybe shortly before he died. Another company used to share it, but they closed down ten years or so back. We're using all the space now, as you can see."

That was certainly true. They were walking through what appeared to be the warehouse, and the aisles weren't even wide enough to walk side-by-side. She'd been in the lobby at the other end of the building a few times when Michael worked here, but never anywhere else.

They passed into a narrow uncarpeted hallway and she heard a woman say, "Good, you're here. The whole place has been a circus since your fax arrived yesterday."

Tony laughed. "Good morning to you, too. Britt, come meet Elsa. She's the one who really runs the company."

They shook hands and said hello. Elsa was a gray-haired matronly woman with plenty of laugh lines, and she was obviously very fond of Tony. Too impatient for small talk, Tony said, "We'll go into the conference room now. Is everyone coming?"

Elsa nodded. "You know how everyone loves it when someone stands up to your grandmother."

The conference room was, unsurprisingly by now, plain and Spartan. A table and chairs for a dozen people along with an old-fashioned blackboard - black, not green - filled the room to capacity. Tony took the chair at the far end of the table, nearest the blackboard, and he moved a chair from one of the sides next to his. "Please sit here. I may need all the moral support I can get, before we're through."

Finally. She'd been waiting for him to acknowledge that this meeting made him nervous. It had been obvious yesterday, from time to time, and he hadn't slept well last night - she knew because she'd been awake with nerves half a dozen times herself. "Tony, I hate that you're doing this for me. Don't you want to wait a while, at least?"

He was watching the door, and didn't turn to look at her. "Unless you've changed *your* mind, I'm not changing mine." There was a vulnerability in his voice that she wished she hadn't triggered right now.

She gave his cold clammy hand a quick squeeze. "No way. You're stuck with me for the duration."

He smiled and started to say something, but the door opened and a group of men entered. She recognized Robbie and Tony's father. There was another middle-aged man with them who must be Uncle

Frank. They all shook hands, and Robbie smiled at her in a friendly way that helped reassure her.

Good thing, since Grandmother marched in then, followed closely by Aunt Luisa, Frankie, and Elsa, who closed the door behind them. Grandmother took the chair at the opposite end of the table and said, "You persist in ignoring my advice, Antonio."

Tony didn't comment and quietly waited for everyone else to be seated. "Thank you all for coming. I expect you've all read my proposal. Naturally, I hope you agree that my plan is feasible." His voice was strong, but lacked its usual warmth.

Britt moved her leg an inch closer to him, so that it touched his. He pressed his leg into hers and his body relaxed marginally. "I apologize for being somewhat mysterious in my memo about the reason for my move, but I wanted to make this announcement in person." He reached for her hand and squeezed it. "You are my family, and you know that I've been searching for someone special my whole life. Brittany is that person, and a little more than twenty-four hours ago, she agreed to become my wife. We will be married sometime later this year, but I will be moving to Oregon to be with her immediately."

Frankie and Elsa looked pleased, Grandmother and Aunt Luisa horrified, but Dad and Uncle Frank didn't seem to react. Robbie said, "That's great! Congratulations!"

Grandmother turned a withering eye on Robbie, but Aunt Luisa spoke next. "And why are you moving to Oregon, Antonio? You have family here, and it is not like you to walk away from your responsibility to the company."

"I am not walking away from my responsibilities, Aunt Luisa - not unless I'm forced to. But Brittany has a successful bed-and-breakfast on the Oregon Coast, and she needs to be there."

She scowled. "You are planning to marry another one of those career women? I would have expected you to have learned your lesson last time."

Frankie leaned forward and said, "Aunt Luisa, I'm surprised at you. You must understand that it's unusual these days for a young woman to not have a career. I have one, yet I also make plenty of time for my husband and my daughter." Brittany was struck by the contrast between her and the older Fiore women. She appeared every inch the go-getter businesswoman, with her neat blow-dry hair style and crisp business suit. Both Aunt Luisa and Grandmother, on the other hand, looked like every movie director's idea of an Italian matriarch.

Aunt Luisa raised her chin belligerently. "Yes, Francesca, I am very aware of these modern trends. I also know how often they lead to divorce and broken families. I had simply hoped that Antonio would choose his bride wisely this time and therefore spare himself any more heartbreak."

Tony opened his mouth to speak, but Grandmother got there first with a grudging, "Well said, Luisa." Directing her attention at Tony, she continued, "Antonio, you claim that you are not walking away from your responsibility to this family and this company. I say that you are. You have known since you were old enough to write your name that you would eventually run this company. We have all struggled and sacrificed to make this company what it is today, and to raise you to be the strong leader you have become. Yet, what do you do now? You reject it all and say that unless we do what you want, you will not take your place at the head of this company. I say that is blackmail. Who will run this company if not you?"

Tony's father broke in, "Mother, really! You can't mean that. Tony has always shown you and the rest of the family the utmost respect. You talk as if he has paid nothing for the annual doubling and tripling of company profits over the last years, but that is far from the truth. Deep in your heart, you know, as I do,

that his first marriage failed because he devoted more time to the company than to his marriage. Perhaps a wiser man would have done differently, but Tony is still young, and he was only emulating the single-minded devotion to the company he learned from Papa. I cannot demand that you endorse his plan, but at least show him the respect he is due, and do not try to blackmail him into living his life according to your plan for him."

Grandmother drew back in her chair and said icily, "Continue with your discussion."

After a few seconds, Tony said, "Perhaps we could discuss any operational concerns or comments anyone has."

Frankie quickly said, "I'd like to clarify a couple of points. First, how would you propose to handle the disbursement of funds? Currently, for expenditures of more than five hundred dollars, I need Grandmother's signature on the check, as well as my own. Since she won't be involved in the business anymore, that will need to be changed. Do you envision us expressing the checks to you in Oregon for signature?"

"No, I don't think that's appropriate. First, I think the limit for one-signature checks should be raised. And second, I would suggest adding additional signatories - probably both Dad and Robbie, since one of them is likely to be in the office most of the time."

Frankie nodded. "That makes sense. Now as far as all these new job titles you're proposing, have you stopped to consider what these jobs pay in the industry? Not that I would mind a hundred- percent salary increase, but our bottom line would certainly suffer."

Tony relaxed enough to half-smile. "That's a good point, Frankie, and one I didn't devote much consideration to. My hope would be that we could keep salaries fairly level for now. After all, the company belongs to all of us - " He flicked a glance at Grandmother, then looked back at the group as a whole. "I trust that Grandmother explained she is holding onto my shares for now. So, it would be more accurate to say the company belongs to all of you. As for my own salary, if you accept my proposal, I wouldn't want an increase."

Dad sighed and said, "Since we're talking about the new titles, I'd like to say that I don't feel comfortable with your suggestion of naming me Chief Operating Officer. I realize you need someone here in Newport to oversee operations and that that's basically what I do now, but I don't want the additional responsibility that title implies. I'm sorry."

Tony smiled. "Frankly, Dad, I'm not surprised, and that's why I worded it as a suggestion. Given Robbie's proposed title of VP of East Coast Operations, it would make just as much sense for him to take on that role."

"I'd feel much better about that. Would that give you too much to handle, Robbie?"

Robbie shook his head, a twinkle in his eye. "Not if I can hire an assistant to do some of the stuff Tony's had me to do all these years."

"Just don't hire a young lovely without getting Sal's approval first," Tony shot back. He turned toward Elsa, sitting in the middle of one side of the table. "What do you think, Elsa? You're likely to be the most affected by this, day-to-day."

Elsa blinked in surprise when eight pairs of eyes focused on her. "Oh. Well at first, I thought it couldn't possibly work. But then I remembered how much Tony has been on the road during the past few years, and how often something has come up at one of the other subsidiaries, or even right here. And every

time, Tony's been able to handle it by phone or fax - or in the last year, by e-mail. And he's promised to make regular visits here, and to the subsidiaries, so I don't think it should be a problem."

"I'm glad you agree about that, Elsa," Tony replied. "And another thing to consider is that I'm only suggesting that we give this a try. It may become clear that my plan isn't workable, and in that case, I'll simply resign from the company."

Uncle Frank spoke for the first time. "Come on, everybody, what harm is a few month trial going to do? I, for one, accept that Tony's done a heck of a lot to make Fiore Marine into a bigger company than any of us ever thought it could become. And Mother - Lu, you too - after all the hassles you've given him about getting married again, I'd think you'd be happy for him, instead of carping that he's not doing it exactly how you want."

Elsa asked, "Should I make some ballots, so we can vote secretly?"

"Well, I don't want my vote to be secret," Robbie said. "I'm proud to say that I support Tony's plan."

Frankie nodded emphatically. "I do, too."

"As do I," Dad said.

Uncle Frank looked across the table at Aunt Luisa. "What do you say, Lu? Are you so stuck in your old-fashioned way of looking at things that you can't give something new a try?"

Aunt Luisa glared back at him. "Old-fashioned is not a curse word, Francis Fiore. But I admit that Antonio has done well up to now, and I'm willing to give him a chance to prove that this idea will work, too."

Tony squeezed Brittany's hand a little tighter, then licked his lips. "By my count, all of you with the exception of Grandmother are endorsing my plan. Is that correct?" A chorus of nods was his reply. "In that case, I need to know who has the authority to vote for the family trust. Grandmother?"

All eyes moved to the woman who stood in the way of Tony's plan. She stared at him with more force than Brittany would have been able to withstand. Finally she answered, "Since the family trust is for the benefit of the future generations, it is up to my children to cast that vote. And that means, Antonio, that you have a majority. Your plan will go forward."

Tony sagged back into his chair for a moment, then smiled. "Thank you all for your confidence in me and willingness to be innovative. I'll be in the office the rest of today and tomorrow to make specific plans. Please let me know, at any time, if problems arise." He stood slowly, and Britt realized how much this meeting had taken out of him. "Thanks for coming."

Robbie grinned at them and said, "Since you're only in town for a couple of days, I'd better get my bid in right away. How about dinner tonight at our house - or would you rather go someplace fancy?"

Brittany said, "I'd like to meet the girls, if possible."

He nodded. "Okay. Our house, it is. Six-thirty."

Dad approached Tony, wearing a concerned frown. "I hope you realize that I'm flattered you wanted me to be COO. It's just not something that appeals to me."

Tony shook his head. "No, I understand that, Dad."

He smiled. "Great. I'm awfully pleased for you. You both look so happy. Will you come to dinner tomorrow? Your mother would never forgive me if I gave someone else a chance to invite you first."

Tony and Brittany answered in unison: "We'd love to."

And then the room emptied out, and only Grandmother was left there with them. Brittany wished she could crawl away and hide, except that would leave Tony to face her alone, and she couldn't do that to him. She would never desert him.

Grandmother looked Brittany straight in the eye and said, "You will drive me home. We have much to discuss if you are to be my granddaughter-in-law."

Tony stiffened and slipped his arm protectively around Brittany. Grandmother gave him a scornful glance and said, "Antonio, please. I will not harm her. I simply plan to explain that if she wishes to get along with me, she will continue to make you as happy as you are today - and she will give birth to your babies and raise them to be strong and loving, like their father."

Brittany breathed a sigh of relief and answered, "I will."

As Tony's arm tightened around her, she was suddenly confident that everything would work out. It had taken them fifteen years to reach this point, but nothing could tear them apart now. Their love was too strong.

EPILOGUE

That November

The day after his long-anticipated wedding was not Tony's idea of the perfect time for a sightseeing trip with his father, his brother, and his two small nieces. He'd hoped to spend the day at Martha's Madness, savoring the moment and marveling at the good fortune that allowed him to share his happiness with his whole family.

He had no such luck. At breakfast, Sal asked about the aquarium in Newport, a couple of hours south of Myrtle Beach. Britt described some of the many exhibits, and the moment she mentioned jellyfish, the die was cast. Trina had received a video about marine life for her birthday a few months earlier, and jellyfish were her favorites. They were headed for Newport within the hour.

In all honesty, he didn't really mind spending his day like that. He rarely saw his nieces now that Oregon was his home, and his time with Robbie and Dad was normally spent on business issues. Being away from Britt all day was the worst part. Even though they had plenty of time together now, even a few hours apart seemed endless.

Sometime in the early afternoon, he started wondering if the excursion was really as spur-of-the-moment as it seemed. Why had Sal asked about the aquarium in front of the whole family, for instance? And why hadn't Sal wanted to go there herself? She'd sounded quite knowledgeable about the subject, after all, so would have been much better able to answer Trina's many questions. When he remembered just how tricky Dad and Robbie had been in the past about avoiding tourist attractions, he was sure something strange was going on. Unfortunately, he didn't know what, and he knew better than to ask. Dad and Robbie would laugh at how long it had taken him to figure it out, and then not tell him anything.

They got back to Martha's Madness just in time for dinner, and the smells that greeted them solved the mystery. Grandmother had made her lasagna today!

Of course, the fact that Grandmother had bothered to come to their wedding was still a bit of a shock. He hadn't seen her often in the six months since their showdown. He was in Newport several days a month, and he called her each visit, but she was always a bit distant. It reminded him of the period after Carolyn left him, when Grandmother made her disappointment in him obvious.

Dinner was wonderful, as Grandmother's lasagna always was, but Tony noticed conspiratorial grins being exchanged among the women every few minutes, and an occasional quickly stifled laugh. As the table was being cleared, Britt asked him, "Did you really like it?"

"Of course!" Her shy smile, and the way everyone had stopped to stare at them, made him suddenly realize the truth. "You made it, didn't you?"

She nodded. "Sauce and everything. Grandmother - and Sal and your mom - taught me."

So *that* was it! He gave Britt a quick hug and whispered, "It was worth every minute we spent apart today."

And then, he turned to Grandmother. "Thank you, Grandmother." The words didn't seem adequate, so he wrapped his arms around her and squeezed, pulling her off her feet.

Grandmother protested, "Antonio, put me down!" When he complied, he saw that her eyes were sparkling with what might be tears. "The girl did well for her first lesson, but there are many more traditional foods she must learn to make. Bring her with you to Newport next time, and I will see about making her into a proper wife for you."

Coming from Grandmother, that was a ringing endorsement of their marriage.

**

Brittany put the final touches on the breakfast buffet and stepped back to check the overall effect. She wanted everything to be festive but a bit understated, not like the gaudy Christmas displays in so many of the local stores and restaurants.

It had been hard to restrain herself when decorating, though. Christmas hadn't been much of a celebration for her since her father died, and now that she was so supremely happy, she wanted to go all- out. She'd solved the dilemma by buying or making one thing at a time, then finding the perfect place for it before even considering another item.

She must have done all right, because she'd overheard her guests commenting on how tastefully everything fit together. And last night, when they invited everyone staying at Inn on the Hill down to sing Christmas carols around the fireplace, Ralph complimented her on her decorating job.

Today, all her guests were invited up to Inn on the Hill for Christmas dinner, and she was providing some of the food. She wasn't sure if she and Tony would stay to eat, though, because she thought it might be romantic to spend their first Christmas together in front of the fire.

As soon as breakfast was over and they'd cleaned up, they retreated to their room to exchange gifts. She'd been nervous about that, knowing that Tony would have chosen any number of exquisite presents for her. In the end, she'd decided not to worry; at least one of her gifts was something he'd like.

He looked up at her now with tears in his eyes, holding a letter in his hand. She looked closer and remembered that it had been in the box they'd received from his family. "This is from Grandmother. She says that my plan has proven successful, and that she no longer doubts my maturity and devotion to the company. She's turning my shares over to me!"

Brittany gave him a congratulatory hug and read quickly through the letter. It said more than he'd reported. It said that Grandmother was proud of him, and that he was a worthy successor to his grandfather. And in places, it almost seemed to say that Grandmother knew she'd been wrong to treat him so harshly back in May - pretty close to an apology from a woman who had never been known to apologize.

Suddenly, she couldn't wait to see his reaction, so she reached behind the small tree for Tony's most important present. She kept her eyes on him as he unwrapped it, and then picked up each of the two books and looked at its title. Both were about the same subject - pregnancy and childbirth, from the father's point of view.

His eyes widened and he looked at her with a mixture of joy and awe, tempered with a little caution. "You're pregnant?"

She nodded. "I went to the doctor last week, while you were down at Blackburn. I should have told you right away . . ."

The intensity of his grin silenced her. "This makes everything even more perfect than it already was! I love you so incredibly much!"

She tried to tell him how much she loved him, but he grabbed her and held her so tight she couldn't breathe, and then his kisses took her breath away in a whole different way. But somehow, he seemed to understand.

The End

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