

-Hot Fudge and Peppermint-

Book III of the Second Chances Trilogy

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PROLOGUE

April

The boring old Nik would never have done this. She would have waited for Bill to call or come by. She would have been afraid she'd shock him with her forwardness if she stopped by his dorm room with a sundae, on a night when they'd both planned to study.

But that was the boring old Nik - the Nik who spent her evenings and nights studying. The new Nik wasn't flashy and her face and figure weren't breath-taking, but she was having fun for once in her life.

Thanks to Bill. She might be a senior and him a freshman, but he was a master at seizing the moment. He was a master at pleasing a woman in bed, too - and boring old Nik wasn't nearly as boring now that she was the woman in his bed.

She hadn't discarded all vestiges of her old caution, though. Walking into his dorm and up the stairs to his hall made nerves skitter in her stomach and her hand feel slimy on the cardboard ice cream dish. The promise of his special-for-her smile was enough to steady her and propel her the last few feet to his door. She calmed her breathing, then knocked.

No answer, but she heard sounds through the door. It was probably the radio, and it might be loud enough that he hadn't heard the knock. She knocked again, louder this time.

And she waited. Finally, the door cracked open a couple of inches, and Bill demanded, "Geez guys, can't you take a hint?" He wore only jeans, unbuttoned at the top, and his face went slack when he saw her. "Nik."

She shoved the door open another two or three feet, and the smell hit her. The smell of sex. The room was lost in shadows, but she knew there was a woman in Bill's bed.

She had the crazy idea that she ought to apologize for disturbing him - or say something completely civil and thoroughly cutting like her brother's fiancée Julie would. But really, all she wanted was to disappear, to magically transport back to her dorm room where she wouldn't have to pretend she wasn't devastated.

She couldn't disappear, though, and she absolutely *would not* react like the old Nik. "I brought you a

treat, but I see you've got one of your own," she said, grabbing the waistband of his jeans and pulling it open. She heard the metal zipper slide open. "Feel free to share this with her."

Quickly, she dumped the sundae in his pants.

CHAPTER ONE

October, Eight Years Later

"Wait up a second, Bill!" Scott hailed him from down the hall. Bill paused at the intersection of hallways and waited for Scott to catch up. "You remember Nik Harding, don't you? She was in George's class at the University, and she says you two knew each other, too."

The name grabbed at his insides, and he looked at the business-suited woman next to Scott. It really was her. "Nik." He stopped and took control of his mouth. "Of course I do. Hi, Nik." His smile didn't feel real.

"Hello," she said, without an accompanying smile.

Scott continued, seemingly oblivious to their awkwardness, "Nik's here today interviewing for the customer support manager job. Seth's supposed to see her next, but he's tied up right now on a conference call. I thought maybe you two'd like to do some catching up until he's ready."

He caught what looked like horror on Nik's face, but he replied, "That's a great idea, thanks. Come on, Nik - my office is down this way."

As they walked away, Scott said, "Ellen will call when Seth's free."

"Right in here," he said, leading the way into his office and sitting behind his desk. "Have a seat, Nik. It's great to see you again."

She perched on the chair closest to the door. "Look, we don't have to talk. Just go back to whatever you were doing, and I'll look through this folder." She opened the folder of fluff pieces about Adams-Worthington and its product, TechDoc.

"You don't want to read that crap," he said with a laugh. "Anyway, I always wished I'd had a chance to talk to you again." He'd tried, too. He'd stopped by her room unannounced and lurked near the rooms where she had classes. The few times he'd been in the right place at the right time, she'd acted like he was invisible.

"Well, I never did." Her voice was flat, with a hint of steel he didn't remember from college days. She'd been tough to get to know then, but under that she'd been soft, and sexy as hell.

"You're still pissed at me, aren't you?" All these years later? Wasn't that carrying a grudge a bit far?

Her mouth pursed in disgust. "Of course not. I simply have no interest in pretending to be friends with you."

He hadn't gotten his reputation with women by backing off at the first sign of resistance. "Fine. We don't have to be friends." He paused to give her a false sense of hope, then added, "I'd rather be your lover, in any case."

Her body jerked to full-alert, and he was amused to see her breasts suddenly become well-defined under her suit jacket. The covered-up look had been her style back then, too. It had made discovering the lush

body underneath that much sweeter. "They let you get away with saying things like that here?" she demanded. "No wonder I haven't seen more women today."

"They don't have a clue what I say," he said, not completely truthfully. He'd gotten in trouble more than once over suggestive comments to female employees. "Plus, I'm only telling the truth, Nikolia."

"Nik," she insisted, her teeth clenched. Her given name had embarrassed her when he'd known her before, and apparently that much hadn't changed.

He smiled. "I like Nikolia. It's pretty - like you." That wasn't a line, despite the fact that her looks wouldn't win her a second glance from most guys. He'd taken that second glance long ago.

"You can't think -" she started belligerently, but the phone stopped her mid-sentence.

He glanced at the display. "Hello, Ellen. Are you ready for me to bring Nik Harding down?"

"Yes, please," she said in that bitchy tone she used with those she considered her inferiors.

He hung up without responding. It wouldn't hurt her to treat him with half the respect she'd shown George. His brother had been a jerk, and the fact that he was co-founder of the company shouldn't have earned him special treatment.

He stood. "We'll continue this later, Nikolia."

He was looking forward to it already.

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Nik knew the interview was drawing to an end. Mr. Worthington was telling her now that they expected to make a decision on the job by the middle of next week. Quickly, before he started on the "thanks for coming in" speech, she spoke up. "Mr. Worthington -"

He interrupted with a warm smile, "Seth, please."

She smiled back at him. "Seth, then. Before we finish, I need to explain about my health. I assure you that I'm capable of handling this job, but I have a chronic illness that affects me all the time, to one degree or another." That sounded rather dire, but she couldn't in good conscience make it sound minor. "I have fibromyalgia."

Concern replaced his smile, but the warmth was still there. "Fibromyalgia is a difficult disease. One of my wife's friends has it, and she's had quite a time."

"It is difficult, and one of the trickiest parts is that there are no definitive answers on what works or even what causes it." She took a deep breath and began what she thought of as her sales pitch. "I was diagnosed two and a half years ago, and one of my first decisions was that I wouldn't let the disease control me any more than I absolutely had to. I read everything that's published on the subject, and I've developed a very personal regimen of diet, exercise, and lifestyle modifications that works for me. It's a continual balancing act, but I haven't missed any work due to illness for more than a year now."

"That's impressive," Seth replied. "Annabelle's friend has given up most of her outside activities, and she recently had to hire full-time help around the house. I wonder if the same routine would work for her."

"Possibly, although it sometimes seems like there are more differences than similarities in how people with fibro feel the disease and with what helps them." Because this was a job interview, and because she felt a

deep bond of sympathy with other fibro sufferers, she added, "But I'd be glad to talk to your wife's friend and tell her what's worked for me, if she's interested."

He smiled. "Thank you, Nik. I'll tell Annabelle about your offer." He dismissed the subject with a slight nod and said, "Now, about this job. I'm sure you realize that there's a reasonable amount of stress in any management position, at least at certain times. Would that be an issue, as far as your health goes?"

She needed to carefully mix honesty with optimism here. "Stress can be a problem, I admit, but I've found that if I'm careful to take a couple of breaks during the workday and not work too many extra hours, I get along just fine. My career is extremely important to me, and I make the necessary tradeoffs in my personal life to allow me to fulfill my work commitments."

That brought a concerned frown to Seth's face. "I appreciate your commitment, but as I always emphasize to my managers, I want and expect them to have lives outside the office. In fact, I explicitly discourage employees from making a habit of working more than forty-five hours a week. Barring deadlines or unforeseen disasters, if anyone's job takes that much time to perform adequately, something's wrong."

"That's an interesting philosophy," she said. "Most high-tech companies I'm familiar with are just the opposite."

He nodded. "I know, and their employees burn out or wreck their home lives because of it. My personal life has always been important to me, and when George and I started this company, we took the opportunity to do things the right way. I don't want to get ahead of myself, but I assure you that if we offer you this position, we will be prepared to accept any limitations your health might impose on the performance of your duties."

Nik didn't dare take his words at face value, but still she relaxed a little. Maybe she'd actually be judged on her professional abilities this time, unlike last summer when she applied for a support manager job at her current company. Everyone at DesignTek had been careful to say the right things about her health, but she didn't make it past the first round of interviews. Considering the lesser qualifications of the candidate who was hired, she was certain fibro had played a large role in the decision-making.

In any case, given that Bill was a manager here, she wasn't completely certain that a job at Adams-Worthington was quite as ideal for her as she'd hoped. She was no longer the naïve girl she'd been when Bill had broken her heart, but she couldn't be sure the years had made her any more able to resist his all-too-evident charm.

**

Seeing a former lover wasn't exactly unheard-of for Bill. He had plenty of them, and a not-insignificant number worked at A-W. But there was something different about seeing Nik again.

It had been years longer since he'd seen her, for one thing. Freshman year in college was - what, eight years ago? He'd been eighteen and just set free from a hellish childhood. He'd loved everything about his new life, especially all the available women.

In retrospect, he could see that Nik had been the wrong type of woman for him. She'd been too serious, too focused on the long-term. He'd been interested in long-term goals only to the extent necessary. Learning computer science was important because it would lead him to a well-paid and secure career, but he didn't spend the hundreds of extra hours on it that Nik did. There were too many fun things to do in life - and too many beautiful women to do them with - to study more than necessary.

Eight years might have passed, but it was clear they'd both stayed basically the same. She was a serious-minded woman and he was a fun-loving man. So the line about preferring to be her lover instead of her friend was just that - a line. He didn't care if he was either.

He was a healthy male, and when he met an attractive woman - or met her again, as in this case - she stirred a few fantasies.

Plain and simple.

**

The following Thursday after work, Nik sat in her combination office/gym and stared at the phone. Seth had offered her the customer support manager job on Tuesday, and she'd promised to call today with her answer.

The answer had to be yes. She'd worked too hard for too many years to refuse the chance to become a manager, and a company like Adams-Worthington would be a great place to work.

Other than Bill, that is. She'd been a fool over him one too many times already, and she couldn't afford being a fool ever again. She'd been honest with Seth about how she handled stress - job-related stress, that is. Emotional stress was different, and much harder to manage.

She'd had a taste of how much harder, right after she was diagnosed. She and Allen had still been engaged then, and she'd demanded that the doctor figure out what was wrong with her so she could get back to planning the future with him. The diagnosis was a huge shock. She was young, she had her whole life in front of her. How could he tell her she'd always have this rotten disease?

Instead of helping her deal with the blow, Allen retreated completely. She didn't hear from him for a week and a half. He finally came here to the house where she spent most of each day limply sprawled on the sofa, and broke up with her. He sympathized with her illness, but he wanted an active life with several children, and Nik would never be able to fit into that life.

He was right, but that didn't make his rejection any less traumatic. In less than two weeks, she'd lost everything that mattered to her.

She got sicker. Days passed in a blur of pain, and nights were never-ending. She couldn't sleep, and if somehow she fell asleep, she felt more exhausted than ever when she woke up. The simplest tasks became more than she could do. A shower left her weak and dizzy the rest of the day. She ate whatever she happened to have on hand, whenever she got hungry enough to venture all the way to the kitchen.

Neal almost certainly saved her life. Her little brother was nearly six years younger, and he'd finished art school that spring. He moved into the house and took care of her for the next several months. He cooked nutritious meals and made sure she took the medicine the doctor had given her to try. When she felt a little better, he helped her begin to exercise and to learn how to avoid getting in such a bad state again.

Avoiding relationships with the wrong kind of people was one of her basic tenets. She didn't have the time or energy to waste on negativity or game-playing, and Bill was a game-player. He'd liked his big-man-on-campus image all those years ago, and he still had the same swagger and self-assurance. His good looks were intact, too - the blond hair that belonged in an ad for hair color, the face that might belong to a very naughty angel, and the body that matched. She could laugh now at him saying he'd rather be her lover than her friend - as long as a woman was breathing, he'd think that.

Suddenly, she realized that she didn't have to worry about Bill. He couldn't force her into something she

didn't want, and she certainly didn't want to be one of his women again. Their jobs were in different parts of the company and that nice Scott Richards was Bill's boss. She suspected Scott was the one she'd work with most often. And bottom line, she could guarantee that Bill would leave her completely alone by the simple expedient of telling him about her illness.

She did a few minutes of deep breathing to relax her muscles, then called Seth to accept the job.

**

Bill waited until just before lunchtime to go to Nik's office. Not that he was planning to invite her to lunch. He'd simply found that was a good time to catch a lot of people alone in their offices.

He was eager to validate his theory of why Nik had been on his mind so much since her interview. The way he figured it, he virtually always was the dumper in a relationship, not the dumpee. He tired quickly of women, and once a woman had worn out her welcome with him, he avoided her like the plague.

But Nik didn't fit into that category. He'd been a long way from tired of her when she caught him with that nothing who was mad at her boyfriend. He'd been sorry to lose her, and his attempts to win her back had been as unprecedented as they were unsuccessful.

It only made sense that he'd feel like he had something to prove with her now. He wouldn't mind having *her* be the one left out in the cold this time, either.

But really. The whole thing was pointless, like digging up any other random piece of ancient history and getting all fixated on it. Life now was way too good to bother with any of that crap.

So, his whole point in barging into Nik's office this morning was to demonstrate that to himself. Nik was an attractive woman, one he'd be perfectly happy to go out with, if she was interested. It appeared so far that she wasn't, which was fine.

There were - what? Maybe half a dozen candidates here at A-W he hadn't gotten around to dating yet. In addition, there was the apparently-limitless supply of women he met at the athletic club and local bars. His life wouldn't come to a crashing halt if Nikolia Harding didn't join the queue.

His fine intentions lasted until she raised her head and nailed him to her partially-open office door with her eyes.

CHAPTER TWO

Nik had known this would happen. Bill had been persistent back in school, and he'd assume that the same tactics would work this time. They wouldn't, and she'd make it crystal clear. "Are you here about work?"

She probably only imagined his momentary hesitation, because before she was sure it had happened, he was lounging in her guest chair with a lazy smile. "Not today. I just thought I'd stop by to see how everything's going - it being your first day and all."

"Everything's fine, and I'm on my way out the door for lunch." She stood and picked up her purse. "You'll have to excuse me."

She swept past him and out the door.

**

The bitch! She was doing that I'm-too-good-for-you number on him, and he didn't take that from anyone anymore. He just bet she was laughing now, all full of herself for being rude to him.

Well, let her laugh. She wouldn't be so damn snooty if she didn't still have the hots for him. Conveniently, he had the hots for her, too, and he could push her a whole lot longer and harder than she could resist.

And for damn sure, he'd be the one to end things this time.

**

Nik didn't see Bill again on Monday, nor all day Tuesday or Wednesday. She knew she hadn't seen the last of him, but she tried to pretend that she had. Still, by the end of work Wednesday, her muscles were even tighter than usual, and she knew her after-work workout was particularly critical tonight.

She started with gentle stretching exercises on the special raised exercise platform Neal had built for her. It occupied about a third of the small bedroom she'd converted into an office/gym, and was covered with padded exercise mats. She'd hated giving up all that floor space, but she couldn't always get down onto the floor and back up again. Since she needed to do plenty of stretching every day, especially when she was having a flare and unable to do much else, the platform was needed.

She wondered again if a spa tub of some nature was worth the investment. Hot jets of water directed at the muscles that hurt sounded absolutely scrumptious, but the few times she'd tried it at a hotel or health club, it hadn't seemed to help. Besides, she didn't have room for even a tub-size spa, to say nothing of the larger kind, which would be easier for her to use.

After her muscles were warmed up, she got onto her exercise bike and pedaled away for fifteen minutes straight. That took care of her aerobic needs, plus strengthening and further limbering up the muscles in the lower half of her body. Those were the muscles that ached the most in bed at night.

All she had left was her upper body work followed by more stretching as she cooled down. Then, finally, she could rest for twenty minutes before heating a bowl of soup and making a small salad. One thing she could say with confidence about her exercise routine - it made her pathetically boring dinner seem nearly as desirable as surf-and-turf with a loaded baked potato and several glasses of full-bodied red wine. Well, not really, but the days when she could thoughtlessly indulge her taste buds were over, and she'd come to terms with that reality.

The doorbell rang while she was toweling off before getting onto the mat again. She knew that ignoring the bell would result in her wondering all evening about who had been at the door and why, so she answered it.

Better that she'd spent the evening wondering. Bill was at the door, and he shoved his way inside and pinned her to the wall by the coat closet with his body. "Get away from me!"

He shook his head. "Not right now, Nikolia." His arms were resting against the wall on either side of her body, but neither touched her. His body didn't touch hers in front, either, but she felt his body heat, as well as something like static electricity. His face - his mouth - was only an inch from hers.

She jerked suddenly to her right, hoping to break through the imprisonment of his arms by going the opposite direction from what he'd expect. She broke through easily - so easily, in fact, that she crashed into the garage door with no chance to reach for the doorknob first.

He seemed to take his time gathering her into his arms, but in no time, there she was, pressed tight against his body from chest to knees. His kiss was unhurried, starting with a barely-there brush of his lips across

her temple, and visiting her forehead, the corner of an eye, and an earlobe before reaching her mouth.

The kiss became serious then, deep and probing, and his hands were on her body as though they'd been made for each other.

And then, gradually, he released her, helping her to lean back against the wall where she'd been a minute - or a lifetime - ago. She stared at him, wondering what had happened.

He smiled tightly. "You said to get away from you."

"I -" She shook her head. Could she say she'd changed her mind?

"You don't mean it, Nikolia. I know that. You want me every bit as much as I want you." His eyes glittered and the ice she saw there made her shiver. "But I want to hear those words right from those luscious lips of yours, and I'm going to wait until I do." He reached behind him for the door and stepped back through the doorway. "Feel free to say the words any old time, Nikolia. I guarantee it'll be worth it, to both of us."

He pulled the door closed and disappeared from view.

**

Geez! Bill hadn't been this turned on by a kiss since - well, since never. Nik was sexier than she'd been back at school. More woman, less self-conscious adolescent. That leotard didn't hurt matters any, either, despite being damp with sweat.

Leotards were a wonderful invention. They showed off a woman's body, pluses as well as minuses, and the simple fact that a woman wore one usually meant she cared about her body. Since he cared about women's bodies, too, it gave them at least one thing in common.

He shook his head and concentrated on fitting his car key into the ignition. Thinking about leotards wasn't going to help him resist the urge to walk right back into Nik's house and take her up on her still-unspoken need. That would be the quickest way to get her to admit how much she wanted him. He could play her need against her, and force her to tell him what they both knew was true before he let her off the hook.

But she was different than most women he dated. Her brain was the part that controlled her, and it needed to be in agreement with her body before he took her to bed.

Resolutely, he started the car and drove away. He'd stop by the athletic club and see about sweating away the visions of him and Nik.

And if that didn't work, Jade would be there, happy as always to join him for a nonstop night of purely recreational sex.

**

"Isn't Adams-Worthington the company that guy you knew at school started?" Neal asked over coffee on Saturday morning.

"Yeah, George Adams. But he died several years ago. Mr. Worthington - Seth - runs the place, and he's real nice." Nik chattered on, hoping the flow of information would distract him before he remembered that Bill and George were brothers. "George was married to Seth's daughter, and they had a little girl shortly before he died. Francine's dead now, too, but Rachel - the little girl - is being raised by Scott, the head of development. He and Francine were engaged, and he seems real nice, too." The whole setup

sounded more like a soap opera than real life, but she'd been assured it was all true.

Neal smirked, and she knew he remembered. "Any news about Bill?" Neal had practically worshipped Bill, those few months when she and Bill had been friends and then lovers. Their house was almost on campus, so she'd taken him there many times.

"He works at A-W, in development," she admitted.

His smirk broadened. "That's nice. You two must be busy getting reacquainted."

She should play along with him, she knew. He was simply teasing her, reminding her as only a brother could that once in her life, she'd been spontaneous and fun-loving. But Bill was no joking matter. She'd struggled too much against temptation these last few nights, so her voice was harsher than she intended when she said, "Bill's not like you remember him. He's an unprincipled jerk, and he spends his time going from woman to woman, taking and never giving."

Neal's eyebrows soared. "You've been checking up on him?"

She blew her breath out in disgust. "I didn't need to. All week, the other women at A-W have been whispering warnings to me. They say Seth's spoken to him half a dozen times about what's appropriate behavior for the workplace, but he still pushes it right to the edge. And personally - well, they say he's like a light switch. One day, he just can't get enough of a woman, and the next, he can't even be bothered to call."

She shouldn't have wasted her breath explaining. Neal was sitting there, struggling not to laugh, and totally misunderstanding the situation. "It didn't occur to you that maybe you were talking to someone with an ax to grind?"

"Just forget it - the point is that I'm not going to be renewing anything with that jerk." She changed subjects to the one thing guaranteed to be of interest to Neal. "How's your painting going?"

He laughed and shook his head. "Don't think I don't know what you're doing - but the answer is good. You know how I've been trying to capture that above-the-clouds feeling up at the log house?"

She nodded. He lived with an older art patron named Marian in a log house on top of a small mountain nearby. The valleys below sometimes filled with clouds, and from the mountaintop, they looked like vast fields of freshly-fallen snow. "You've gotten it to come out right?"

He waggled his hand in a so-so gesture. "Not yet, but I'm getting there. Marian's sure she can sell the one I'm doing now, even though I can already tell it's not quite right."

She sucked in a breath so fast she coughed. "Sell it? That's great! It'll be your first one, won't it?"

He shrugged and nodded and tried to appear nonchalant, all at the same time. "Yeah. Of course, it might not turn out like she thinks it will, or maybe none of her friends'll want it, but if one of them did, that'd be cool."

She smiled and put her hand on his muscular forearm. "I'm proud of you, little brother."

He suddenly craned his neck to look out her kitchen window, then laughed. "You've got a visitor, big sister. Someone who apparently doesn't feel the same as you do about renewing old acquaintances."

Her heart did an unwelcome leap and took off into panic. How on earth could she deal with Bill while Neal was here, egging him on?

**

Bill was disgusted with himself. It was way too soon to visit Nik again - she'd get the idea he was desperate. She'd be right, too - damn it.

She answered the door right away, and surprisingly stepped back to let him in. "Since you're here, come and say hi to Neal."

Not exactly "I've been thinking of you night and day," but he'd take it. He followed her through the kitchen to the dining room. If he hadn't been warned, he wouldn't have recognized the good-looking guy at the table as the gawky teenager he'd known years ago. "Hey, Neal. How're ya doing?"

Neal stood and offered his hand. Geez, he'd grown another several inches. "Can't complain, Bill. How about you?"

"Fine." Well, wasn't this a lovely turn of events? Neal was probably a fine guy, but Bill hadn't come to see him. He glanced over at Nik, hoping for an inspiration. Instead, he saw her edging back toward the kitchen, and he bet the kitchen wasn't her final destination. He stepped in her way and said, "Isn't this something? The three of us meeting here, all these years later? Does your dad still teach at the University?"

Neal answered. "No, he's at the U of O now. Nathan's at the University, though. His family even lives in our old house."

"Is that so? I never really knew Nathan." He knew enough to know that he was a pain, as well as their father's favorite. He'd been finishing his graduate studies when Bill knew Nik.

"Not a big loss, if you ask me," Neal said. Before Nik had a chance to react, he rolled his eyes and added, "Okay, maybe that's not a nice thing to say, but isn't it true? He's just like Dad, except for all the good parts of Dad."

Nik snorted, but instead of answering Neal, she glared at him. He threw up his hands and said, "Okay, okay. I'm sorry. I'll go get started on the yard work." With half a dozen long strides, he went through the garage door and closed it behind him.

And Bill was alone with Nik.

**

Nik should have known Neal would abandon her, the very second he could. He hadn't believed anything she'd said about Bill, and obviously thought that if he left them alone together, they'd be back in each other's arms in nothing flat.

"I must admit I was hoping you'd be wearing that leotard again today, Nikolia." Bill's voice was soft and insinuated itself right into her brain. "But this is fine, too. It makes me imagine what's underneath."

She was wearing a caftan, and nothing underneath. She often wore next-to-nothing at home, since clothes sometimes pressed against body parts tender with fibro, making her frantic. She squirmed mentally and started toward the garage. "I'd better go see if Neal needs anything."

He stopped her by wrapping his hand around her wrist. "Neal went outside to give us some privacy. Let's take advantage of his thoughtfulness." He pulled her around to face him and nudged her back against the refrigerator.

Desperate, she said, "I thought you were going to wait until I told you what you wanted to hear."

He sneered, "You're too pigheaded to admit a damn thing."

Good thing he wasn't inside her head! But since he wasn't, she pushed back with, "Then what are you going to do? Rape me and hope I decide later I wanted it?"

His eyes flared dangerously and she wondered if she'd gone too far. Finally, the words like bullets, he said, "You have no reason to accuse me of rape."

He stalked to the door and slammed it behind him.

CHAPTER THREE

Bill drove to the athletic club, but didn't go in. There was no point. Exercise hadn't done a damn all week to deal with this idiotic obsession with Nik, and it would do less with his anger.

The anger wasn't at her so much as it was at that awful word. Rape. It brought back so much of what it had been like growing up. He'd known about rape long before he'd known about sex. He'd seen the girls his age or a little older, tough but still basically carefree one day, haunted and broken the next. At maybe ten, he'd happened on the gang-rape of a girl he didn't know, and been laughingly offered a piece of the action by a guy who lived in his building. And it was maybe soon after that when he realized what happened after Pop finished beating Ma.

He'd sworn, way back then, that even if he someday grew big and strong enough to force his will on a woman, he wouldn't do it. He'd been the weak one, the one who could be hurt, too many times.

Living up to that vow hadn't been enough to escape being labeled a would-be rapist, though. Once during high school, he'd worked on a science project with a girl from a nice family. She was a quiet girl who never seemed to think she was better than he was. They stopped at the public library several times after school to research their topic, and once, she invited him into her house for a soft drink.

The girl's parents arrived home while Bill and Sharon were sitting in the kitchen, planning the next phase of their research. Bill was polite and respectful, but the parents didn't care. They called Sharon into the next room and, loud enough so he could hear almost every word, told her to get rid of him. She protested that they weren't done talking yet, and that they only had another week before they had to give their report. Her father said that they *were* done - he'd speak to Sharon's teacher about it. The idea of assigning a boy like that to work with *their* daughter - why, everyone knew he was as likely to rape her as to look at her.

Bill thought that Sharon tried to defend him, but he wasn't quite sure, since he grabbed his books and ran out the back door before anyone came into the kitchen. At school the next day, she kept glancing over at him, as though she wanted to say something, but he knew from her cautious eyes that she no longer dared to believe he was decent.

And now, without even knowing his past, Nik seemed to think he might rape her.

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Nik didn't know what to think about Bill's reaction, but she knew she owed Bill an apology. Not even the nastiest comments she'd heard this week hinted that he ever coerced women into bed. Sure, he made suggestive remarks left and right, but that seemed to be part of his personality, and in general, light-hearted.

He had reason to believe she was interested, too. She tried to be cool and distant with him, but it was impossible. Her body gave her away. She wasn't going to follow through on her interest, but Bill didn't know that.

She finally decided that she should go over to his apartment and apologize in person. Maybe they could actually discuss the situation rationally, and she could explain why further pursuit would be wasted.

She got dressed and started through the garage to tell Neal she was going out, emerging into the sunlight just as Bill turned into her cul-de-sac. She waited for him by the front of her garage. "I was going to come see you," she said as he stepped out of the car.

He blinked, whether from the sun or her statement, she wasn't sure. "You were?"

She nodded. "I owe you an apology. I didn't mean that about you raping me."

"You didn't? Why did you say it, then?"

"Because -" She bit her lip, hoping she wasn't handing him enough ammunition to sink her. "Because I didn't dare let you kiss me again." That wasn't the full answer, and she rocked back and forth once before continuing. "Because when you kiss me, all the reasons I have for not getting involved with you again turn into mist."

"It sounds like I should kiss you more often." The words and the smile were pretty much what she'd expected, but he didn't immediately follow them up with the kiss she was simultaneously dreading and anticipating. Instead, he said, "But I'd much rather have you welcome my kisses. Why don't you tell me the reasons that you don't?"

This wasn't the same Bill she'd encountered several times recently. This was more like he'd been when she knew him before, and that only made him more dangerous to her. "Come on inside. This isn't a subject we need to discuss in front of my neighbors." She hadn't seen any neighbors yet this morning, but on a nice Saturday morning, they would be around.

They headed back inside, and as she was opening the door into the rest of the house, he asked, "You were really coming to see me?" She nodded and he continued, "Where were you going to go?"

She answered, "Your apartment complex," then realized his address wasn't listed in the phone book. "Someone at work mentioned where you live."

He didn't comment, but she was glad she wasn't still trying to pretend she had no interest in him. She led the way into the living room and sat in her recliner. He sat across from her on the sofa and his face took on a serious almost mask-like expression. "I came back because I overreacted before, and because you were kind of right. I shouldn't have pushed myself at you like that."

"No, but the rape comment was out-of-line, anyway."

He half-nodded, then said, "Let's start over now. Okay?"

"Okay, but my answer's still going to be no." It had to be.

"Why? If it's because of what happened before -"

She didn't need to hear the lie that had to be coming. "It's not. It's me." She suddenly felt horribly tired, like she couldn't possibly explain her condition to one more person ever. "Have you heard of fibromyalgia?"

His forehead wrinkled and he watched her warily. "Not that I remember. What is it?"

She sighed. So much for simplicity. "It's a chronic disease, and I have it. It's kind of like arthritis, only it affects muscles instead of joints."

"Old people get arthritis, not somebody your age," he objected.

"It's not just old people, although I'm not surprised you think that. And fibromyalgia tends to start at a fairly young age."

The wariness seemed to have turned into suspicion. "So, what you're saying is that you get stiff and sore sometimes? Big deal."

That was the wrong thing for him to say. "It is a big deal, a whole lot more than getting stiff and sore once in a while. The pain's constant, sleep's almost impossible, and my whole life consists of trying to survive work, one day at a time. I can't eat any of the foods I love, I have virtually no social life, and my dream of getting married and having children is gone forever."

He was taken aback by her outburst, but she could see him trying to formulate a response - one she'd undoubtedly heard a hundred times before. Well, she had an excellent idea where he could put that response! She jumped up before he could say a word. "I'm sick of talking with you. You obviously don't understand the first thing about what I deal with everyday, and that's fine. Just leave me the heck alone and we'll both be happy." She started out of the room. Just before heading down the hall to her bedroom, which thankfully had a lock, she added, "If by some strange chance, you actually want to know more about my condition, talk to Neal. He knows everything."

Almost everything, at least. Not even Neal knew what it was like to wake up in the middle of the night and hurt so bad all over that simply surviving for the next several minutes seemed like the worst torture imaginable.

**

Bill hated being talked down to. Nik acted like his whole life had been perfect, and she was the only one with problems. Not a chance! She could just pick on somebody else if she needed to be all superior over some poor dude.

And what was this fibro-whatever deal? Probably just an excuse to avoid getting involved with him, but why bother with a big act? All she had to do was tell the truth - that she figured she was better than he was, and didn't want to dirty her precious little self by being with him.

She sure as heck hadn't cared about that back at school, but people changed. He wasn't going to put up with that crap just because he had a lingering fondness for the girl she'd been back then.

He let himself out the front door, but the sound of clippers drew him toward the side of the house instead of toward his car. Neal was bent over a bush, his back to Bill. "Hey, Neal," he called.

Neal stood and faced him. "Bill! I thought I heard you leave earlier."

He shrugged. "Yeah, but I came back." How exactly was he supposed to go about asking Neal about Nik? "You need any help?"

"Nah, thanks anyway. I'm almost done for today." He glanced around, seeming to feel the need to explain. "I try to get down here once a week and do stuff Nik can't do herself."

He couldn't ask for a better opening. "What kind of stuff can't she do?"

Neal waved at the yard. "None of this, really, except about once a year she goes crazy and tries to mow the lawn. She gets maybe this corner of it done and spends the next week in misery." He shook his head. "Still, she tries it again the next year."

Well, it sounded like Neal really thought she was sick. "What exactly is this fibro-thing she has?"

"It's awful, man. All her muscles and tendons and stuff ache all the time, and there are a bunch of places where if you just put the tip of your finger on her skin, it kills her. And sometimes, her muscles just stop working - she'll be walking along and end up on the ground."

"She said something about not being able to eat things she likes."

He nodded. "She has to be really careful about her diet, because some foods make it worse. Plus, she's trying really hard to keep it under control so she can keep working, and diet and exercise really help with that."

Okay, so this thing was real, but he still bet she was using it as an excuse. "Isn't this new manager's job pretty much the last thing she needs?"

"Oh, no," Neal explained earnestly. "Nik's career is really important to her, and she's willing to give up most anything else to be able to handle work okay." Suddenly a little doubtful, he asked, "How come she told you only part of the story?"

He wasn't about to admit the truth, so he shrugged. "I don't know. She said you knew everything, so I should ask you."

Neal smiled slightly and shook his head indulgently. "I'll tell you what it is. You were the best thing that ever happened to her, and she's afraid it'll happen again. She's trying to scare you off."

"I think you're right." Except why be afraid of something that good?

"Is it going to work? Her fibromyalgia's going to be a serious issue, if you try to have a relationship with her."

He shook his head. "I don't scare easy."

Neal grinned and clapped his shoulder. "I never thought you did. I really have to warn you, though, she's got this idea set in her mind that she can't get involved with anybody, that her health won't allow it. I don't buy it."

He grinned back at the younger and much taller man. "I don't, either."

But what in heck was he getting himself into?

**

Nik felt like an idiot, locked into her own bedroom to avoid a guy she shouldn't even have let into her house. She'd heard the front door close a while ago, so Bill had probably left. But maybe that was what he wanted her to think. She could easily imagine him lurking down the hall, just out of sight, waiting for her to decide the coast was clear.

To do what, exactly? He wasn't going to rape her, she knew that. And as far as a guy like him wasting one of his days off, lying in wait for her - well, the idea was ludicrous.

Okay, so apparently he thought she'd be a good candidate to add to his harem of willing women. But the operative word there was willing, and eager would be even better, and he knew by now that she was neither. So, bottom line, that meant he had no reason to pursue her any longer.

That was a relief, it really was. There was something about Bill that made him harder to say no to than virtually anyone else she'd ever known. She'd had guys at DesignTek ask her out since she was diagnosed with fibro - nice guys, guys she enjoyed talking to. It hadn't been a problem to turn them down, not even Dale who'd tried several times before giving up. All she'd had to do was remind herself how difficult it already was to make it through a work week, and imagine how a simple dinner date would disrupt the precarious balance she usually managed to maintain.

The problem with Bill was that he slipped under her defenses, lightning-fast like a snake. One second she was resolute in staying away from him, and the next, his kiss - or even his smile - made everything else seem unimportant.

Yes, she was getting off lucky.

"Sweet Nikolia," Bill's voice came softly through the bedroom door. "You're not going to scare me off, so don't even try. I'll be back after dinner tonight."

CHAPTER FOUR

As he drove to Nik's, Bill suddenly wondered if she'd be there. He hadn't thought of that possibility before. Maybe he shouldn't have given her time to make a getaway.

But really, what was the point? If she was determined to avoid having anything to do with him, that's what would happen. She had a choice in the matter, and his rational brain insisted that he didn't want her if she didn't also want him.

Still, it was almost a surprise when she opened the door less than a minute after he rang the bell. He struggled to sound matter-of-fact as he asked, "So, Nikolia, are you finally willing to admit that you want this?"

"Come sit down. There are some things I need to make clear." Her manner was cool, but not negative as far as he could tell. She sat in the same recliner as before. "You're talking about us having sex," she said baldly. When he would have answered, she raised her hand and shook her head. "That's what you mean, and there's nothing wrong with being honest about it. And to be honest, I'd like that, too."

She was admitting that's what she wanted? "That's great!"

She smiled wistfully. "It's not quite that simple. First of all, I'm not sure it would work, physically. I have a lot of pain in my hips and legs, and I'm not very flexible anymore. It might hurt too much to work, and if it did, you'd have to be willing to give up."

He was tempted to do the meaningless reassurance act, the way he might with a woman who was worrying about some issue that would never arise in a hundred years. But Nik was serious, and her disease was real, even though he didn't understand it. He owed her sincerity in return. "There are lots of positions we can try. I'm sure we can find one that works."

But could they? And how would it be to make love with someone who had such limits? He was used to reasonably lithe partners, and to changing positions based on what would bring the most pleasure, not what would hurt the least. Would it still bring him the hit of freedom and bliss that he counted on?

"But if we couldn't?" she asked quietly. "Would you accept my word on that? Because I can't try unless I'm sure of that."

His mouth dried and he nodded soberly. Something a lot like dread crowded into his gut. "I'll do what you say, Nik. I don't want to cause you pain."

She nodded, looking as solemn as he felt. "Also, I have trouble sleeping, so you'd have to go home afterwards."

No way! Sleeping with a woman - especially a new woman he wanted as much as he wanted Nik - was an essential part of making love to her. Holding her while she slept, enjoying how she looked when she didn't know he was watching, arousing her all over again and then satisfying her - he couldn't give up any of that. "What if I promise to leave if you really need me to?"

She didn't like that option, but finally agreed. "This might be a mistake, but I guess I have to trust you to some extent."

That was a slap in the face, but he didn't let himself react to it. After a moment, she said, "It'll probably just be this once, but just in case -"

"It'll be more than once." Right now, he couldn't imagine ever not wanting her, but it would eventually happen. It always did. But with Nik, it wouldn't be very soon.

She looked at him with wide startled eyes. "Well, if you're right, you'd have to accept my limits. I can't lose too much sleep, or - um - expend too much energy. So it would have to be only once in a while."

Another condition he wouldn't accept. When he needed a woman like he needed Nik, every night was the only frequency his system could tolerate. Carefully, he said, "I think that's something we'll have to work out together at the time. Exhausting you or making you sick won't do me any good, and I'm sure we can find a workable solution."

He wasn't all that sure, actually, but he wasn't going to blow his chance with her over some hypothetical issue. She shook her head. "Don't think you're fooling me. You think you'll agree to the easy stuff and let everything else ride, assuming I'll be too hooked on you to insist on doing things my way later. You're wrong, for the very simple reason that we're not talking about my preferences here. We're talking about my health, and that's something I don't play games with. I can't afford to." She paused, and her eyes drilled into his. "So get it through that thick head of yours right now that you're not in charge. I am, and unless I feel confident that you're going to respect my needs and limitations, nothing's going to happen here."

She was simply being too pushy, and way too insulting. He wouldn't take it. "You're right, Nik. Nothing's going to happen here - because I've taken all the insults I intend to. Either *you're* going to open your eyes and understand that I wouldn't cause you pain for the world - or you can just sit there all alone and feel superior about yourself. Your choice." He shut his mouth and waited for her response.

The belligerence disappeared, leaving confusion. "What do you mean?"

Maybe she honestly didn't understand. "Do you really not know me any better than that? You admitted earlier that you knew I wouldn't rape you - why would you think I'd ignore your physical limitations? Making love with someone is about bringing them pleasure - I can't do that if I'm also causing you pain." Knowing it wouldn't mean much to her, but still needing to say it, he added, "Believe me, I don't confuse pleasure and pain."

Her forehead furrowed and regret darkened her eyes. "I didn't mean it like that. I just -" She worried at her bottom lip for a moment before continuing. "You always seem so positive that what you want is the right thing, and you keep pushing at every limit I try to set."

He felt himself begin to relax. Maybe this would work out, after all. "That's because you set limits to keep me from getting close to you, and I want to get close to you. I have no problem with limitations based on your health."

She thought that through and finally asked, "And that's why you said what you did about not staying all night?"

He nodded. "Right. I want to sleep with you almost as much as I want to make love to you. But if it proved to be a problem, I'd leave." Only after he'd exhausted every other possibility he could imagine, but he *would* go.

Suddenly, waiting even another few minutes seemed impossible. "Nikolia, I know it's hard for you to trust me, but I won't disappoint you. I swear I'll take care of you and do everything within my power to make things right for us. Please, let me make love to you tonight."

Her tongue peeked out between her teeth as she considered his words. Finally she nodded.

**

Nik's insides were trembling. She'd actually agreed to go to bed with Bill! She guessed she'd known she would. She'd needed to make the situation clear to Bill, but fighting the attraction between them was just too hard to continue forever.

She didn't know what happened now, though. Did they simply stand up and go into the bedroom together, like the sensible adults she and Allen had been? Or would Bill almost literally sweep her off her feet, like he used to do?

They'd often walked back to her dorm room together, after meeting for coffee or a shared hot fudge sundae with peppermint ice cream. They'd start out with his arm around her waist and hers around his. Partway there, he'd pause and give her a brief but leisurely kiss that made her squeeze her eyes shut and feel like the luckiest girl on campus. The next time they stopped, he'd slip his hand under her shirt and cup her breast while they kissed. By the time they got to her hallway, their pauses were lengthy heated intervals that made her knees weak.

Her heart stuttering, she realized that it didn't take desire to weaken her knees these days. Was she crazy to think this one aspect of her life could be unhindered by fibro?

"Nikolia." Bill's voice stirred more swirls in the pit of her stomach. He was right here, inches from her, his hands extended in invitation.

She offered her hands to him wordlessly, and he pulled her to her feet. Toe-to-toe, still holding hands, they kissed, a gentle kiss that reminded her of their first kiss, all those years ago.

**

Bill was dimly aware that he might be in big trouble, but he didn't care. He was in a zone of bliss with Nik that was way better than anywhere he'd been before.

Making love was serious business to him. It was so much more than the mindless release that most people believed it was, and well worth the attention he devoted to it. And tonight was better than that.

Tonight made all the other nights pale by comparison, but he wasn't questioning why. He was too busy enjoying.

Nik was sleeping now, and he should be, too. Instead, he was watching her sleep, noticing how much younger she looked, and realizing that her now-normal half-frown must be the result of the pain she'd mentioned. That thought threatened to spoil his pleasure, so he pushed it away before it had the chance.

He pulled the sheet down a few inches so he could see her body. He loved women's bodies, all their curves and hollows and secret places. Even when he was physically satisfied like this, he still couldn't resist the chance to explore.

As gentle and feather-like as his touch was, he woke her. Her first reaction was to roll toward him, put her arm around him, and snuggle up close. That instantly brought back his desire full force, and he took the opportunity to step up the assault on her senses. She didn't seem to mind.

**

Nik couldn't see the clock, but from the dim light filtering into the room through the mostly-closed blinds, she figured it was close to morning. Amazing. She'd slept more tonight with Bill here than she did most nights.

She'd probably be awake the rest of the night now, but that wouldn't be so bad. Her hips and legs weren't aching with the all-too-common toothache-like pain that made her frantic, and having Bill practically cradling her body was oddly comfortable.

She wouldn't change positions unless she had to. He was sleeping now, and disturbing him would likely lead to him wanting to make love again. Not that she had anything against the idea in general - she'd thoroughly enjoyed herself each time earlier. But she was afraid she'd pay tomorrow for the semi-acrobatics, and besides, three times in a single night was enough for anyone!

At least, that's what she kept telling herself.

**

Geez! What *was* that sound - that blat of noise with the intensity of a buzz saw drilling into his brain? Bill opened his eyes, expecting to see something foreign in the room, something that could be causing that noise.

All he saw was Nik, calmly turning over inch-by-inch, as though in slow-motion. Eventually, she got onto her other side and reached for her clock. The noise stopped.

"That was your alarm clock?" If so, he was surprised it didn't wake him when he was a mile away in his own apartment.

"Yeah. It's kind of loud, I know."

Kind of loud didn't cover it. "You don't have a clock radio?"

She seemed to be struggling to sit up, and her answer was somewhat delayed. "With my sleep all messed up like it is with fibro, I need a loud alarm." Now, she started turning so she could sit on the edge of the bed.

Her movements were infinitely cautious, and he realized something was wrong. "Are you okay? Should I help you up or something?"

"Oh. No," she said, her words punctuated by pants of exertion. "I'm just stiff in the mornings. I'll be better in a while." She'd made it to the edge of the bed, and she slumped there, looking like she was working up her nerve to do some impossible task. After a few more seconds, she said, "You don't have to get up right away, but you'll need to be ready to leave by ten, when I go to church."

"I'll just hang out until you get back." He wanted to wrap his arms around her from behind and remind her just exactly why that was such a good idea, but given her obvious stiffness, maybe she wouldn't appreciate the reminder right now.

"You can't do that. I have stuff to do today." She didn't sound sorry about it, nor even like she wanted him to think she was sorry.

He'd give her another chance. "You can do stuff with me around. I'll even help, if I can."

She shook her head. "I need to be alone." Still no hint of regret or willingness to compromise.

With another woman, he'd put his hand on her arm and pull her around to face him. But that might hurt Nik, so instead he got out of bed and sat on the floor in front of her. He was nicely positioned between her and the bathroom, and she wasn't going anywhere until he decided to let her. "In other words, you got what you wanted out of this, and I should buzz off before I annoy you?"

She sat up straighter. "That's not it. I told you I can't do anything to jeopardize my health."

"And how would having me around jeopardize your health?" He'd like her reason to be that his presence would tempt her to ignore her chores, but he doubted that would turn out to be it.

"I do a lot of meditating on weekends, and I can't do that with anyone around." Her answer wasn't as grudging as he'd expected, so maybe he'd been wrong about her attitude.

He shrugged. "Okay. Well, I usually spend time at the athletic club working out on Sundays. I can do that while you meditate."

Her eyes darted around the room, and he knew he was about to hear more excuses. "Look, last night was great, but I don't really think I could take another night like that right away. Maybe next weekend -"

He cut her off. "Next weekend's a hell of a long time from now. If last night was too much for you, just tell me and we'll figure out how to make it easier."

She sighed. "It wasn't too much. It's just -"

He gritted his teeth. "I told you, Nik. Don't set arbitrary limits. Trust me to be willing to work things out with you. If your body can't handle making love so many times, we'll deal with it." How, he couldn't imagine, but he'd figure something out.

She looked doubtful. "I don't see why you're wasting your time on me. Other women don't have these problems."

"They're also not you, Nikolia." Because he'd been with a lot of women and knew how they thought, he added, "I'm not saying I'll necessarily want to be with you forever, but I'm with you now because of you, not because it's convenient." He smiled at her and caressed her leg. "Come on. I'll let you get your chores done, and we'll have a good time in between."

She softened a little. "Give me until seven o'clock."

He suspected that was about as far as she'd go. "Make it six, and I'll take you anywhere you want for dinner."

She laughed. "You don't want to eat at the kind of places I dare to go."

"Try me," he said, willing her with his eyes to trust him that far.

With a smile, she warned him, "You'll be sorry."

Not a chance.

CHAPTER FIVE

Nik blew her breath out and grimaced. Bill didn't belong in the middle of her visualization of the deep blue waters of Crater Lake! Not when the point of the whole exercise was to relax and let the mental vacation loosen her always-tight muscles!

Why was he interested in her? It couldn't simply be the need for conquest - not after last night. And she didn't like womanizers, so it made no sense for her to find him so attractive. Yet -

Yet nothing. This was her mental and physical exercise time, and if she couldn't succeed at mental exercise today, she'd darn well do a good job of the physical.

First, a few minutes more of stretching. She'd started the session with some simple flexibility work, and now she repeated the same exercises before increasing the pace and working up a light sweat.

Then, onto the bike for twenty minutes, starting with no resistance and increasing it a notch every five minutes. *That* would get her full attention. She couldn't keep wondering about Bill's motives while she struggled and sweated.

She *could*, however, wonder what he was doing right now. Was he at the athletic club? What kind of exercise did he do? He didn't have big bulky muscles, but the muscles were there, and they were strong. His body was more sculpted now than it had been, too.

He'd changed in other ways since college, too. He'd always been brash and charming, but he was smoother and more sure of himself now. And his technique in bed had definitely improved -

That was enough of that! She had at least a little self-control, and wallowing in endless mental replays of last night wasn't something she would allow. She needed to stay as objective as possible about this affair.

She had to. It wouldn't last, and she couldn't let its end throw her into a major flare or down cycle.

**

Bill certainly wouldn't have chosen this humongous salad bar as a place to take a date, but he enjoyed his dinner. Nik stuck almost entirely to the most healthy ingredients, while he was an equal-opportunity diner - plenty of fresh salad, but also a loaded baked potato, chili, and a big make-your-own sundae of frozen yogurt and several toppings.

He had second thoughts about the sundae when he saw Nik eyeing it as though she wanted to rip it out of his hands. "Should I not eat this in front of you?"

She managed a small smile. "No, it's okay. I'll make a small one for myself, and that'll take care of my

sweet tooth." She went off then, returning in a minute with a much smaller and less gooey dish.

He still felt awkward about it, so a minute later he said, "I guess I ought to know some specifics about the diet you're on. It looks like you eat a lot of vegetables and very little fat - is that right?"

She nodded. "Not much meat, either, and in general, foods that aren't highly-processed. It's a trial-and-error thing with me, mostly, and I can eat small amounts of things that aren't good for me, as long as my fibro's reasonably under control. I also take all sorts of nutritional supplements and vitamins - probably fifty pills a day - because my system gets out of whack easily."

"What do you eat normally?"

"Nutrition drinks or yogurt a couple of times a day, and typically homemade soup and salad for dinner." She wrinkled her nose in distaste. "I get pretty bored with the same stuff all the time, but finding new recipes takes more effort than I'm willing to spend on it."

He opened his mouth to say he'd cook her dinner, but decided he should find something he could safely make for her first. "Can you drink alcohol?"

She shrugged. "It's the same as everything else. I can handle a little, once in a while." She looked down at her nearly-untouched sundae. "I'm sorry. I know this isn't very much fun for you."

What was she talking about? "I'm having a good time. Aren't you?"

"Sure." She waved a hand at the utilitarian dining room surrounding them. "This can't be the kind of place you normally frequent, though."

"Well, no," he admitted. "Although it kind of reminds me of the main cafeteria back at school."

She chuckled. "Exactly. Maybe now you'll believe me when I say you don't want to go the kind of places I dare eat at."

She still didn't get it. He shook his head. "Not a chance, Nikolia. I want to be with you, and as long as you're with me, I'm happy."

She didn't believe him, but he didn't really care. He knew it was true.

For now.

Funny. That was the first time he'd had to remind himself that his interest in a woman would only be temporary.

**

When her lunchtime meditation/rest break on Monday left her neck and shoulders still feeling like they were caught in a vise grip, Nik had to admit what her body was telling her. Two nights in a row with Bill was pushing her limits, and another one would probably throw her completely out of balance.

She dreaded having to explain that to Bill. He claimed he wouldn't have a problem accepting restrictions based on her health, but she didn't believe him. He liked having his own way too much.

She called him the minute she got home, hoping to catch him before he came over. His answering machine picked up and she told it, "Bill, this is Nik. You can't come over tonight. I'm tired and in pain, and what I need is a quiet evening by myself. I'm sorry." She purposefully didn't say that she most likely needed several nights of rest to recover enough to spend another night with him. He'd never be able to

leave that kind of statement unchallenged.

She knew better than to do what she wanted to right now - crawl into bed and stay there until morning. Instead, she exercised, concentrating on her stretching exercises. They were the most critical, and she didn't dare skip them even one night. The bike was another matter. It would be too exhausting.

She had no appetite, but forced herself to zap a mug of soup in the microwave and to pour herself a large glass of filtered water. She ate mechanically, trying not to feel sorry for herself.

The attempt was doomed. She couldn't help comparing tonight to last night, and this dinner to yesterday's. How rotten did her life have to be, anyway? By some miracle, she actually had a lover for the first time in years, and her body wouldn't even let her make the most of it. It wasn't like Bill was going to stick around, day after day and week after week, waiting for her to be strong enough to have sex with him. His appetite was too strong to put up with that for long, even if he would otherwise be willing to do that.

And after he left, what? A whole lifetime of nights spent alone and miserable like this, that's what. It just wasn't fair!

**

Bill told himself that Nik was playing hard-to-get again. She wasn't sick. She just wanted to regain the upper hand in their relationship. She'd given in too easily over the weekend, and now she intended to make him pay. Well, he'd see about that.

But the hollow feeling inside his gut made the drive to her house seem endless, and the wait before she answered the door panic-inducing.

And once he saw her, there was no question about it. She was sick. She leaned most of her weight on the doorframe, but still barely seemed able to stand, and her skin appeared chalky. "I left you a message," she said, too weakly to be called a whine.

He spun the truth a little. "I was worried about you. I wanted to make sure you didn't need anything."

She gingerly shook her head an inch or two in each direction. "Oh, no. I've got everything I need. Thanks."

She started to close the door, and he stopped it with his hand. "Since I'm here, could I come in? I'd like to know more about your illness."

Her forehead creased as though his request put an intolerable burden on her. "I'm not going to change my mind about you staying. And I really am sick, so don't give me any crap about cultivating a positive mental attitude." The flatness made her voice sound eerily robotic.

He felt the need to defend himself against her unfair assumptions, but now wasn't the time to argue with her. "I believe you, Nikolia. I'm only asking so I can understand better."

She sighed and took her weight off the door. "You can't stay long. I need to rest."

He stepped inside and slipped his arm around her waist. "I'll leave when you ask. Let's go sit down - or would you rather lie on your bed?"

She half-snorted. "The living room will be fine."

He helped her to her recliner, doing most of the work and being amazed at how fragile her body felt. It was the same body he'd spent many of the last forty-eight hours making love to - how could it feel so different now? She lowered herself cautiously into her chair, her breath catching suddenly a couple of times.

The hollow feeling in his gut worsened, sending a chill all the way to his heart. "Can I get you something to drink - or anything - before I sit down?"

"No," she said, her voice barely louder than a breath. "Just tell me what you want to know."

"I want to know what hurts." The words were out before he realized what he was saying. He didn't want to know that! He didn't want to hear about pain! Or see pain - or even know that it existed. No more. Never. He'd geared his whole adult life to avoiding every aspect of pain - mental and emotional, as well as physical.

He ought to take back his words. And leave. Leave before he saw any more.

But it was already too late. He'd seen her like this, and now she was telling him about it. "Everything hurts." She curled her lips up in a sad attempt at a smile. "Seriously. I don't remember what I told you before, but fibromyalgia makes my muscles ache constantly. It's kind of like having a bad case of the flu all the time - or a monster hangover. But normally, the pain's at a level I can mostly ignore, or control with my various relaxation techniques."

"But you can't do that now," he said, not needing to ask.

"No," she said, with another of her mini-head shakes. It probably hurt to move her head more than that much. "They don't know what causes fibro, nor even what makes it worse in general, but one of the problems is that lack of sleep makes the symptoms worse, and the symptoms make it particularly hard to get restful sleep."

Guilt stabbed him in the gut, nearly making him wince out loud. "And I didn't let you get enough sleep over the weekend. Geez, Nik, I'm sorry. I -"

She lifted a finger to stop his words. "It's my fault more than yours. I know how much sleep my body needs, and I thought I was getting the bare minimum. Besides, I slept more hours at a stretch than I usually do, and I figured that would give me a little cushion."

He remembered waking her Saturday night, simply because he couldn't stand to keep his hands to himself. "Still, you told me how important it was that I let you sleep."

Her smile this time looked more real. "I didn't mind that you didn't."

He wasn't going to follow that train of thought. Getting turned on all over again wasn't going to do either of them any good. "What do you do now? Try to catch up on your rest?"

"Yeah, although when I'm like this, my sleep is even less restful than usual. It'll take me several days of doing nothing except work, but eventually I should be back to ground-zero."

"Work? You're not going to work when you're like this, are you?" The idea was ludicrous.

She sighed. "I have to, Bill. My career is really important to me, and if I stayed home every time my fibro wasn't under perfect control, I'd spend more time at home than at work."

"But you'll just make it worse!"

"Not really. Besides, if I stayed home, I'd get depressed about it, and that's much worse for me than this." She seemed to search his face for a few seconds, then added, "Depression is a problem for most people with fibro. It normally isn't for me, and I try extra hard to avoid it, because I've seen how damaging it can be. People just give up sometimes. They figure fibro's not curable, so they can't possibly have any sort of reasonable life with it. That's not the way I want to live my life."

He understood more than he wanted to about people giving up. "Okay. I can buy that. But I'd like to help. What can I do?"

"Just don't hassle me about spending the night. I'll tell you when I'm ready. Okay?"

He sighed. He'd left himself open for that one. "Sure. And I'll bet you'd like me to leave now, wouldn't you?"

Her nod was grateful. "I'm sorry, but yes."

On the way to the front door, he leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Take care, Nikolia."

He should run as fast as he could away from her. He always kept the women he slept with at a careful distance. He didn't want to know about their troubles, nor share his with them.

Instead, he walked slowly to his car, wishing he didn't have to go at all.

CHAPTER SIX

Nik took a sleeping pill before going to bed. She hated the drugged morning-after feeling she'd have tomorrow, but she needed as good a night's sleep as she could manage.

One of the theories about fibro said that everyone's muscles developed small strains or tears during their daily activities. The tears in normal people's bodies were repaired during the deepest most restorative phase of sleep - a phase fibro sufferers, including Nik, spent little or no time in. Sleeping pills didn't induce natural sleep, but they were her only option at times like these.

Actually, she was lucky to not need sleeping pills every night, as well as antidepressants every day to elevate her mood. Many people with fibro were basically disabled by the disease and lived lives of endless misery. She credited her diet and exercise habits, along with a lot of luck, for escaping that fate.

So far. She reminded herself that, just because she'd managed to continue working and having a somewhat-normal life for two and a half years, she wouldn't necessarily be that fortunate long-term. And if that ever happened, she'd realize darn quick how shallow all this worrying about her affair with Bill was.

It wouldn't be permanent, and there was no point wishing it would be. He'd get tired of her disease, and realistically, she had to wonder if sex was something she'd have either the strength or interest for in five or ten years.

No. The only sensible thing was to enjoy the time she had with him, and to store up memories of what it was like to have a lover.

**

Bill couldn't stand feeling helpless. That's what had been the worst as a kid. He'd lain there in the darkness of the room he shared with George, whimpering after being beaten despite his best efforts to be quiet, knowing that Pop would take his anger out on Ma next. And knowing he couldn't do anything to

stop it.

He was helpless again. This fibro-whatchamacallit of Nik's wasn't simply an impediment to fully enjoying being with her. It was his past thumbing its nose at him, saying, "You think you're so hot. You think you've left your childhood traumas behind. Fat chance! Let's see you deal with this!"

He made it through Monday night somehow. When he drove into the lot at work on Tuesday, he checked for Nik's car. It wasn't there, but he was early, so he refused to worry. At nine-thirty, he decided to walk to the convenience store, knowing that if her car wasn't in the lot, he'd end up at her house.

Her car was there, but that didn't tell him how she felt today. He'd stop by her office on the way back to his. Maybe he could pick up something at the store for her - but what? Even when she was feeling okay, she didn't eat the sugary and salty snacks they sold there. But how about bottled water?

Forget it. If he couldn't take her something more exciting than bottled water, he wouldn't take her anything. In fact, forget the whole trip to the stupid store. It had only been an excuse, in the first place.

He went straight back to his office. Every few minutes all day, he thought about calling her. Or sending her email. Or coming up with an excuse to go see her, or someone on her hall.

But, really, Nik wasn't his responsibility. She knew how to take care of herself at times like this, and there was no point pretending they had a future together.

**

Nik gripped the handles of the exercise bike a little harder. Just two more minutes. She could do it. She wasn't even using any resistance tonight!

Darn good thing. Each push of the pedals made her pant with exertion, and she wasn't entirely sure she could last. But it wasn't two minutes any longer - only about ninety seconds. She'd make it. She'd made it through work today, after all - a little better than she'd expected, actually.

And if she lasted the full five minutes she'd assigned herself tonight, she could have her after-dinner treat. A normal person might not think a one-inch square piece of chocolate was a big deal, but Nik was not a normal person. Her life was so full of things she couldn't do, and others that she had to and didn't want to, that she'd long since decided she needed a tiny indulgence on a regular basis. A square of chocolate - really good chocolate - or a spoonful of sinfully rich ice cream was her indulgence. She only had it on nights when she'd eaten right all day and done her bike riding.

The chocolate would be particularly appreciated tonight. She still resented missing time with Bill because of this damn disease, and while a tiny piece of chocolate was no match for a night spent in his arms, it was at least *something*. Maybe she'd save it to enjoy just before bedtime.

Beep, beep, beep! That was the timer - she'd *done* it! She sagged on the bike for a few seconds to catch her breath, then stood for her cool-down stretching. She just did the minimum number of all the stretches tonight, then wrapped a big towel around herself and lay on the mat to rest. She set the timer for five minutes, knowing she might otherwise fall asleep.

When it went off, she went to the kitchen and filled a mug with soup. As she was zapping it in the microwave, she noticed the message light blinking on her answering machine. She pushed the Play button, wondering where her mind had gone. She should have remembered that Neal would be checking in, since she hadn't called him in several days.

But it wasn't Neal. "Hi, Nik. This is Bill. I've been worrying about you today, and I hope you're feeling better than last night. I - uh, well, you probably don't feel like talking, but it would be great if you'd call." He paused and she thought maybe he'd hung up without saying goodbye, but then he continued, "No pressure or anything. I'd just like to know how you are." Another pause, followed by, "Bye for now."

She stared at the answering machine, suddenly emotional. It was so sweet of him to call! He couldn't know how awful it was to be a freak like this, and yet he was being amazingly supportive about everything. Maybe he wasn't as shallow as his reputation said he was.

Or maybe he just wanted to keep on her good side, and figured that pretending to value her as a human being was a good way to do that. He was a smart guy. He'd know she didn't exactly have guys lined up waiting to take his place as her lover. He could tell that fibro was the dominant thing in her life, and he'd know that if he acted concerned, she'd eat it right up.

He wouldn't have to keep the act up for long, anyway. From what she could tell from office gossip, it sounded like two weeks was about as long as he ever lasted with a woman. So he was probably looking for one more weekend before he moved on to greener pastures.

Damn him. And damn her stupid diet, too. She ate her mug of soup, then took the carefully-wrapped bar of chocolate out of the refrigerator and into the living room with her. She ripped the paper off the bar and glared at it. How dare it be more than half-gone? Well, no matter. It was still a lot more than the paltry square she allowed herself to have.

She broke off a square precisely and placed it on her tongue. It melted slowly, filling her mouth with a rich creamy sweetness that wouldn't be here today and gone next week. When she'd eaten that square, she popped the next one into her mouth. And then another and another, even though the taste of chocolate became overwhelming. By the time she ate the last square, she was ready to swear she'd never want a piece of chocolate again in her life.

If only it was possible to overdose on Bill!

**

Bill was ticked off. He'd stayed home all evening, waiting for Nik to call - but had she? Not even a two-second thanks-for-calling-I'm-okay call.

The bitch was home, too - and perfectly capable of talking on the phone. He knew that because he'd gotten a busy signal when he called back. He called back twice, actually.

Okay then. She'd shot her allotment of phone calls and messages not returned. Bill Adams didn't waste time on women who couldn't be bothered to call him back. He didn't have to.

Come to think of it, Nik had been trying to dump him from before the beginning. She tried that ice-bitch act, and when it became apparent her bloodstream was more molten lava than ice-water, she switched to playing the sickie. She got to call all the shots because of her health.

What a load of bull! He guessed she really did have this fibro-thing and it was probably pretty unpleasant, but she'd been active enough in bed over the weekend. Not like Jade, of course. Jade thought sex didn't count unless you ended up with a couple of sore muscles the next day from all the weird positions she dreamed up. Nik wasn't like that, but she wasn't one of the lie-there-and-think-of-England types, either.

But if she didn't want to be with him, that was just fine with him. He'd been nice up to now, figuring

maybe he owed her something from before, but no more. He'd go his way, and she could go hers.

**

By Thursday morning, Nik knew she was going to be okay. She just needed to flush the remains of last night's sleeping pill out of her system, and then she'd be pretty much back to normal.

She finished her email about nine-thirty, and got up for her first short break of the day. She took the pitcher from her office to the kitchen to fill it with water from the cooler. The cooler was one of the little features she liked so much about A- W. DesignTek was a much bigger company and was well-known for caring about its employees, but the only drinks they supplied were coffee and tea. Water was much healthier.

Two AA's were already there, whispering and giggling at one of the tables. Phyllis, the assistant who covered Nik's group, waved her over. "Nik, come here for a sec. You've got to hear this."

The other one, Abby, looked a little dubious, but Phyllis said, "It's okay. Nik knows about Bill." When Abby didn't speak, she said, "Tell Nik what you told me."

Abby said, "Well, you know how perfectly groomed Bill always is? And how polite?" Nik nodded, and Abby continued, "He sure isn't *either* today! I was just over in the other building doing this big copying and collating job for Mr. Worthington. On the way back, I was in the middle of the courtyard with this big stack in my arms when Bill burst in the door from the parking lot. He ran right smack into me, and he didn't even stop. He just kind of staggered a couple of steps and took off toward his office - no apology, no helping me with all the copies I dropped, no nothing."

"He was just getting in? It's nine-thirty." A-W had flexible work hours, but virtually everyone got in by nine.

Abby nodded. "And that's not all - it looked like he'd shaved in the dark, and he didn't smell so great." She wrinkled her nose, remembering. "That same cologne he always wears, but way more of it than normal, and I think liquor under that."

"You're right. That doesn't sound like Bill." If he smelled like he'd just left another woman's bed, she wouldn't have been surprised - hurt, yes, but not surprised.

Phyllis smiled in a sly way, reminding Nik that Bill had never approached her. "He obviously got drunker than usual last night, and I'll bet he's been puking his guts out all morning. I still wonder why Mr. Worthington promoted him..."

Abby jumped to his defense. Nik was ashamed of assuming that was because Abby was still hopeful of getting his attention someday. "He's very good technically and his presentations are nearly as good as Scott's, and he's only been doing them a couple of months." With a little less assurance, she added, "And maybe it wasn't liquor I smelled. Maybe he has the flu - you know how the engineers drag themselves in to work when any three-year-old would know they should stay in bed."

Phyllis smiled in a superior way. "Bill's a three-year- old, all right - a three-year-old with an adolescent's fixation on sex. Any woman who goes out with him should have her head examined." She sailed out of the room.

Nik knew she was right. Even so, she couldn't help hoping he wasn't through with her yet.

**

Bill jerked his head up off his desk. It would be just his luck for Scott to come waltzing in while he was dying like this. The dweeb'd almost certainly never been hung over in his whole pathetic life, and he'd just love to find Bill splatted all over his desk like this.

Not that the guy would *do* anything about it. That was part of what pissed Bill off about him so much. He was so reasonable, so businesslike, so damn *nice* all the time. Even when Bill'd gone way over the line that time last summer, Scott was reasonable. He'd pushed back, but then he'd had to. And ever since, it was like all that hadn't happened, like it was like it had been before, when they just couldn't stand each other. How could he be so cool about what Bill had done?

Oh, geez. Using his brain made him feel like throwing up again. Why hadn't he died already? Part of the problem was that he'd started out drinking scotch, and when he emptied that bottle, he'd switched to rum. The rest of the problem was that he'd had at least a half-dozen drinks, and he doubted that any of them was as small as a drink in a bar would have been.

And the thing was, he couldn't remember why he'd poured that first drink. He'd been on the way out, trying to decide which of the women he used to date to drop in on first. The odds were pretty good he could find a willing woman without much trouble, and he was sure a night with any one of them would take care of this lingering thing he had for Nik.

Instead, he'd spent the rest of the night in his apartment, pacing and tossing back liquor. He hadn't been this hung over in years.

Was this the way Nik felt all the time? She'd compared fibro to a bad case of flu or a monster hangover, after all.

No. She couldn't feel like this all the time and still be alive. But maybe this was how she'd been feeling on Monday.

Maybe on Tuesday, too. Maybe that's why she hadn't called back.

If that was the case, he shouldn't just write her off. She'd said it would take her a few days to get back to normal. Tomorrow was Friday, so she'd had her few days.

He reached for the phone and punched in her extension. When she answered, he said, "I'm coming over tomorrow night."

She was quiet a couple of seconds and his head started pounding harder. If she said no -

She said, "Okay."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Nik was waiting for Bill by five-forty-five on Friday. She'd done her stretching, eaten her soup, and showered. He probably wouldn't be here anytime soon, but she hadn't asked him what time and was unreasonably paranoid about him catching her in her ratty leotard.

He arrived five minutes later, carrying a leather duffel bag. "I didn't go to the store because I wasn't sure what you'd want to eat. I figured you'd probably eaten already and I'd wait and go in the morning."

He talked like he was moving in! She focused on the safer part of his comment. "I have plenty of food." Assuming that oodles of the same few ingredients were all anyone wanted.

He checked out her body from top to bottom critically, not like he had a lot of interest in touching it. "Are

you okay? You're still a little pale."

"I'm fine. As fine as I get, anyway." She practically mumbled the last part, hating to say it, but knowing they both had to keep it in mind. When was he going to kiss her? He wouldn't be here with plans to stay overnight if he'd been seriously put off by her fibro flaring up.

"We should sit down," he said abruptly. "Standing must tire you out."

She led the way to the living room, reminding herself that he was trying to be considerate. She sat on the sofa, hoping he'd sit next to her. He didn't. He perched on the straight chair with the embroidered seat cushion. She couldn't remember the last time anyone had sat there. What was going on?

All of a sudden, he looked straight at her and blurted, "So is there some limit on how many times we make love, or is it more that I've got to let you get a bunch of sleep, or - I don't know - maybe only do certain positions, or what?"

She stopped her laugh just in time. He wouldn't like her laughing at him, but it was such a relief to know what was bothering him. "Is that what's worrying you?"

He nodded. "I don't want you getting sick again, and I know you'll probably say I should just settle for seeing you once in a while, but that's no good. So what I figure is that if you tell me what's cool and what's not, we can stay within your limits and I can still be with you every night."

"Every night?" As ridiculous as the idea was, she felt a jolt of pleasure deep inside. "There's no way I can handle every night."

He didn't challenge her, just said, "The weekends, then." Like it wasn't negotiable. Like this was only one of many weekends to come.

She'd pretend along with him for now. It felt great, even when she knew it was just pretense. "Only two nights. You leave Sunday when I go to church."

He nodded. "But what about the rest of it?"

He wanted her to say how many times they should have sex? Try a couple of million or so. She shook her head. "Sorry, I can't give you an answer on that. It's all going to depend on how I feel - just like everything else in my life. Fibro's not like a piece of software, where you plug in the same data and you get the same answer back every time. It's more like a pseudo-random number generator. You know there's an algorithm creating the numbers, so they're not truly random, but you can't tell what it is."

"But that doesn't make any sense! You do all that special stuff - it must have some effect!"

It was no surprise that he didn't understand. She barely did. "Of course it has an effect. If I ate the kind of things I like all the time, I'd be a lot worse. But I never know ahead of time how I'll feel on any particular day - and even sometimes when I think I'm okay, I get exhausted all of a sudden. So we just have to wait and see how it goes."

He frowned. "But you might end up getting sick again."

"I might. But if we're sensible about things and I take it easy on Sunday, I ought to be okay." She hoped. Anyway, it was her health she was putting at risk, so it was her business.

"You've got to promise to tell me if something I do's too much."

This sitting across the room from each other deal was getting to her. "You'd have to do something before it could be too much." His eyebrows went sky-high. "Seriously, I should be fine, and I'll tell you if I'm not." She'd never thought she'd need to be forward with Bill, but apparently she did. "There are better things we could be doing right now, if you ask me."

The next second, before she even realized he'd moved, he stood in front of her and offered her his hand. "Then let's do them."

**

Bill was having a perfectly lovely dream when he became aware of the noise. The dream was about Nik, and some of the things they'd done last night, and some of the other ones they hadn't had time for. The noise was nowhere near as pleasant - a scritch-scraping sound that wasn't rhythmic enough to be machinery, but likewise wasn't a natural part of the environment.

Where was it coming from? He sat up and looked around the darkened room, but he already knew it was farther away than that. Maybe outside? He slipped out of bed and pulled a corner of the shade out just far enough to peek.

Ah-ha! Neal was out there raking! And it was full daylight already, not somewhere around dawn, like he'd guessed. He'd slept later than usual - at least later than when he hadn't been drinking the night before.

He glanced back at the bed. Nik was deeply asleep, and no way would he bother her. He'd had a chance last night to notice her sleeping pattern, and he understood more now what she meant about not sleeping well. She'd sleep lightly for half an hour or an hour, then wake up and not fall back asleep for a considerable period of time.

He had to admit he'd thought that was convenient, early in the night. He didn't have to feel guilty about waking her, yet he had the benefit of extra chances to play. But he'd eventually gotten tired and gone to sleep himself, and he remembered just enough of the rest of the night to know that she'd continued in her restless pattern for several hours at least.

So, he'd get dressed and help Neal with the yard work while Nik slept. Neal greeted him with no surprise whatsoever. "Hey, Bill. Saw your car out front."

"I heard you raking," he replied. "What can I do to help?"

He shrugged. "Nothing that I know of. Nik's only got one rake, and raking's all I was planning to do today." For a second, he looked like he was going to make a smart remark about what Bill had obviously been doing earlier, but he got embarrassed suddenly and stared down at the ground.

Geez, he guessed it *would* be kind of weird to think about your sister in bed with some guy. It had been weird to think about George with a woman, too, but that was a different kind of weird. He'd always found it hard to believe that George could ever act that human.

He looked around the yard, hoping to notice something he could offer to do. There were several small piles of leaves scattered around the lawn. "What happens with the leaves? Put them in trash bags or something?"

Neal looked relieved to make it past the awkwardness. "Yeah. You could get some out. They're in the garage, on a shelf near the furnace."

He found them without a problem - no surprise, given how well-organized the double-wide garage was.

He looked around for another tool he could use in place of a rake, but didn't find anything. Oh well, he had his hands.

Not a good choice, he learned a few minutes later when he discovered just how soggy and nasty these leaves were. He'd survived much worse in his life, though, so didn't let it deter him.

Neal appeared next to him a while later, saying, "Let me help finish this up. I've got some coffee in the car that we can share after." They dragged the leaves into the garage and Neal muttered, "I'll have to remember to come by and put these out Thursday."

"Thursday?" When Neal nodded, Bill said, "I'll do it. Where do they go?"

Neal pointed to the intersection of this cul-de-sac and the dead-end street through the neighborhood. "Along the curb on this side of the street. You're sure you don't mind?"

He shrugged. "Nah. I probably live closer than you." Plus, maybe he could talk Nik into starting the weekend early. Now that he wasn't working, he noticed the chill of the early-fall morning. "You said something about coffee?"

"Yeah, come on." Neal led the way to the almost-new SUV parked next to Bill's car and hit a button on his key ring to unlock all the doors. They climbed in and Neal picked up a thermos and a car mug from between the seats. "You'll have to drink out of this." He poured coffee into the top of the thermos and handed it to Bill, then filled his own mug.

"Thanks." Bill took a long warming gulp as he glanced around the plush interior of the car. "I guess you went along with your old man and took up engineering." He'd be what now? Twenty-three?

Neal barked a laugh. "Hardly. I went to art school - I paint." After a brief pause, his eyes rolled and he said, "Oh, you're looking at the car and thinking I've got money. Not a penny, and it's not my car."

Bill was lost. "It's not?"

He shook his head. "Nope. I see Nik hasn't told you - I'm the family disgrace. Not only did I waste my perfectly-good brain on art school, but to feed and clothe myself until my career takes off, I'm the kept man of an older woman." His tone of voice was breezy, like the whole thing was hilarious. The defensive undertone was one that Bill was intimately familiar with, however. The accept-me-or-screw-you attitude he'd perfected as a kid.

There was no reason for Bill not to accept Neal's choice of lifestyle, so he said, "To each his own. You appear to be compensated pretty well."

Neal grinned and relaxed back into his seat. "Oh, this is just gravy. Marian's a great lady and she's got this dynamite house on top of a mountain. My studio's got a view of Mt St Helens and Mt Adams, and I'm meeting all the important people in the art world in the Northwest. Plus, it's only twenty-five minutes from Nik, in case she needs something." That stopped his exuberance dead.

"Does that happen often?" The coffee in his stomach burned like acid.

Neal shook his head and stared at the dashboard. "Not much, not since she got her fibro under control. But I get nervous if she doesn't call every few days, and I'm always trying to think ahead and figure out what I can do to make things easier for her. Like the yard work, and stocking up on stuff so she doesn't have to drag so much home from the store."

"She's lucky to have you," he finally said. That was much more sensible than the first thing he thought of

saying.

There was no way he was going to volunteer to take over Neal's watchdog duties.

**

Nik lay in bed, hoping she hadn't made a big mistake. Bill was pretty definitely here until tomorrow morning, and he really didn't seem like the you-go-your-way-and-I'll-go-mine kind of guy. He didn't think they were going to spend the whole day in bed, did he? Even just joined-at-the-hip like she and Allen had been wouldn't work for her.

But when she opened her eyes and looked around, he wasn't there. It looked like he'd taken some clothes out of his bag, too, so maybe she didn't need to worry. Maybe he'd gone off to do something and would be back later.

She'd take advantage of his absence by doing some simple stretching exercises before her shower. She knew from experience that first thing in the morning wasn't a good time for a serious exercise session, since she woke up so stiff. A little stretching now would improve her flexibility all day, though.

She felt surprisingly good this morning, probably due to some sound sleep toward morning. And that, she strongly suspected, was related to all the delicious things Bill had done to her body throughout the course of the night. She'd have to be careful not to admit that to Bill, though, or he'd think he should stay over every night.

When she finished her shower and went back into the bedroom to get dressed, Bill was there, half-undressed and obviously sweaty. He leered at her. "I hope you appreciate the restraint it took not to jump into the shower with you."

The idea made her pulse pound in places she hadn't known had a pulse. "You're not usually that restrained."

He shrugged lazily, but his eyes were glued to her face. "I wasn't sure if you'd be up to it." As though that might be too revealing, he hurried to add, "Besides, I didn't want us to run out of hot water in the middle. That's no fun."

She kept her eyes locked with his. "That was thoughtful of you." She unwrapped the towel from around her torso and dropped it on the floor. "Maybe you can show me what you had in mind."

The rest of his clothes disappeared. "Now? I'm all dirty and sweaty."

As if she cared. "Now." She nodded and took one step toward him.

She didn't need to take any more.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Bill was no stranger to multi-night sleep-overs, and he'd worked out a system for maximizing the opportunity to make love and minimizing the wasted time in between. He stuck around as long as things were sexy and playful. The minute they started veering toward the emotional or the just plain boring, he remembered an errand he needed to run or something he really had to get done at work. That let him escape for a few hours of blessed freedom. He usually gave the woman a call once in a while to make her think that he was missing her. By the time he saw her again, the chemistry was strong enough to carry them through the next night without difficulties.

But all that was based on him feeling caged and desperate. With Nik that didn't happen, for the simple reason that Nik insisted on spending part of the day alone. The third bedroom in her place was set up as an in-home gym, with a desk and filing cabinet added for paying bills. She retreated there before he was out of the shower on Saturday morning, and spent another hour or more there in the afternoon.

He didn't waste his time while she was in there. In the morning, he bought the ingredients for the pasta primavera he'd planned for dinner, and in the afternoon, he went to the athletic club for a workout.

So maybe they'd spent enough time apart that there was no need for feeling caged. Or maybe it was Nik's attitude about their relationship. She wasn't like so many of the women he knew, who kept trying to manufacture an emotional tie between them that just wasn't there.

He wasn't like a lot of guys who claim to love a woman simply because it's a convenient path to intimacy. Almost every woman he went out with knew his reputation up-front. He was a great guy to have fun with and to have super sex with, but that was it. He never got involved beyond the physical, and his interest never lasted long. Yet women couldn't accept that. Each was determined that *she* would be the exception. *She* would be the one Bill couldn't get enough of.

Not a chance! He had his reasons for being the way he was, and he liked his life just fine. Why tie himself to one woman for decades when he could have a different one every week or two?

Nik didn't have any illusions about where they were headed, and she seemed perfectly okay about it. In fact, he got the idea that she'd resist any attempt to turn their relationship into something longer-term. He was astonished at how much more relaxed and comfortable that made spending time with her.

That had to be the only reason Sunday morning came all too quickly for his tastes, and why he was eagerly anticipating next weekend before he even kissed her goodbye.

What other reason could there be?

**

Nik took it easy on Sunday. She exercised mentally as well as physically, of course, but the rest of time, she relaxed. She read the Sunday paper, watched a little TV, and lost herself in a book by a favorite author that she'd been saving for weeks.

She didn't even cook. There were enough leftovers from last night's pasta primavera to feed her for a couple of nights, and she'd eat big salads the rest of the week. Maybe if she did that, she'd feel confident enough about her health to suggest going out to dinner on Saturday.

Assuming Saturday found Bill at her place again. He'd seemed perfectly content with her this weekend - and very much interested - but that could change at any moment. A new woman might catch his eye, or he might decide that her restrictions were too limiting.

She had to wonder, though. If Bill had been with another woman this weekend, would they have had sex any more frequently? Or in any more varied positions? She supposed it was possible, though beyond the realm of her experience or imagination.

This whole line of thinking was pointless. Proving to herself that Bill wasn't missing anything by being with her wouldn't make *him* feel that way, and he was the one who'd eventually look elsewhere.

Her job was to enjoy every minute she had with him, and to not let herself get so hung up on him that she couldn't stand to lose him.

**

Bill was careful not to mention the leaves all week, not even when he called Nik on Monday night. He hadn't seen her all day, and after the way she'd reacted to spending time with him a week ago, he needed to make sure she was all right.

She said she was fine, and her voice sounded normal, so he believed her. He saw her Tuesday at a meeting, and she seemed perfectly okay then, too. He didn't see her again Wednesday at work, but decided not to call. She might get the idea that he spent all his time thinking about her.

It would have been natural to tell her about the leaves on Saturday, right after he'd promised Neal to put them out on Thursday night. He hadn't done it, though, thinking she might tell him not to bother, that she'd put the leaves out herself. Somehow, he just knew that she wouldn't like him helping her.

Instead, he simply showed up on Thursday, about the time he expected her to be done with dinner. She was wearing that form-fitting leotard again, and was shocked to see him. "It's only Thursday!"

"I know," he said, with what he hoped was a winning smile. "That's why I'm here, actually. When I helped Neal with the leaves last weekend, he said they needed to be put out on Thursday, and I told him I'd do it."

The smile didn't do the trick. She blew her breath out and shook her head. "I put them out when I got home. And here I thought Neal was finally giving me some credit for being able to take care of myself. Instead, he's got you nursemaiding me, too."

"That's not it!" he protested, although he couldn't say how reality was measurably different from her accusation. "He just said he'd come and do it tonight, and I said I lived closer."

"Of course, neither of you even considered suggesting that *I* do it." Her glare made it clear she was seriously annoyed. "They're my leaves, after all."

"But they're bulky, and they go way out there." He gestured blindly behind him.

"I know where they go," she said in a crisp voice that cut through him. "I put them there."

"But you're sick." He knew even before she reacted that he shouldn't have used that argument.

Her voice became even sharper. "I have a chronic disease, Bill. As I've already explained, I could give up living because of it, but I choose not to. I choose to live my life as normally as I possibly can, and that includes putting out my own dead leaves. Neal understands better than anyone else how this disease affects me, but he has a problem with being overprotective. I accept that because he's my brother, and in some ways, I'm overprotective of him. But you are not my brother, you are my lover. I will not tolerate you treating me like an invalid."

Before he could begin to imagine how to dig himself out of the hole he was in, she shut the door firmly in his face and snapped the deadbolt into place.

**

Nik might have overreacted a little the night before. Bill probably hadn't known how much she hated Neal doing things for her that she could do herself. She ought to explain why she felt that way.

She couldn't really do that at work, but she could be nice and let him know she wasn't still mad. So, when it came time for Seth's Friday afternoon staff meeting, she got there a few minutes early and took

the seat next to where Bill had sat the last two weeks. This was only her third staff meeting, so she wasn't sure if he always sat there, but the chances of that were pretty good.

He came in with several other people, including Scott. She smiled at the group, and Scott and one of the other managers greeted her, but Bill didn't even seem to notice. He plunked into a seat on the same side of the table as her, but nearly all the way at the other end, and started talking to someone at his end of the table.

Well, she guessed that was clear enough. He was mad at her. He was probably also through with her, so she might as well get used to being alone again. She'd known it would happen sooner or later.

Maybe so, but reminding herself of that did nothing to take away the sting of rejection. She struggled to keep on top of the meeting agenda, and to give sensible answers when they discussed assigning some of her support engineers temporarily to a pre-beta testing blitz. Bill gave a short update on the developers' progress toward code freeze, and she spent much too much energy trying to decipher his tone of voice and much too little on the content of his report. She learned nothing from the former, and only prayed that she didn't miss anything important in the latter.

The meeting ran long enough that she only had time for a quick check of her email before leaving for the weekend. She almost stayed late to revise the phone duty schedule in light of the testing blitz that would start sometime next week. She needed to know exactly when it would start before she did that, though. Besides, she was just postponing the inevitable - going home and having Bill not show up.

Except he *did* show up. He walked into her garage right after she parked there, carrying the same leather duffel from last weekend. His attitude was different, though.

Dangerous. That was it in one word. Controlled, yet hot. His piercingly-blue eyes were predatory, and he even walked differently. Like this was *his* garage, and she was *his* woman, and he could do any damn thing he wanted.

She froze halfway out of the car. Was this what Bill was like when he was pissed? She'd have to remember never to make him angry again.

Assuming she survived this time. She didn't think he was the violent type - correction, she'd never seen signs of it before. Now? Well, now, she wasn't so sure.

He dropped his bag on the garage floor, and the noise rang out like a shot. Even though she knew what it was, her heart kicked into high gear.

He covered the eight or ten feet separating them in three giant steps, then towered over her as she sat on the seat of the car. "Nikolia," he said, taking her arm firmly but not painfully and pulling her to her feet. "Here, let me." He pressed the button on the garage door opener she clutched in her right hand, and the garage door lumbered closed.

The garage seemed dark and claustrophobic now, lit only with one dim bulb. She thought of opening the door again, but he must have realized she'd do that. He slipped it out of her hand and tossed it onto her car seat, then moved her enough to close the car door. He stepped even closer and pressed her back against the car. "Nikolia, I can't tell you how happy I am that you don't want me to treat you like an invalid."

He was happy about that? Then why was he acting so strangely? Before she could ask, he stole her breath with a kiss that felt deeper and more intimate than anything they'd done in bed. It apparently lasted a good five minutes, since the light connected to the garage door opener turned off before it was over.

Now, she couldn't see anything, not even Bill's face, and she knew it was only an inch away. His voice was husky when he continued. "Let me tell you about my plans for tonight, Nikolia. First, we'll go inside and I'll make love to you until you're screaming for release. After that, we'll go out for a late - probably quite late - supper at a little bistro I know, and maybe stop off at a club to dance a bit. Then, I'll bring you back here -" She could hear the anticipation in his voice. "As far as what happens then, well, suffice it to say that *tonight* you won't be doing any sleeping."

He punctuated the recital of his plans with another kiss, this one just as lethal as the first one. But this time she had something else on her mind. Something that no mind-numbing kiss could erase.

She struggled against the kiss, using her hands to push him away. He stopped immediately. "What's wrong, Nikolia?"

"Your plans! I thought you understood I can't do those things!"

"What things?" he asked, way too innocently.

"Any of it! The late supper, for one - the dancing, either. And I certainly can't stay up all night."

"Why not?" His voice and his whole demeanor were wrong. "You're not an invalid, after all."

CHAPTER NINE

All of a sudden, Bill realized there was more involved here than turning the tables on Nik. He'd thought it would be amusing to take her at her word and act like some overbearing macho type from a movie at the same time. He hadn't expected she'd take him seriously.

And now, he was afraid she might start crying. She'd sounded so distressed when she said she couldn't go dancing - dancing, for heaven's sake! As if he had any interest in wasting time on the dance floor when he could have her naked body next to his.

He could be pretty heartless about women's tears, knowing they were simply tools of manipulation. But if Nik cried now, she wouldn't be trying to manipulate him. She'd be crying because he'd pushed too hard on subjects he knew upset her.

He couldn't let her think he didn't understand. "Nikolia, I'm sorry," he murmured, running his finger down the curve of her cheekbone. "I was only teasing. I wanted you to realize you can't have it both ways, but I didn't mean to hurt you."

She didn't move during the next few seconds, but it felt like she did - like she was suddenly several feet away instead of practically touching him. "Oh. I get it now. You didn't hurt me, though." Then, she *did* move, slipping along the side of the car and walking away. It was still pitch black and she said, "I'm going inside. If you want to wait there, I'll turn the light on in a minute."

Well, he didn't want to wait here, not when she was leaving, so he moved toward where the door to the house must be. It was easy going until he got to the front of her car and ran into an empty recycling tub and tripped over the edge of the large mat she kept by the door. She turned the light on just in time to catch the swearwords he was mouthing. Great!

She acted like she didn't notice, and didn't really care if he was following, either. She went inside and paused by the entrance to the kitchen. "I'm going to make myself a big salad for dinner, and there's stuff in the freezer you can have, if you want. But I need to do my exercises before I eat. I didn't expect you this early."

That was it? She says she's not hurt, when he knows damn well something's wrong, and they go on like nothing happened? Hardly! "We need to talk about this."

"About what?" Her voice was brittle and she wouldn't look him in the eye. "Your joke falling flat's no big deal. And I already realized that I was kind of over-the-top last night. You meant to do me a favor, and that was nice of you." She managed a pained smile. "It's just that Neal and I go round and round on this thing all the time." She took a step backwards. Another couple steps, and she'd be to the back hall and would disappear on him.

He had to stop her. "We have to talk about our relationship."

That stopped her, all right. Him, too. What craziness possessed him to say those words? She snorted. "Isn't that my line? Only I'm not about to say it, because we have no relationship. What we have is short-term and for sex - pretty simple, if you ask me." Two more quick steps backward. "I'll probably be about an hour, but go ahead and eat, if you're hungry."

With that, she left.

**

Nik didn't even try to meditate. Simply knowing that someone else was in the house would make it difficult. After that weird encounter with Bill, it would be impossible.

He wanted her to realize she couldn't have it both ways? Hadn't he been listening when she told him about fibro? Didn't he see that her whole life was geared around what she could or couldn't do?

Well, she'd overreacted yesterday. He hadn't really been treating her like an invalid, and it was actually sweet that he cared enough about her to bother with the leaves.

Caring - well, that was a bit strong. It likely didn't enter into the equation at all. He'd undoubtedly thought she'd be grateful to him for taking out the leaves - sufficiently grateful that she'd let him stay the night. She bet he'd had his trusty leather bag in the car, ready for action. No wonder he showed up early tonight.

She slacked off a bit on the bike riding, figuring she'd need the energy later, but was extra-diligent about her stretching. After a quick shower, she changed into the slightly gauzy purple caftan she liked so much and went to find Bill.

He was in the kitchen, and from the looks of it, he'd been there a while. He glanced up from the cutting board and smiled. "Dinner's almost ready. You said salad, so that's what I'm making."

"I didn't mean for you to cook."

He shrugged. "I had time, and I know you don't particularly like it." Just then, her kitchen timer went off, and he headed toward the stove. "The muffins ought to be done now."

"Muffins?" Her mouth started watering.

"Just perfect," he said and reached into the oven. "I found a corn muffin mix, so I figured they're something you can eat."

Dinner was delightful. He'd found some chicken breasts in the freezer, cooked them with herbs and other seasonings, and sliced them into julienne strips. The result was moist and flavorful, and when topped with the wonderful dressing he made with plain yogurt as its base, their meal was nothing like the dull salads she made for herself.

"You're a really good cook," she said as she finished the last bite. "Did you learn from your mom?"

If she hadn't happened to be watching his face, she wouldn't have noticed the pause before he laughed. "No way. She's a terrible cook. I taught myself - to impress women."

She was fairly sure he tossed in the last comment to increase the distance between them. She didn't mind. Distance was good.

Thinking they had a relationship to talk about - now, *that* would be dangerous.

**

Bill was half-asleep when he heard Nik's voice. "I guess you really were kidding."

"About what?" he mumbled, trying to focus past the fog in his brain.

"About all of it - not just the late supper and the dancing, but the no sleeping part, too." Hesitantly, she added, "And not that I didn't enjoy it or anything, but you didn't make me scream, either."

The fog vanished. That was the one part of his plans she hadn't explicitly said no to, he now realized. "You wanted me to do that?"

She shifted her head in what could be interpreted as either a shrug or a nod. "It's okay. I figured you were joking. I mean, sex is great, but I don't react off-the-wall like that."

Making love to a woman until she screamed for release wasn't something he'd done often. When he had, his curiosity was what had prompted him - wondering if he could do it and what it would be like. He'd discovered that he could, in fact, do it, but that it took an incredible amount of energy and self-control. Two minutes ago he would have sworn he was too exhausted to even contemplate exerting himself that much. No more! He laughed softly. "You'll scream tonight, Nikolia."

She did. But the thing that surprised him was his reaction. He didn't end up drained physically yet feeling cheated, like he had the other times.

He was energized - he'd almost say inspired - by the beauty of her unleashed sexuality.

And he'd never felt that close to another human being.

**

One moment, Nik was asleep, and the next, she was completely awake. No fuzzy half-dreaming thoughts, no foggy mental processes that felt like swimming through jello.

She had the sense she'd slept for hours, yet she doubted that. She wouldn't be so clear-headed now if she had. She opened her eyes, hoping she'd be able to see the clock without moving. Moving was always painful after being asleep.

She couldn't see the clock, but the room was light. Well, not exactly light, but after all, her room-darkening shades were almost all the way down. Judging by the light filtering into the room, it had to be morning!

She braced herself for what she thought of as breaking the ice - moving for the first time in a while. Her body stiffened up while she slept, and it would protest every tiny movement.

Except it didn't. She could roll over with amazing ease - so much that she didn't believe it, and rolled

back over the other way. Still, she had little pain. Had she been magically healed?

"You're awake," Bill said with a smile. "I wondered if you were going to sleep all day."

"What time is it?" She'd been so surprised at the lack of stiffness that she hadn't remembered to look at the clock.

"A little after nine. I think you've been asleep since midnight."

Normally, she'd argue. She never slept that long at one time, and the only time she got nine hours sleep in an entire night was when she took one of the heavy-duty pain pills that knocked her out. But she felt so good this morning that the impossible just might be true. "That's pretty amazing."

"You're pretty amazing." He slipped an arm around her waist and grinned when she shifted closer. "You screamed last night."

The memory made little shocks go off inside her body. "I know." Another thing she would have said was impossible. "It was unbelievable." Was it proper to thank him? "I know it had to be a lot of work -"

He stopped her with a finger on her lips. "Oh, it was. I had to touch your body, over and over, and listen to your soft sweet moans of pleasure, and feel your body and soul melt into one. And then, I had to drive you just that little bit farther, until your entire being imploded and became the universe." He grinned again. "It was horribly hard work, and I hated every minute of it." He slid his finger across her mouth, making her realize how badly she wanted to feel his mouth on hers. "Anytime you want a repeat, just let me know."

He kissed her then, slowly and thoroughly, and it was close to noon before she bothered to check the time for herself.

**

The weekend was going great, but Bill felt unexpectedly edgy and not quite satisfied. Any minute now, Nik would head off into her little hideaway, and he'd be left to his own devices.

Not that he minded that in general. It was good for each of them to have time alone to take care of personal stuff. He could go to the athletic club for a workout and do a little shopping for dinner tonight. He'd managed to find something in her kitchen to make last night, but the pickings would be slim for tonight.

The thing was that he didn't want a workout, and the only kind of shopping trip that appealed was one where Nik was with him. They could go to that half-natural half-gourmet grocery that had opened recently. They'd wander the aisles together, trying samples, laughing at the bizarre choices the store offered, and come out with enough food to feed them both for a week instead of one night.

He looked at her eating plain yogurt across the table from him, and he couldn't stand it any longer. "Let's go shopping this afternoon."

She stared at him as though he'd lost his mind. "Shopping?"

"Yeah. Have you been to that new place in Raleigh Hills yet? I've heard they've got great food, lots of fresh produce and everything. We can get stuff for dinner."

Her face cleared of confusion. "Oh, don't worry about dinner. I thought we could go out for seafood tonight - my treat."

"But you don't usually go out for dinner."

"No, but I ate healthily all week, and I feel good today. If I'm kind of careful what I order, I'll be fine."

"Oh." He should be happy. Eating out was something he never tired of - undoubtedly because it had been unheard-of his entire childhood. He forced himself to sound enthusiastic. "That's great, then. Maybe we can do this shopping thing next weekend."

Nik looked as though he was suggesting a trip to the dentist. "Maybe. But I don't usually bother with all the fancy stores and so on. I just run into one of the neighborhood places on the way home from work or while I'm out doing errands."

Exactly. That's why going to this special store would be fun. It would have different choices of foods and the produce would be fresher. Plus, they'd be together, and that had to make it better.

Except maybe it wouldn't make it better for her. She'd said that all they had was sex. She didn't really think that, did she? "Nik -"

Her laugh interrupted him. "Nik, not Nikolia? I thought you had a complex against calling me by my regular name."

Geez. Why did she have to pick now to hassle him about that? "I just think Nikolia's a beautiful name." He also liked having a private name for her, but he wasn't about to admit that right now.

His momentum was shot. Maybe he shouldn't say anything. She was wrong about them, but she'd figure it out eventually.

But no. He made a point of being upfront with women, and this was certainly important enough to talk about. "You said yesterday that we don't have a relationship, that it's all about sex. I think you're wrong."

She smiled and opened her mouth to respond, then snapped it shut and stared at him. Eventually she asked, "You're serious about that, aren't you?"

"Sure." This was great. He'd explain how different it was being with her, and then she wouldn't be afraid to admit it was different being with him, too.

But then she gave him that look - the look that was the equivalent of being patted on the head, except there was a whole bunch of scorn mixed in. "We've got chemistry, Bill, I'll grant you that. But a relationship's a whole lot more than chemistry. It's what keeps two people together and trying to work things out, even when the chemistry's all messed up."

He wanted to listen to her words. He knew they meant something, and that if he understood them, he could argue against them and convince her.

But her voice wouldn't let him. She was lecturing, not talking. He knew that meant that she thought she was hot shit, and that he was just plain shit.

That was the tone of voice that had prompted him to get into bar fights a few times, despite his hatred of violence.

As though placating a child, she added, "What we've got is great, Bill. It's not a relationship, but that's fine with me. I'm not looking for anything long-term, and neither are you."

"The hell I'm not!"

He stormed out the front door and drove away before he realized what he'd said.

CHAPTER TEN

Nik opened and drained the cans of beans that would serve as the protein in this week's soup. She dumped them into the pot where the vegetables she'd chopped earlier were already simmering, and stirred. It smelled good!

Most Sundays, she made soup using canned or frozen veggies, and often a mix for the base. Anything to get done with the job quickly. But the meals that Bill had prepared made her rethink her easy-is-better philosophy. Maybe if she devoted a little more time and interest to cooking, eating a healthy dinner wouldn't be quite as depressing an idea.

She was relieved that Bill had stomped out yesterday afternoon and never returned. Really. This thing they'd been having was destined to end sometime, and sooner was safer than later. It had been marginally less dangerous before Thursday. Back then, Bill'd been just as careful as she was to stay away from the word "relationship". Now, he was wielding it like a club.

She had two theories about his sudden weirdness on the subject. First and most likely was the idea that he was playing games with her, that he wanted her to buy into the whole relationship deal and would then shy away. That would fit in with the bizarre scene in her garage on Friday. It didn't fit in with what she'd heard about his usual behavior with women, though. He didn't typically twist reality to give himself an excuse to drop someone. He just stopped calling - plain and simple, albeit a bit brutal.

The other theory was that he was basically sincere, and completely clueless. From all reports, he'd been with her longer than most women, not even counting when they'd known each other in college. So maybe he'd never gotten involved with anyone before on an other than purely sexual level. Because of her fibro, they'd talked a fair amount about issues that weren't common date-talk. He'd seemed to be quite sympathetic and to want to spare her pain. Maybe he was interpreting that as something it wasn't.

Or more likely, maybe he didn't have the slightest idea of how a relationship would work. He probably assumed that any interaction with a woman that wasn't sexual meant they were having a relationship.

In any case, it was over now, and she was relieved. She was also rather selfishly glad that it hadn't ended before Friday night. She'd remember that night for the rest of her life - the night when she discovered that love scenes in books weren't all make-believe.

That was the negative to having it over, of course. No more nights like that - not that her body could take the strain very often, but she wouldn't mind having the problem of rationing out such mind-blowing sex.

She had to admit she'd miss having Bill around for more than the sex. He'd been great in the kitchen, and it had been fun not to be alone all the time.

But it had also been habit-forming, and she was lucky to be spared an addiction she'd eventually have to quit cold- turkey.

**

By Sunday afternoon, Bill had realized the truth. He shouldn't have walked out on Nik yesterday. He should have stayed right there and explained how he felt. He shouldn't have let her attitude make him bolt.

So he drove right back to her house and rang the doorbell. She tensed when she saw him. "Oh. You're

here for your things." She took a step back from the door and let him in. "They're -" She waved her right hand in the direction of the bedroom, looking embarrassed. "I just left everything where it was. I didn't - I mean, it's your stuff." She backed completely away from the door and stepped into the kitchen. "Take as much time as you need."

He guessed this was her version of a nice civilized breakup, with no ripping up of his possessions or throwing them onto the front lawn. Except they weren't breaking up. He followed her into the kitchen. "I'm here to talk."

"There's no need," she said, her back to him, stirring a pot of soup. "I'm not mad or anything. In fact, I'm kind of relieved to have it over." She *was*? She glanced over her shoulder at him. "Not that it wasn't great. And I'm glad I found out what a nice guy you are."

Nice guy? Scott was a nice guy - not Bill! And what a way for her to sum up their relationship! Nothing about the ecstasy they'd shared, just that he was nice. But she didn't intend it as a slam, so he ignored it. "So if it was great and I'm such a super guy, why is it over?"

She turned back to her soup and stirred some more. "Because either you're playing games with me or you're looking for something way more than I am."

"I'm not playing games, and all I'm looking for is for you to admit that our relationship's more than just sex."

She sighed. "Exactly. Look, Bill, maybe we're not speaking the same language. There's nothing wrong with being involved simply because the chemistry's right. It'll stop being right sometime, but that's to be expected."

"Of course it's not wrong! But we've got way more than that going for us!" He couldn't stand talking to her back any longer, so he put his hands on her arms and turned her to face him. "Come on, Nik. We've got to sit down and talk about this."

She pressed her lips together and he was sure she was going to be stubborn, but instead she said, "I have to turn off the soup." She gave it another stir before putting the cover on the pot and leading the way to the living room. She sank into her chair and worked her neck muscles like they were bothering her. "Okay. You say we've got more than sex or chemistry or whatever. What more do we have?"

"We're friends!"

She paused, mid-stretch. "Friends? Friendly, sure, but that's not the same thing." After a couple of seconds, she asked, "Are you really not used to -" She waved a hand vaguely. "Well, I don't know - liking the woman you're with or whatever?"

"No, I like them." At the time. He'd run into enough old flames to know that their charm died along with everything else. "But when they tell me about their problems, they don't really matter to me, and your problems do. I worry about you and want to help you, and it drives me crazy when you do stuff like Thursday night. You treated me like a stranger who didn't have any right to care about making things easier for you."

That was what had bothered him so much, he suddenly realized. Not that she was mad, or that she locked him out, but that she seemed to think it was okay to pretend to him that she was more capable than she truly was.

"I overreacted on Thursday. I told you that already."

He nodded. "Yeah, but ever since then, there's been this barrier between us that didn't used to be there. You didn't mind me helping Neal with the yard last Saturday. Or me cooking dinner that night."

"You cooked dinner on Friday, too, and that was fine," she objected.

"It was right on the hairy edge," he corrected. "If I hadn't made a salad, like you said you were going to have, you wouldn't have eaten it. And if I'd asked first, you would have refused."

She thought about that for a minute, then sighed. "I guess. But it's not just you. I'm like that with Neal, too. It's the fibro - I can't accept needing help all the time."

Okay! Now they were getting somewhere! "I understand you feeling that way. But when I do something for you, it's not because I think you can't do it. It's because I want to help, and whatever it is seems like a good way."

Her lips curved into an almost-smile. "Really?"

"Really," he assured her. "And maybe I'm wrong, but I think that when I take care of something you'd otherwise have to do, then maybe you'll have a little more energy left for other things."

A laugh bubbled out. "Gosh, I wonder what other things."

He laughed, too, then shook his head. "Not just making love, although that's certainly high on the list. But other things, too - really, anything you'd think was fun. You're so focused on survival that you don't have much chance for fun."

She sobered. "That's true. And I have to admit that's been one of the best parts of being with you. I feel almost like a normal person when you're around."

His stomach clenched. "You're an incredibly special person to me, Nik, and your specialness has absolutely nothing to do with you having fibro." He wanted to go on and on, to make her understand how he felt about her. Except how did he feel? Was he really ready to abandon a lifetime's caution and say things he couldn't be sure would still be true next month?

He didn't have a chance to answer that question. Nik's face became even more serious and she said, "Maybe that's how you feel now, but you haven't seen me when I'm having a flare. I won't seem so special to you then."

The truth was the only answer. "I don't know what will happen, Nikolia. Your disease won't change how I feel about you, but that doesn't mean I'll always feel the way I do right now." He wished he could say more, that there was a promise he could make that he'd know he could keep.

She shook her head. "Of course you won't. That's been implicit all along, and I honestly don't mind. With my health, I can't do the things I'd always planned to do with my life. I can't have children. I can't even have a real relationship."

"Why not?" He remembered now that Neal had warned him about this. She thought her health wouldn't stand for it.

She scrunched her forehead and scowled like he hadn't been listening. "Because of my fibro, of course. Relationships involve a lot of give-and-take, and both parties have to be responsible for making things work. I could do that sometimes, but sometimes isn't enough." She sighed. "Like when I overdid a couple of weeks ago. I could just tell you to go away and let me sleep, and you did. But if we were really involved, there might be issues we had to deal with, and we couldn't just wait until I was feeling better."

Issues? He didn't like the sound of that word, but he wouldn't let it throw him. "Sure, we could! Your health is more important than whatever else was going on."

She shook her head. "If I didn't feel good maybe one night every couple of months, I'd buy that. But that's not reality. There are lots of nights - and days - where all I can manage is the bare minimum of what I absolutely need to do. I come home from work, and zapping a mug of soup and then eating it feels like as much work as climbing Mt Everest. Sometimes, I spend half the night stretched out on the sofa, and only drag myself to bed around midnight."

"But I could help you! I could make dinner, and I could carry you into bed, if you needed me to."

"How many evenings would you - or any guy - want to spend like that? Not many, I'll tell you. I've talked to a number of people who have fibro. The only ones who have relationships are ones where the relationship was solid before the fibro surfaced, and some that seemed solid didn't last, either."

Neal was right. Her mind was made up on the subject. Besides, she was scaring him about what a relationship entailed. "I see your point. But isn't there something in between where we are now and a full-blown relationship?"

"What's wrong with where we are now?"

His cheek muscles were tense, but he managed to smile. "Well, for one thing, you think I'm here to pick up my stuff."

She smiled a little sheepishly. "Okay. So maybe I was wrong about that. But still, it's Sunday."

"You got to sleep lots last night." He hadn't slept well, but maybe she had. "And it looks like your neck's bothering you. I'm great at neck rubs."

"That's okay," she said. "My muscles are all weird. I even went to a masseuse one time, and she couldn't help me."

"I bet I can. You just have to tell me what feels good or not." She didn't seem as completely negative about the idea as she might, so he added, "Let's give it a try, anyway. I'll be careful, and if it doesn't help, I'll stop."

"There are places I can't let you touch," she warned him.

Like he hadn't found that out already! "I know." He stood and offered her his hand. "How about trying it now?"

She bit her lip, but finally nodded.

**

Nik had expected this to be like the time she'd gone to a masseuse. She'd heard positive things about how massage could help with fibro, and she'd finally gotten over her nervousness enough to make the appointment.

But how it hurt to have those strong hands digging into her already-sore muscles! And when she told the woman that, the masseuse said she'd do it more gently, but either she hadn't or the damage was already done. She hadn't been able to last for half the session, and she was extra sore for the next few days.

Bill's technique was nothing like that woman's. He used a light touch, and only gradually went deeper. He

didn't entirely miss her tender points - it was close to impossible to avoid all of them - but as soon as she caught her breath in pain, he moved on to another area.

She couldn't really tell if he was doing her stiff neck any good, but at least it felt good now. She felt pretty good all over, in fact. And they *were* in the bedroom - maybe this would be a good time to make up for what they'd missed out on last night.

"Nikolia," his silky voice came from inches away. "Would you like me to massage the rest of your back and your legs?" He put his hand on the middle of her back, and she immediately sensed the difference in the tension level of those muscles compared to the ones he'd been working on. "Or should I go away and let you rest?"

What about making love? "Isn't there another choice?"

**

Bill grinned. "Another choice, Nikolia? Whatever would that be?" He leaned over and planted a kiss just behind her earlobe. "Maybe something like that?"

She squirmed around, turning over, then pulled him down to her level. "More like this," she said, giving him a serious kiss.

"That's good," he said, "but it causes things like this to happen." He rolled onto his back and pulled her on top of him for more kissing.

"Very good. But we're wearing way too many clothes."

"We can deal with that." He laughed and shifted out from under her. "In fact, I'll race you."

But then, he didn't bother to get up, because he was caught watching Nik's strip-tease. It didn't matter. He'd won, already.

She might claim this wasn't a relationship, but he knew better.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

By Friday at five, Bill was eager for the weekend. He always was, but never more so than this week. Things were different now with Nik, and he'd missed her more than he had other weeks. Calling her a couple of evenings had helped ease the worst of his edginess, but it hadn't been nearly enough. And all the couple of meetings they'd been in together had done was make him want to be alone with her more.

The meetings had been about their pre-beta test blitz. This was the first time they were going all out on testing like this. Usually, they just had the QA team go through their regression test suites, and then Scott sat down for an hour or two with each new feature, trying to break it. He usually succeeded, too.

But A-W was getting bigger and more well-known all the time, and this release had tons of new features. Quality and usability were high priority to many of their customers, even in a release like this one not intended for production use. Nik had been the one to suggest this testing blitz. She'd said that if one person could find a significant number of bugs, then a whole team of people could probably find even more. She'd assigned several of her customer support engineers to the blitz, and all the developers and QA engineers were pitching in.

They'd started yesterday morning, and he'd assigned Carolyn to keep track of who was testing what, and what problems had been uncovered. Carolyn was the only female development engineer, and she

reported to him. She'd gotten under his skin her first day by acting like lunch with him would be worse than going out with pond scum. They had a lot of history since then, every bit of it adversarial. If he didn't know better, he'd suspect that she was seriously involved with Scott just to make his striking out with her tweak even more.

Normally, he stayed away from her. They communicated via email, and occasionally in a meeting, he'd ask her opinion about something - just so no one else on the team would notice anything weird. But this was their first release with him as project lead, so he stopped by her office on the way out.

"How's the testing going?"

She jerked her head up. "I'm not done with my report. It'll be on your desk by the time I leave."

That wasn't the question he'd asked, but she'd succeeded in making him feel somewhat defensive, anyway. "I'm not in a rush for the report. I just wondered how it was looking overall."

"Take a look for yourself." She shoved a pile of papers in his direction.

He picked them up and flipped through them - what a bunch of chicken-scratching some of them were! They were the notes people had made while testing. "You can actually read this junk?"

She shrugged. "Mostly. The one on top that looks like a ransom note is Phillip's, and Rollie's is pretty bad, too, but the rest aren't too tough."

"So, has anyone found anything major, as far as you can tell?" He hated having to ask again, but he had to, if he wanted an answer.

She shook her head. "It's little stuff, from what I've seen so far, and not concentrated in any one area of code."

"That's great," he said, trying not to show how relieved he felt. He knew he was doing a good job as project lead, but he still needed to prove himself to Seth, who had been leery about promoting him.

"Caro, Daddy says you gotta do my makeup!" Rachel rocketed past Bill into the room, her shoulder-length white-blonde hair flowing behind her. She noticed him suddenly and twirled in place. "Uncle Bill! I'm a princess."

"A very pretty princess, indeed," he answered. She had the same angelic face he and George had been cursed with - he guessed it wasn't as bad for a girl. She was wearing some sort of long dress made of shiny material - oh, yeah, this was Halloween weekend.

Carolyn was momentarily nonplussed, and kept glancing into the hall. Scott appeared in the doorway finally and she asked, "Is it time for that already? I'm not done here."

He nodded. "Afraid so, if Annabelle's going to have time to take Rachel around to the neighbors before the party." Glancing at Bill then back at her, he asked, "Is this something you can finish over the weekend?"

Bill knew a cue when he heard one. "No problem - it can wait until Monday, as far as I'm concerned. I'm outta here."

He left Carolyn's office, but he lingered a few steps down the hall for a couple of minutes. He couldn't help being curious how the distinctly nonmaternal-seeming Carolyn coped with being his niece's substitute mother. Surprisingly well, it appeared. Rachel was now perched on Carolyn's desk, having her face

made up, and they were both laughing and talking at the same time.

Just before he headed for the side exit, he caught Scott watching him with an unwavering protective eye. The guy couldn't think he'd cause problems for Rachel! He raised his hand, palm out, offering peace, and backed out of view.

So maybe Carolyn wasn't the gold-plated bitch he'd been damning her for all this time.

**

Nik hadn't known how much to look forward to the weekend, figuring they were in for more relationship talk. When Bill mentioned Rachel half a dozen times during the course of dinner, the two subjects suddenly clicked in her mind. No wonder he wanted a relationship - he wanted kids of his own!

She had to put a stop to this now, before she remembered how much she'd wanted a family. "You know, Bill, I'm sure you'll be a good father. The thing is, you're wasting your time with me, if that's what you're looking for. Having fibro, I can't be sure I'll be able to take care of myself long-term, much less children."

He stared at her, a piece of roll halfway to his mouth, forgotten. "I don't want kids! Whatever gave you that idea?"

She smiled to let him know she didn't mind. "You've been talking about Rachel a lot tonight."

"Because I just saw her!"

"You see her quite often, don't you?" She'd been surprised when she first heard that at work. He hadn't seemed like the type to bother with a child, even though she was his niece.

He half-nodded, then shook his head. "Not anymore. Scott - well, he and I don't really get along."

"Won't he let you see her?" That didn't sound like Scott, but then again, she knew the two didn't like each other.

Bill shoved his chair back a couple of inches and dropped the roll onto his plate. "That's not really it. Are you done eating? I'll take care of the dishes."

Her appetite was gone for good, so she said, "I'm done, but I don't mind doing the dishes." She got up and worked with him to clean up the kitchen.

There was something strange about his reaction to the question about Scott letting him see Rachel, but she decided not to pursue it. He was entitled to his privacy, just as she was entitled to hers. But his answer about not wanting kids wasn't the same thing. It was relevant, and she wasn't going to take his off-hand answer as the absolute truth.

"It's completely natural to want kids, you know," she said. "They make it sound sometimes like it's just women who want them, but I don't buy that. You should have seen my brother Nathan when he announced Julie was expecting the first time!"

"Maybe it's natural for some people," he said, scrubbing the counter with far more intensity than needed. "Not me. The world'd be a lot happier place if people had to take an exam before they could become parents."

She wondered at the bitterness in his voice, but simply said, "I agree. But you'd do just fine on an exam."

Why was she trying to reassure him? If for whatever reason, he didn't want kids, there was no reason to try to change his mind and hasten his departure from her life.

He threw the sponge into the sink and spun to face her. "What the hell do you know about it? You don't know the first thing about where I come from!"

Whoa. She'd just stumbled into some serious issues, ones that she had no intention of pursuing. "Um, you're right. I'm sorry." Where was the exit from this minefield of a conversation?

He threw his hands up and backed away. "No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have bitten off your head like that."

She managed a wavering smile. "My head's still attached. The whole thing's none of my business, anyway."

He didn't contradict her.

**

Bill was certainly doing great tonight. First, he went on and on about Rachel and got Nik all confused and defensive about kids. Then, he stumbled halfway into telling her exactly *why* he and Scott didn't get along - and wouldn't *that* have made her think well of him? And finally, he'd yelled at her, in effect, for saying he'd be a good father. Well, he wouldn't be, but he sure as hell wasn't going to explain why. If he hadn't sworn he'd never walk out on her in the middle of something again, he'd have left before he could make the situation any worse.

Instead, he asked, "Do you feel like listening to some music?" She jumped at the suggestion and offered to let him choose the music. He should be glad she didn't have a fraction as many CDs as he did, since it shortened the choosing process, but he missed having the broad range of music to choose from.

She sat on the couch, undoubtedly waiting for him to join her. He still felt awkward about his outburst, so he killed a little time checking out the pictures on the wall and mantle. The stuff on the walls was pretty ordinary, but on the mantle, he found a group picture that he thought must be Nik's family. He couldn't be sure, though, since if it was, Nik was only about Rachel's age. "Is this your family?"

She glanced where he was pointing. "Yeah. It's the only one of our whole family - Mom's holding Neal."

"He looks pretty young." Bill could barely see the baby for the blanket surrounding him.

"Yeah. A couple of weeks or so, and I was five. The picture was taken at Easter, and Mom died less than a month later."

"That's awful!" He looked at her, trying to gauge her reaction to talking about it. "I knew she'd died when you were young, but I didn't realize it was that young."

She nodded soberly. "Yeah. Neal never really knew her at all. I feel bad about that."

Since George had died when Rachel was a baby, and Francine just recently, he had his own opinion about which was worse for a child. "It must have been tough on you, too."

"Sure. Grandma was great, though - Mom's mom. She gave up her job down here for a while and stayed with us, and then later, she'd have us each come down and visit her for a week in the summer - separately, so we didn't have to compete for her attention." She smiled at the memory. "This is her house, you know. She gave it to me when she died."

That must be why the furnishings seemed so old and out-of- date. "No, I didn't know that. I'd wondered why you'd have a place with a yard, though."

She sighed. "It doesn't really make sense for me, I know. But at least for now, I don't have to worry about it too much, with Neal around to take care of it."

"He told me about -" What was that woman's name?

"Marian. I know, he told me you were okay about it."

He turned away from the picture to face her. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"No reason," she said, but then added, "No, that's not the real answer. The thing is that he's paranoid about what everyone will think because of Dad and Nathan, plus he always looked up to you, so your reaction's particularly important."

She looked lonely there on the couch, so he sat next to her. "They don't approve?"

"Not a chance. They were bad enough when he went to art school instead of majoring in engineering, like the rest of us. But they expected him to get a day job after he finished school, and just paint on the weekends or whatever. He took Marian home for Easter a year ago, not long after he moved in with her, and it was so bad, we all left before Easter dinner."

"That doesn't seem fair."

But then, life wasn't fair. Bill had known that since he'd been only slightly older than Neal in the picture on the mantle.

**

Thinking about Mom always made Nik a little melancholy. She felt sorry for Neal that he hadn't known her, but in truth, she'd barely known her, either. Grandma had told her lots of stories about her, and over time, those stories had blurred with her own memories to the point where she wasn't sure which she remembered and which she didn't.

Grandma had said it didn't matter which was which, that it was simply important to remember about her mother. That line of thinking worked just fine until a couple of years ago when Nathan made an off-hand comment about an incident he remembered about her and Mom, something she had no memory whatsoever of. Nathan had claimed not to remember any more than what he'd said, and Dad had been off in the safe world of engineering instead of tricky real life, so no answers were to be had there, either.

She dismissed her lingering resentment - one more time - and concentrated on enjoying the evening with Bill. That was a bit of a challenge, since they both seemed to feel slightly out- of-sorts. Eventually, she suggested going to bed, thinking that maybe sex was what they needed.

But Bill simply held her for a long time after they got into bed. At first, she was tense, waiting for him to touch her or kiss her, wondering if it would feel as good as it always had before. Eventually, she relaxed, and let herself be comforted.

Finally, she pushed him onto his back and took the lead herself. It felt great.

CHAPTER TWELVE

After Friday night, Bill was afraid the whole weekend was ruined, and maybe their whole relationship.

Sure, it had been great when Nik took the lead in making love, but he was beginning to see her point. That was more or less chemistry, and the rest of what they had wasn't. If there was something wrong *there*, he didn't have a clue how to fix it.

It turned out that he hadn't needed to worry. Nik was her normal self in the morning, or maybe even a slightly softer version of herself, and it was clear that she wasn't brooding about the way he'd behaved last night.

She turned to him while she was dressing. "I'll need to spend an hour and a half or so exercising later, but if you want, we could do something together for part of the day."

"Sure!" She was in the middle of pulling a sweater over her head, and he watched as her luscious bare breasts slowly disappeared from view. She seemed to wear a bra only for work. Once the show was over, he asked, "What did you have in mind?"

"It doesn't really matter, whatever you'd like to do." After a second, she came out with her idea. "Have you been to that store you were talking about last weekend?"

"Not yet." Given how negative she'd sounded then, he had to wonder why she was suggesting it now.

"I looked at their ad this week, and you're right - it does look interesting. I'm trying to get more creative with my cooking, so I thought it might be worth a try." She paused in the middle of brushing her hair. "But if you don't feel like it, that's okay. We can do something else."

"No, that would be great. We can find something for dinner tonight - and they have a deli, in case you dare try it for lunch."

She thought for a moment - but only a moment - before flashing him a smile. "What the heck. I have to live a little once in a while." Hey, maybe a little of him was wearing off on her!

The rest of the day was like one of those sequences in a movie where the couple is together and happy and doing things that look silly to an outsider, but that make them even more happy and together than before. He always groaned to himself when one of those showed up in a movie he took a woman to. He knew the woman would think it was all romantic and wish things would be like that for them, and he thought it was stupid and was glad he didn't have to pretend like that to get what he wanted.

The thing was that it didn't seem stupid at all today, and he was damn glad there wasn't music playing in the background - like there always was in the movies - or he'd be tempted to start dancing. Even worse, the inevitable sad fate of the lovers in the movie didn't bother him in the least. Nik wouldn't die, and he wouldn't do something so completely horrible and inhuman that she could no longer tolerate the thought of him.

The absolutely worst part was that he knew he'd never be able to tolerate another meaningless affair with a woman. Nik had ruined him for that.

**

Nik had always loved going to bed with Bill. Even at eighteen, he'd had more skill and intuitive understanding of the nuances of sex than any of the few other partners she'd had. He was much better now, and she had no doubt he'd be even better ten years from now.

She'd also liked him as a person and enjoyed talking to him. She hadn't ever felt truly comfortable with him, though. Either she felt like he was judging her, or he seemed to be playing a role, or both.

But not today. Today they were two people - two equal people - without hidden agendas or expectations that were impossible to meet. They both wanted the same, very attainable goal. They wanted to spend the day together having fun.

The only sad note to the entire day was that Nik knew it wouldn't always be like this.

**

The message light on Bill's answering machine was flashing when he walked into his apartment. His first thought was that Nik had called and wanted him to come back to her place. Then he realized she hadn't even had time to get to church, much less to attend the service and drive back home. Unless she'd missed him so much she'd decided to skip church today?

He punched the Play button. "How come you're not home, Billy? You usta always be home on Sunday mornings." Yes, and in bed with a woman - not that Ma ever cared what she was interrupting. "You ain't gone all religious on me, have ya? Naw, I guess not - not after your old man taught you 'bout *his* kind of religion."

Geez. That was all he needed to totally wipe out the wonderful weekend he'd just had with Nik - for Ma to be in one of her reminiscing moods, all about the bad old days. He could understand - kind of - that she maybe needed to talk about it sometimes. But why him? She knew damn well that he had all the same nightmare memories - well, okay, they weren't *all* the same. He hadn't gotten raped after being beaten to a pulp, but still he *heard* it happen time after time.

Ma's voice was still blathering on when the phone rang. He grabbed it halfway through the first ring, hitting the Delete button on the answering machine and turning the volume all the way down at the same time. "Hello?" Please, let it be a normal human being!

"Where were you at, Billy?"

No such luck. "I was out, Ma." Then, even though he knew it was pointless, he added, "You didn't have to call back. I would have called." Eventually. When the guilt over ignoring her overwhelmed the dread of talking to her.

"I din't get a picture of Rachel in her Halloween costume this year. I always did before."

"Ma, Halloween was just this weekend! Did you expect it to come Federal Express?" Probably, knowing her. And who knew if Scott had any idea that she'd be expecting one? He added grudgingly, "I'll check with Scott this week about it."

"Do it right away, before you forget." She continued wistfully, "I'll bet she looked sweet. She looks so much like you and George at that age."

Geez. He and George hadn't been sweet a day in their lives. Would it help to tell her about seeing Rachel in her costume? Probably not, but he'd try. "She looked real nice, Ma, all dressed up like a princess." Although the way everyone spoiled her, Bill wasn't sure she didn't actually *think* she was a princess. He figured that was better than the way he'd grown up, though.

"Did she have a crown and everything?"

"I don't know, Ma. She was just getting her face made up when I saw her."

"Poor little girl, without a mother to do that for her. Who put on her makeup?"

"One of the women at work." He knew better than to mention that Scott was already all-but-engaged. Ma, never a model of propriety, would be horrified - she'd been scandalized enough that Francine and Scott had lived together without getting married.

"Now, Billy - when you talk to Scott about the picture, be sure to remind him I'll be coming to see my little sweetheart at Christmas."

He sagged forward in his chair. Just what he needed! It had been bad enough all these years, knowing that Francine knew what Ma was like. But Scott had never met her. He might still think that Bill was an upper-middle-class preppie like himself. "Okay, Ma," he said, trying to ignore the sinking feeling. He'd just have to figure some way to handle this potential disaster. "I'd better go now."

"Aren't you even going to ask how I am?" she demanded.

Why bother? She was always the same - miserable and feeling cheated by life, when it was her own choices that had done the cheating. "Sure, Ma. How are you?"

"I think I'm getting pneumonia. I keep having these coughing fits, and they don't stop until I take a little sip of cough medicine."

"You smoke too much, Ma. I keep telling you that." And her cough medicine - peach brandy - wasn't sold in any drug store. He sighed. "You doing okay on money, Ma?"

"I guess," she said, martyr-like. "You said to stop going to the casino, and there's nothing else to do around here."

Since when did she listen to what anyone told her to do? But damn, it still made him feel like a miser. "All I meant was you shouldn't spend so much time there." Then, despite what his brain said, he told her, "Look, Ma, I'll send you a little extra this month. Just try not to lose it all at once."

"You're a good boy, Billy. I just wish your Pop had really known you."

And whose fault had it been that he hadn't? Not Bill's. It wouldn't have mattered, of course. George, Sr., was an abusive bully, and from day one, it had been clear that George, Jr., was the only son he needed or wanted. And maybe George, Jr., hadn't physically abused his wife and child, but he'd been just as much of a bully as his father.

Rachel should be damn glad she wasn't old enough to remember him.

**

Nik put her book down and clicked on the TV, then turned it right back off. No, she wasn't in the mood for sitting quietly and being entertained. She was too restless for that - the opposite problem from her usual one of trying to summon up the energy to do the chores she absolutely needed to get done.

She decided that the difference was that she was taking better care of herself these days. She was so eager not to miss spending time with Bill that she was being much more diligent about her exercise and diet than usual. She was also sleeping better, and some of that was because of how thoroughly relaxed she became after an evening of lovemaking.

Another big part of it was her job. It was perfect for her, and she and her group were treated with respect and professionalism. That hadn't always been true of customer support at DesignTek. Development engineering there reported into a totally different chain of management than support, QA, and tech writing, and development was definitely the favored group. She remembered many frustrating

and contentious meetings where support had fought the good fight, but ended up losing.

At A-W, the tone was completely different. Satisfying the customer wasn't just a slogan, it was the goal that the whole company strived to achieve. When she went into a meeting and presented support's point of view, she could be assured that it would be taken seriously.

That translated into much less stress for her. And less stress meant that she was less likely to have flare-ups of fibro.

But only less likely. She would still have them from time to time, and she'd almost certainly still have down cycles once in a while. She didn't think doctors made any differentiation between flares and down cycles, but she did. A flare lasted a day or two, and she could usually trace it to a cause - a couple of close-to-sleepless nights in a row, something stressful that happened, or maybe catching a cold. A down cycle lasted much longer, several weeks at least, and while it didn't usually continue at the level of severity of a flare, it wreaked havoc on her life. For weeks or even months, she would vary between feeling completely horrid and just plain miserable, and there was close to nothing she could do to help herself. That was one of the worst parts - she couldn't take a pill and think she might feel better in a little while.

Her major prayer these days was to be spared a down cycle until *after* she and Bill split up. In the meantime, she'd take a drive in the country and see if any of the fall color was left on the trees.

**

Bill got into work early on Monday morning and lurked around the coffee pot until he saw Scott arrive. "Hey, Scott - got a minute?"

Scott's forehead creased and he gestured for Bill to follow him into his office. "Problems with the testing?"

"What? Oh, no - as far as I know, that's going fine. This isn't even about work."

Scott took a seat behind his desk, and Bill felt the unspoken question. If it wasn't about work, then what could they possibly have to talk about in a civilized manner?

He hated asking for anything, and to have to ask it of Scott made it much worse. "It's hardly worth mentioning, but I promised my mother I'd ask if you happened to take any pictures of Rachel in her Halloween costume this year."

Scott made a face. "You know, I completely forgot. Just getting her dressed and all - we got halfway to Lake Oswego before I remembered. But Seth took quite a few, and he said he'd make copies. Would your mother like some?"

"Yeah, she would. I'll check with him about it, then." He wanted to get out of here. They could talk about Christmas another time.

"Don't bother. I'll tell him. I have to ask him to make some for other people, too." There was something secretive about how Scott said that - like he didn't want to say who he was making the extras for. That was odd. "Um, speaking of your mother, she usually comes to town around Christmas, doesn't she?"

Bill nodded. "Yeah. She likes to see Rachel."

"That's good. I think it's important for Rachel to have a relationship with her. Do you know when she's planning to come?"

"She hasn't decided yet." More importantly, Bill hadn't decided how to minimize the damage yet.

"Well, after Christmas would probably work best for us. We're going back East early, and then flying back Christmas Eve to be with Seth and Annabelle on Christmas Day."

Bill was pretty sure that "we" included Carolyn. She came from somewhere back there, too, as he recalled. He couldn't say anything about that, though - not without destroying the civility of their conversation so far. "I'll tell Ma, but I'm sure that will be fine with her." Time to get out of here. He stood. "Well, thanks."

Scott half-smiled. "Sure. I'll let you know about the pictures."

"Great."

Okay, that was a pretty successful conversation. Now all he had to do was figure out how to keep Scott from meeting Ma.

Oh, geez. Nik couldn't meet her, either!

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Late Wednesday morning, Nik stretched her back muscles as she saved her document. She'd been working on this presentation all day, and it was finally done. She'd just save it, send a copy to the printer, and head out for her lunch break.

Oh, no, TechDoc crashed! She sighed, crossed her fingers, and invoked it again. It said her document didn't exist!

She tried a couple of things that might retrieve it from inside her computer, but none of the tricks she'd learned to help users worked. She'd have to find someone who knew more than she did about it.

Unfortunately, all of her support engineers were either on the phone or at lunch already. Maybe a developer? She checked Bill's office first, but it was empty. Carolyn's office was nearby, so she stopped there. "Excuse me, Carolyn, but who'd be a good person to try to retrieve a document I lost? I wouldn't care about it normally, but it's part of a presentation that Seth needs this afternoon -"

Carolyn smiled and waved away the rest of the explanation. "I can try. What version of TechDoc are you using?"

Oops. "The one we've been testing - I forgot to switch back to the production one."

Carolyn shrugged. "I forget sometimes, too. Let's go see what I can do." She headed to the other building and Nik's office, her long legs setting a pace that made Nik feel like she was running.

Nik started out standing behind her, trying to follow what Carolyn was doing. She was typing fast and using several windows at once, so it was hard to follow. Before long, Nik's muscles started screaming, and she finally moved to her visitor's chair.

Carolyn swiveled around to face her after ten minutes or so. "I got it back - maybe not your latest changes, but it should be close. But it's a good thing this happened now. There's a real butchery in the code that we need to fix before this goes out to customers. Can I use your phone?"

Nik nodded, and Carolyn punched the speakerphone button, then someone's extension. The phone was answered. "I've been thinking about you." Bill's voice was as smooth and intimate as ever.

Carolyn turned beet-red and gasped, then looked at Nik with what seemed to be horror in her eyes. Finally, she said, "This is Carolyn, Bill. I'm with Nik - one of her documents crashed and I came to get it back for her. We've got a major problem."

"Major, how? You can't retrieve it?" He sounded businesslike, not wishing-he-could-fall-through-the-floor-with-embarrassment like she was. But then, she guessed he might not care that people knew they were seeing each other. He'd been with plenty of women at A-W.

Carolyn shook her head, her blush fading. "No, I got it back. It's why it crashed that's the problem - it's the beta software, and I can't believe nobody found this problem during testing."

Bill's sigh was amplified by the speaker. "Should I come down there?"

"Yeah."

"I'll be right down." The receiver clunked into place on his end.

Carolyn pushed the button to end the call and raised her eyes to meet Nik's. Her blush returned and she said, "Um - normally I wouldn't say anything -"

It was Nik's turn to wave away the rest of whatever Carolyn might have said. She wasn't blushing, but only because she never blushed. "No, it's okay. And yes, I know what Bill is like. I'm not expecting this to last."

She wasn't. She hadn't even expected it to last this long.

**

Bill could bite his tongue off. They hadn't talked about it, but he was sure Nik hadn't wanted anyone at work to know they were seeing each other. He knew why, of course - she was ashamed of being attracted to a low-class guy like him. If she was going out with somebody like Scott, it would be totally different. She'd assume he was sincere and had her best interests at heart. She wouldn't be so busy denying the obvious about their relationship, either.

When he walked into her office, he could tell she and Carolyn had been talking about him. Carolyn blushed and wouldn't look right at either of them, and Nik was busy studying the arrangement of objects on her desk. He pretended not to notice. "So, ladies, what's up?"

That broke the still-life, and Carolyn proceeded to show him just exactly what had happened to Nik's document. And damn if she wasn't right - it was bad. It was also quite possible to fix. "It shouldn't take more than an hour to fix this and make sure it works," he said.

"But haven't the beta disks already been shipped?" Carolyn asked.

"Not yet. They're set to go out this afternoon." A sudden thought. "But Scott's got the bad software at the conference."

Carolyn came up with the answer a microsecond ahead of him. "We could send the update with Seth when he leaves today, and not ship to the beta customers until tomorrow. Assuming we really can fix this that fast." She looked to him for the decision.

Geez! This was it - a chance for him to be the boss, like he'd always wanted. It was exciting, but also scary and not a little lonely. He wouldn't mind it a bit if Scott suddenly zapped into the room and took over, like he'd done a million times before.

But that wasn't going to happen. Scott was about a thousand miles away, and Bill was going to have to make the call. He nodded. "We'll do it. I'll tell Seth and make sure we don't ship the bad software by mistake. Who do you want to work with you on the bug?"

Carolyn sucked in her breath, like she was surprised he wasn't grabbing the fun job for himself - well, she had a point, he guessed. "I can do it on my own." After a second, she looked him straight in the eye and added, "You might want to take a look at my fix later - make sure I'm not causing us more problems down the road."

It wouldn't do to make a big deal out of her offer, but today was the first time she'd acknowledged him as either her boss or as a skilled engineer. "Be glad to," he said with a nod. "Give me a call."

**

Nik ought to take her lunch break now. Maybe not a full hour, but she needed a chance to stretch out, flat on her back, and relax her muscles.

Just not right now. She had her office and her document back. She needed to see if it was all there, and if it was, do one last critical read-through before having transparencies made for Seth to take with him to the conference.

She'd take her break then. In the meantime, she'd sip her nutrition drink - a new brand she'd gotten at the store with Bill, and boy was it tasty - as she worked.

**

Bill left Seth's office so charged up it was almost better than sex. No, that was going too far - close to as good was more accurate.

Seth was impressed! He'd been leery earlier about substituting a new version of software at the last minute like this, but Bill had assured him that they'd run the full regression test suite overnight before shipping to beta customers. He also reminded Seth that if Scott didn't feel confident of the new version, he didn't have to install it and use it for demos. That had been enough to get Seth to give his guarded consent.

But it was different now! The fix was made, and Bill had asked the whole team to individually read over the code and make sure it made sense. They'd all agreed it did. Carolyn had written an explanation of the bug and how she'd fixed it, and they'd included that on the disk they gave to Seth for Scott. They'd also managed to run about half of the regression base on the new software this afternoon, and everything had passed so far. The real kicker, though, was that Phillip had created a test document and set of commands that caused the exact same crash on the version of TechDoc Nik had been using - and it ran successfully on Carolyn's fixed version.

Seth wasn't a software guy, but he was smart and he'd been around developers long enough to understand Bill's explanation of what they'd accomplished. He knew they'd done something in one afternoon that normally took several days, and he could see there was reason to feel confident about the results.

So, not only did he approve of sending the new version of beta software out tomorrow, he did something else as Bill left his office. He shook Bill's hand and said, "Good job." That, and the honest smile that went with it, was a first.

Before Bill consciously realized that he had to do something special to celebrate his day, he was on Nik's

hall. He hoped she was still in her office - for the life of him, he couldn't imagine what time it was.

She was, bent over putting something away and apparently getting ready to leave. What timing! "We're celebrating tonight, Nikolia. What should we do?"

She tipped her head back a couple of inches and his stomach plummeted. Her face was ghastly pale, and her eyes dull with pain. "I'm sorry. You'll have to celebrate without me."

He saw now that her position wasn't right. She was bent way over at the waist, much more than she'd need to bend to put something in a desk drawer. "What's wrong?" He raced to her side, thinking to help her up, and then - he didn't know.

"Don't touch me - not like that. Just -" One hand snaked out and grabbed his arm. "I'll pull myself up this way." The other hand was on the edge of her desk, but it seemed to be the one holding onto him that gave her the leverage to raise herself. She caught her breath and held it as she sat back in her desk chair, and he saw tears glistening in her eyes.

When she finally seemed a little more comfortable, he asked, "What happened?"

She sighed. "I didn't break at lunch today, because of the crash and needing to get the presentation ready for Seth. By the time I finally got it done and finished with my staff meeting, I could tell I was in trouble. So I figured I'd stretch out my back muscles by bending forward in my chair - it's not as good as lying on my back, but I just needed a temporary fix until I could get home."

"You *intended* to do that?" That didn't make sense.

"I didn't expect to get stuck," she said with a weak smile. "But once I leaned forward, I realized my muscles were too spasmic to let me sit back up, and the desk and the arms of my chair weren't in the right place to help me. I was going to try to move my chair around so I could see if putting my arm on the edge of the table would work."

He'd caught sight of the clock on her computer by now, and knew it was only a little after quitting time. "Someone in your group must still be around. You could have just called out."

She shook her head - once - emphatically, then winced at the pain that caused. "I try not to let anyone see me like this."

He didn't tell her how foolish her attitude was. He knew about pride. Instead, he said, "Okay, now how do we get you home? Do I need to carry you?"

"I can get home just fine, now that you helped me up. Thanks." She stood cautiously and straightened upright gradually.

"I'm not just leaving you here like this! I'm going to drive you home and make sure you're all right."

"But you have to celebrate tonight," she protested. "You didn't tell me what for, by the way. I assume you fixed the bug this afternoon?"

He nodded. "Yeah, but I'm taking care of you tonight. We'll celebrate - together - another time."

"I'll be okay, really. I don't need you taking care of me." Her protest ran out of steam, and she said quietly, "But if you want to, it's okay."

They walked out together, and he thought about how she didn't want people to see her like this. *But she*

let him see her like this!

That, in itself, was worth celebrating.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Nik knew that, as bad as she felt right now, she'd be pretty much okay by morning. All she needed was to get home and stop using the muscles that were so painful. She didn't really need Bill to take care of her tonight.

But if he wanted to do it, she'd let him. It would waste too much energy to argue the point with him, for one thing. For another - well, this disease of hers was awful and sometimes she got depressed about the years ahead, about decades of fighting fibro flares all alone. It would be nice to have this one time when it was different to remember.

He drove her home in her car. At first, that seemed strange, but her car was in the part of the parking lot closest to her office and he always parked near the opposite entrance, so she didn't ask. And then, when they got to her place, he used the garage door opener to let them into the garage, and she realized he'd probably already thought about that point. Fibro fog made her thought processes much slower than normal.

It was weird. Usually when she overdid at work like this, she had a massive struggle to get home, and every second was endless and full of pain. Today, though, she seemed to be floating. Her body still hurt, but time was passing without her really noticing it, and the pain didn't seem to matter quite so much.

The problem with floating like this was that it was hard to get her body's attention to actually *do* something. Like now, they were in the garage, so she should get out of the car, go into the bedroom, and undress. But try telling her body that! It just kept sitting in the car.

It was lucky Bill was around. He came and opened her car door, helped her to stand, and walked her into the bedroom. He even started undressing her, except that made her think about *other* times he'd undressed her, and she came to her senses enough to at least do most of the work.

She stood there, tottering as though she had on her first pair of high heels, and he asked, "Do you want a nightgown?"

This man had been her lover for *how* many weeks and he didn't know she slept in the nude? She didn't laugh, though. He was simply trying to be helpful. "No. I can't stand clothes touching me, and I get hot."

"Okay, then do you need to use the bathroom or are you ready for a massage?"

He sure was serious about this taking care of her business! "I'll lie down for a while and then get some dinner." She lowered herself to the bed and stretched out. A lot of the strain on her muscles disappeared immediately, and she felt almost comfortable. Too bad she wouldn't stay that way all night. She knew she'd go through a hundred different positions before the night was through, and would feel pain in every muscle in her body in most of them.

It really wasn't fair to make Bill live through this kind of night with her. He thought he understood about her disease, but he didn't, and he wasn't prepared to learn the truth. "In fact, you really don't need to stay. I'll just zone out as much as I can all night, and by morning, I'll be much better. You could take my car and come back in the morning to pick me up."

"Not a chance, Nikolia. I'm here to help you. Just tell me what I can do."

But that was the point. He couldn't really help her. No one could.

**

Bill wouldn't have expected that he could be in the same room with a naked Nik and not need to make love to her. But he didn't. All he wanted was for her to feel better.

"Shouldn't you take a pain pill or something?"

She shook her head slightly. "The only drugs that work for me are real heavy-duty. I don't take them for something like this." She must have realized how crazy that sounded, because she gave him a weak smile and said, "I know that seems strange to you, but I'm really not as bad off as you think. It's maybe like if you pushed your workout extra one day. You'd be more tired after, and maybe sore, but you'd be better by the next day."

He understood her example, but the example itself showed how messed up things were for her. She was young and she took care of herself. She ought to be as strong and resilient as he was.

Ought to be, huh? When and where did Bill get the idea that life was fair, or even that it was intended to be? It wasn't, whether you were the precious daughter of a college professor or the unwanted son of George Adams, Sr.

There was no point even thinking about it any further. "I'll get you some dinner. What would you like?" He adjusted the position of the blanket slightly.

"I've still got some soup in the fridge. You could zap me a mug of it, if you don't mind."

"No problem. Is just soup enough? I could make something more."

She shook her head and slipped a hand out from under the covers to squeeze his. "Soup's plenty, thanks. You're being great."

But he wasn't *doing* anything!

**

Nik guessed she must have dozed for a few minutes. The next thing she knew, Bill was back in the bedroom with a mug of hot soup. She started to sit up, already dreading the difficulty of finding another comfortable position.

"Here you go, sweetheart," he said, slipping an extra pillow under her head. "Just lie back on the pillow, and I'll feed you."

"You don't need to do that! I can sit on the edge of the bed to eat."

"Sitting hurts, doesn't it?"

"Not too much."

He shook his head. "Any amount's too much, if it's something I can spare you." He smiled. "I promise I won't spill soup all over you." He did a good enough job that she wondered if he'd done this before. But lady killers didn't normally double as nurses, so she doubted it.

When he finished feeding her, he said, "I'm going to eat now, so you rest a little. I'll massage you when I come back."

She ought to object. Her muscles hurt too much to have him poking and prodding at them, no matter how well-intentioned nor how careful he was.

But he'd given her a great neck rub the weekend before last, and he was doing a super job of taking care of her tonight. She'd give him a chance to try the massage. If it didn't help, she knew he'd listen when she told him to stop.

Being able to trust him like that made it worth the risk.

**

Bill's stomach was in such a knot that he barely touched his soup. He was no stranger to pain, his or other people's, but Nik's was harder to accept.

It wasn't like when Pop would go off on him and Ma. There was so much anger then, so much hate, that the pain was only part of it, a sometimes almost-forgotten part.

Now, part of him wanted to be angry and to hate whatever made Nik hurt like this. But he couldn't do it. There wasn't someone he could blame for this, no one like Pop who was doing this to Nik to make himself feel powerful and to take him away from his miserable life for a few minutes once in a while.

Besides, if the anger and hate took over, it would ruin everything with Nik. She'd feel it and she'd push him away. He couldn't let that happen.

He had another reason for his stomach to be in knots. He'd told her he'd massage her when he went back in the bedroom. He'd said that because he was desperate to find some way to help her, and because he had a reputation for being good at giving massages.

But he hadn't given a serious massage to anyone with real problems before! Nik had liked the neck rub he'd given her that time, and once he'd worked a kink out of a date's back, but none of that meant a thing in comparison to what he'd signed up for tonight.

What if he did permanent damage to her muscles? She said the massage the masseuse gave her had hurt for several days afterwards, and the masseuse undoubtedly had a lot more training than Bill did.

Even if he didn't cause damage, massaging the muscles that were already incredibly sore would have to hurt. And causing her more pain was impossible. It would make him too much like Pop.

Well, maybe by the time he got back into the bedroom, she'd be asleep. And if she wasn't, he'd simply explain that it would be better to wait until another time to give her a massage. She'd accept that.

He dumped the rest of his soup down the disposal and took care of their dishes before tiptoeing into the bedroom. Nik looked almost asleep, but she opened her eyes and smiled at him. "Hi. I missed you. I was thinking about the massage you promised -"

Oh, good. She didn't want him to do it. "You were?" he asked, relieved already, but not wanting to admit it to her.

She nodded carefully. "I think it would be best if you started with my legs and worked up, rather than going the other direction. My legs aren't much worse than usual tonight, and I've found that if my legs feel okay, the rest of my body follows along to some extent."

All right. Her legs weren't as scary. They weren't like her back, with her spine right there and all those tender points he couldn't touch even when she felt okay. Still, his smile felt plastic. "Should I help you turn

over?"

"I can manage," she said - a little grimly, it seemed to him. She did manage it, eventually, after a process so obviously painful that he became determined to make the massage successful, simply so she wouldn't have to turn over again anytime soon. She took a couple of deep breaths and said, "Okay."

He took his own deep breaths and started massaging her legs. She might say her legs weren't too bad tonight, but nevertheless they felt like a mass of pulpy knots and there was almost no give to them, even at the surface. But as he worked on them, they gradually changed consistency a little, becoming somewhat softer and almost normal to the touch.

Her breathing seemed fairly easy, so he guessed he wasn't hurting her too much. Finally, he decided to move on, and it was while working on her lower back and hip muscles that she whimpered.

He froze, horrified. "I'm sorry, baby. Should I stop?"

"Oh. No. You're doing fine." Her voice was slow and sounded mellow.

"But I hurt you."

"Just a little, and mostly it feels good."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. My legs are great. But if you're getting tired or anything, you can stop." It might be his imagination, but it sounded like she didn't like that idea.

"No, I'm not tired. Just be sure to let me know if I hurt you." He started working on her beautiful ass again.

"Um-hm," she murmured.

He couldn't really believe her, but he couldn't disappoint her, either. He'd be even more careful from now on.

**

Nik was floating for real now. This massage was making her muscles relax and shut up for once, and she was going to enjoy every second of it.

She remembered being sick one time when she was a little girl. Before Mom died, and probably before Neal was born. All she really remembered was being tucked into her bed, and looking outside and seeing it was a nice day, and wanting to go out and play with her friends. She knew she couldn't do that because she was sick and she was mad at the unfairness of it all. When Mom came into her room, she just stared straight ahead and pretended she was still all alone.

Mom came and sat next to her on the bed and read her a wonderful story about fairy princesses and magical potions, and even though Nik tried really hard not to listen, she couldn't help it. After the story, Mom made her a grilled cheese sandwich with the crusts cut off and the sandwich cut into fancy shapes, and she let her have chocolate milk, even though she normally had to have her milk plain.

By the time Nik fell asleep that afternoon, she felt cherished and very, very special.

She hadn't felt like that in the nearly twenty-five years since then. Until tonight.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Bill had nightmares that night. It was the first time. He hadn't had the luxury as a kid - reality was worse than anything a nightmare could throw at him. And after Pop was gone, he'd been too busy making sure he never came back to sleep more than a few hours at a time. Since then - well, there hadn't been a point, he guessed. His life was a smorgasbord of beautiful women, good times, and great eats. His subconscious ate all that right up, just like the rest of him.

Now there was a point. He was in a relationship for the first time in his life, he hadn't thought of another woman in a month, and tonight he'd faced his fears for her.

So he dreamed about giving Nik a massage. Except instead of how he'd really done it, with soft hands and gentle pressure, the nightmare had him using brute strength and closed fists. And instead of Nik being calm and pliant under his hands, she was frantic and pleading. Her cries were still whimpers, but only because she had no voice left to scream with.

He woke himself before he finished the assault by raping her.

**

Nik cracked an eye open when she heard Bill up and moving around the room. "I must have gone to sleep." Her mouth felt surprisingly stiff and dry.

He glanced over at her and smiled. "I'll say. I should give you a massage every night."

She watched what he was doing for a few seconds. Why would he be getting dressed in the middle of the night? Was he going home now? But then she realized that it wasn't middle-of-the-night dark in here. "What time is it?"

"A little before seven." He paused, as though he knew she'd need to think about that for a second. "I need to go over to my apartment to shower and change before work. You're not going in to work today, are you?"

Today? "Wait a second - are you saying it's morning?"

He grinned, and she saw tired shadows under his eyes. "All morning long. But you can go back to sleep, so it's not a problem."

"No, I can't!" She threw the covers back and started the ignominiously clumsy process of getting out of bed. Because she knew he'd argue - Neal had, too, until they'd had it out a few times - she explained, "If I stayed home from work whenever I had a flare, I wouldn't be able to do my job. Work is very important to me, and I'm smart enough to take it easier than usual the day after something like this."

Well. That wasn't so bad. Here she was, sitting on the edge of the bed, and she wasn't sure, but she seemed *more* flexible than normal, not less. "I'm feeling pretty good this morning, actually," she told him. "Thanks to you."

"I hope you're not just saying that."

She glanced over her shoulder at him and smiled. "I'm not. Do you want to run over to your apartment now and pick me up on the way to work?" Good thing they lived close to each other.

He frowned, obviously not happy that she was going to work, but finally he sighed. "Okay. Should I pick you up some breakfast on the way?"

Oh, yeah. A fast-food egg-and-sausage sandwich would be super for her. "No thanks. I'll grab some yogurt from the fridge."

"Okay then. I'll be back in a while." He started toward the door.

"Thanks for last night, Bill. You were great."

He had no idea how sincerely she meant that.

**

Bill couldn't say exactly how, but things between them were different that weekend. Nik seemed more sure of him, and less suspicious. She was different, too, not quite as reserved about what made her tick.

She still wouldn't spend Sunday with him. She was nice about it, but firm. Finally, he decided to try for something else, something even better. While he still held her in his arms, he asked, "How about coming over to my place for dinner some night this week?"

"Just dinner?" Her smile was skeptical, but not uninterested.

"That would be entirely up to you. Of course, I'd like you to spend the night, but I'd rather spend only part of the evening with you than have to wait until next weekend."

She reached up and touched his cheek. "You're sweet, and I'd like that, too. I don't know if I can handle overnight, but dinner should be okay. What night?"

Every night! He knew not even to say that jokingly, though, so he thought for a few seconds. "How about Tuesday?" It was midway between the weekends, so maybe it would cut down on him missing her.

"Tuesday's good. I should do my exercises first, so I won't get there until maybe six-thirty. Will that work?"

"Sure." As if he'd refuse this chance because of what time she'd arrive!

Tuesday wasn't as far away as next Friday, but he still hated to let her climb out of bed and start the day.

**

Nik went to bed early on Monday and listened to a soothing new-age tape while she fell asleep. Sometimes that was nearly as effective at getting her to sleep as a sleeping pill, and it avoided the drugged morning-after feeling. It worked pretty well this time and she woke up relatively refreshed and definitely looking forward to the evening.

Bill's apartment was probably about half a mile from her house "as the crow flies" - considerably further when following the short and curving streets through the intervening neighborhood. Both were in the same densely-packed residential area near Washington Square Mall and its outlying shopping centers. A-W was on a main street less than a mile away.

His apartment was on the ground floor and had a small patio at the back. The most noticeable thing about it, though, was that it was furnished in black - black leather sofa and recliner, black laminate coffee table and dining table, black dining room chairs, and black entertainment center with smoked glass doors. Not a single item showed dust or fingerprints. The first thing she thought to say was, "You must have a great cleaning service."

He looked quizzical. "I don't have a service. Why?"

She gestured at the entertainment center and the coffee table. "It's all so spotless."

"Oh. I like to keep things neat."

Her place must drive him nuts, then. She didn't mention it, though, since he wouldn't be impolite enough to agree. "I like your place - it feels so modern." She didn't get much sense of the person who lived here, but she knew that was by design. He had a public persona, and only rarely let anyone see beneath it.

"Thanks." He slipped his arm around her waist and led her to the sofa. "I'll do the last little bit on dinner in a few minutes, but first, what would you like to drink? I have sparkling cranberry juice and bottled water, as well as pop and wine."

"Juice would be great."

"Then juice it is." He squeezed her hand, then put a remote control device in it. "This is the stereo remote and here's a list of my CD's. If there's anything special you'd like to hear, just press this button," he pointed, "then put in the disk number from the list."

Music was already playing. It was something soft and full of guitars, and she raised the volume slightly to hear it better. Out of curiosity, she scanned the list he'd given her. It was a single sheet of paper, printed on both sides, covered in plastic, and it listed more than 200 CD's. They were categorized and alphabetized within category by the artist's name. He appeared to have something for every taste, from straight classical to hip-hop.

He'd returned by the time she finished looking at the list. "Find anything you like?"

"How could I avoid it?" she asked with a smile. "You've got everything. But I'm enjoying what's on now."

He listened for a couple of seconds. "Oh, yeah. That's good background music." He sat next to her and handed her a fluted glass of juice.

She half-expected him to offer a toast, something she'd feel awkward about echoing. When he didn't, she relaxed and took a sip. "This is good."

"It doesn't taste as much of cranberry as I expected." He tasted it again. "It's more like apple with a little cranberry."

"I like it anyway," she said. The nicest part was that he'd considered her needs before buying it.

He set his glass down and took her hand between both of hers. "How are you doing this week?"

She leaned back on the surprisingly-comfortable sofa. "Good. No crises or anything to make me skip my lunch break."

"What do you do at lunchtime? Go home and rest?"

She shook her head. "I just go out to my car, put the seat back down, and meditate. It helps relax some of the tension in my neck and upper back. And either then or when I come back inside, I have a nutrition drink and a bunch of my pills."

"Pills? I thought you didn't take drugs normally."

"Nutritional supplements," she explained. "I got a four- page handout from my doctor about fibro and nutrition. It talks about what foods to eat and not eat, and also what special nutrients my body needs."

That's where I found out about all the supplements I take - acidophilus and grape seed extract and the others. There are a lot of them, so I split them up and take some with each meal."

"Speaking of which, I'd better go finish dinner."

**

Bill enjoyed cooking for an appreciative female audience, and Nik was definitely that. She sat on a stool at the breakfast bar watching him finish their meal, then ate every morsel on her plate, plus a second helping of salad. She refused more pasta when he told her there was dessert. He didn't mention what it was, though, and mentally crossed his fingers that it was as good an idea as he'd thought last night.

He cleared the table and told her to go into the living room and sit down. He'd bring dessert to her. As he handed it to her a couple of minutes later, he said, "This is my favorite dessert. It has been ever since that night at the campus snack bar." The first time he ate it. And the first time he kissed her.

Her eyes widened and she glanced down. "Hot fudge and peppermint ice cream? I would have thought you'd hate it."

They both knew she was referring to the ice-cream-in-the-pants incident, and that was part of why he'd served it. He shook his head. "No way. I had that coming - I knew it even then. I mean, not that I thought I was doing anything wrong, but I knew I'd be in trouble if you found out." He took a deep breath, wondering again if he wanted to admit this next part. He decided he did. "And truthfully, as awful as that ice cream felt, I was glad you reacted that way instead of crying." He wouldn't tell her that he'd become famous for the incident, so famous that guys who'd lived in the same dorm years later sometimes bought him drinks at alumni parties.

"I'm not a crier," she said softly.

He knew from her reaction that he hadn't handled this well. He touched her arm and said, "Nik, I know I was a jerk back then, and I'm sorry. That girl didn't mean a thing, even back then, and you always have. You deserve to hate me for what I did, and maybe that's how you've felt about me all these years. But I haven't hated you. You've been a special memory to me, and I always remember the taste of hot fudge and peppermint ice cream when I think of you. That's what you tasted like when I kissed you that night."

She smiled gently. "Thanks for telling me that." She spooned up a bite and let it melt in her mouth. "It's just like I remember it."

In his mind, it was even better. He knew how lucky he was this time.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The next Wednesday, Nik had only been in her office a few minutes when the phone rang. "Hello, this is Nik Harding."

"Nik! Are you okay?" It was Neal and he sounded worried.

"Yeah. Why?" Why was he asking, and why was he calling at this hour? Neal had never been a morning person.

"Because you didn't call me back last night, and you didn't answer your phone this morning, either."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I was at Bill's and forgot to check my messages."

"You were at Bill's on a weeknight?" He sounded incredulous, and she wasn't surprised. She was a little astounded herself. "I'm guessing he's not quite as much of a jerk as you thought he was."

Bratty little brother! Quoting her own words back at her. "Maybe not," she admitted. Changing the subject, she asked, "So why did you call last night? Anything special?"

He laughed, obviously not fooled for a second by her motive for asking. "I was reminding you about Thanksgiving dinner. Marian's friends are all going away, so it'll just be you, me, Marian, and Bill."

"Bill!"

"Yeah, Bill. Unless he's got plans already." He said it with certainty, like of course Bill belonged in their little family unit.

Okay, well, inviting him to Thanksgiving dinner didn't have to mean that. It could mean that if he happened to be available, he was being offered a good meal. "I don't know. I'll see."

"Tell him we really want him to come. Marian would like to meet him and I want to show him some of my paintings." Of course he did. Neal had really looked up to Bill when he knew him before. It was only natural he'd be anxious to impress him with his skills now - especially since Dad and Nathan were so clueless about his art.

"I will," she promised.

For Neal's sake, not her own.

**

"This road goes straight up!" Bill commented as he downshifted. He wouldn't want Nik to know it, but he was glad to have a chance to test his car's acceleration like this. Driving around Beaverton and Tigard was more of an exercise in dealing with traffic than a chance to see what his car would do.

"Wait until you see the hairpin turns farther up the mountain," she said, and he knew she was grinning from her tone of voice.

This was fun. The road looked to be ascending at about a forty-five degree angle, but he knew that wasn't likely. It was dead-straight for at least the next mile, though, and there wasn't anybody on the road in front of him. He could downshift and floor the accelerator all he wanted.

A couple of minutes later, she said, "I wouldn't want to have to drive down these roads when there's snow and ice, but Neal doesn't mind. Of course, he's driving a 4-wheel job with high clearance and anti-lock brakes, but still..."

Before he had a chance to answer her, the road disappeared around a steep curve. He followed the road to his right, then to the left, to the left again, and finally an even sharper right, all within a distance of a few hundred yards. They were still ascending the mountain, but thankfully at a more gradual pace than before. "Wow! That must be the hairpin turn you mentioned."

"The first of two," she said. "The next one's the real doozy." After about a mile, the road started getting noticeably steeper. "You'll want to watch it up here. It's just a single turn, but it's sharp and the road is angled and narrow, and the ditch on this side isn't very good. Plus, you might meet somebody coming down, and neither of you would know it until you're practically on top of each other."

He slowed down and was immediately glad that he had. The turn was just as impressive as Nik said, and

his lane seemed abnormally narrow. As soon as he'd made the corner, he had to downshift and accelerate sharply to keep his momentum going. Why would anyone want to live somewhere so difficult to get to?

He had a partial answer in a minute or so, when he glanced off to the left and saw Mt Hood in all its glory. Its perfect white cone shape perched on a lower ridge of mountains, and it looked nearly close enough to touch. "Great view," he commented.

"Wait until you see it from Marian's. Rainier's even visible some days." Mt Rainier was many miles north of Portland, most of the way to Seattle.

The road took two more of its sudden turns, one to the right and the next to the left, and then it appeared like they were driving on the edge of a cliff. Just past the edge of Nik's side of the car, there was nothing. He craned his neck and saw a steep drop-off dotted with tree stumps. He slowed down a little out of self-preservation.

"Turn left up there where you see the mailboxes on the right." He drove up the driveway, mildly surprised to find it paved. "Take the first driveway, up at the top of the hill." That one wasn't paved, and gravel crunched under his wheels. "Park anywhere here at the end." He found room between the two big SUVs beside the house.

The house was a log cabin - a huge one, from its looks, and made from real logs. The air was clear and significantly colder than it had been when they left Nik's. It was breezier, too, and a glance to his right told him why. They were on top of this mountain, with only a few incredibly tall and fragile-seeming fir trees between them and whatever weather system might be moving in. It was quiet here, too, so much so that there might be no humans around for miles.

But then the front door opened and Neal came rushing out. "How'd you like the drive up here? And isn't this the greatest place?" His questions were addressed to Bill, but he didn't seem to expect a response. "Come on in and meet Marian."

The inside was a jolt, although it shouldn't have been. If the outside was a log cabin, the inside would logically be the same. Still, all the warm honey-colored wood was overwhelming. Not only were the outside walls made of logs, but nearly everything else was wood, too. The main part of the cabin was two stories high, with the ceiling simply the inside of the cabin's peaked roof. It was paneled with wood, as was the lower ceiling in the kitchen area at the far end of the living room. And overhead were two loft areas, connected by a walkway, and all of that was exposed wood, too.

He followed Neal to the kitchen, his eyes still so overloaded he barely noticed the person he was being taken to meet. But then she looked up from something she was stirring on the stove, and he was shocked all over again. Marian was old! When Neal had said she was older, Bill had figured mid-thirties, maybe as much as forty, but certainly not fifty or sixty like she appeared. She wasn't attractive, either - almost mannish in looks and clothing, and nothing that resembled a normal shape.

She smiled then and offered her hand, and Neal sidled up next to her and slipped his arm around her, grinning happily. Was Neal a great actor, or did he really think she was something special?

**

Nik never knew whether Neal was putting on a show of caring about Marian in front of her. She could understand him feeling grateful to her - in addition to everything else, he was meeting important people in the local art scene thanks to her. But hugging her and touching her and gazing fondly at her - all in the same incredibly natural way he did everything - that wasn't gratitude. It was a lot like how Bill acted with

her, in fact.

Marian had a way of making people feel comfortable with her, though. After less than five minutes, she'd worked her magic on Bill. Nik had seen her do it time and again, and all she could figure was that Marian didn't seem like a threat to anybody. She was simply warm and open and friendly, without being the slightest bit intrusive. She turned now and gave Neal a soft smile. "Sweetie, why don't you show off your paintings while I finish getting dinner ready?"

"Don't you need help?" he asked, but from the way his eyes were shining, Nik knew how eager he was.

"I'll help Marian while you take Bill upstairs," Nik volunteered. At Neal's surprised look, she added, "I'm feeling really good today." She'd been feeling really good for a while now, and she was starting to worry a little, in fact. It wasn't natural to be good for so long at a stretch.

"I'd like to see your work," Bill said and they started upstairs.

"Be sure to show him the one you're working on," Marian called up to him. To Nik, she said, "I think it's his best yet. I'm eager for him to finish it so I can show it to a few of my friends. He's going to start selling regularly before long - but don't tell him I said that. I don't want to get his hopes up."

Her stomach felt fluttery. "He's doing well, then. I'm so pleased."

Marian gave her an understanding smile. "I know you worry about him - and about us. But you don't need to. He's going to be a wonderful artist, and I'm just glad I could help him get started." Her voice caught and she muttered, "Damn allergies."

Nik waited a few seconds before asking, "What can I do to help?"

"Nothing, really. I'm just finishing up the gravy, and everything else's ready for the table." She worked quietly for a couple of minutes, then said quietly, "Be sure to ask how that cloud picture turned out - you know the one I mean?"

"The one with the valley full of clouds, and the sunny day up here? Did it turn out well?"

Marian smiled secretively. "You'll have to ask Neal."

Only by exerting her self-control to the max - difficult while simultaneously stuffing her face with turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, gravy, and a dozen other wonderful dishes - was she able to wait until dessert to ask. "Say, Neal, how did that cloud picture turn out?"

He grinned - literally - from ear to ear. "Great! One of Marian's friends was over and he bought it! Marian made him pay \$500!"

Nik's heart lurched with pride. "That's great, Neal!"

**

Bill loved it when Nik lay pliant and languid in his arms like this. It only happened after lovemaking, the kind that started deceptively relaxed and ended with the urgency and power of a freight train at full speed.

The moment was shattered by the shrill of the phone. Nik reached to answer it, but he didn't let go of her entirely. "H'lo?" She listened, then said, "Hi, Neal. No, I wasn't sleeping." Another pause and she laughed. "Never mind what I was doing, little brother! What's on your mind?"

While she listened that time, Bill took the opportunity to kiss her neck just below her earlobe. She tensed, and he knew she was trying to ignore the kiss, so he used his tongue to intensify the sensation. She turned her head, but he moved with her. Her voice wasn't quite natural when she answered Neal. "I don't know. I'll check with Bill and get back to you." She put her free hand on his head and shoved ineffectually, then in response to something Neal said, she said, "Oh, all right. Hold on."

She carefully muffled the receiver under the covers and asked, "Stop molesting me for a minute, will you? Neal and Marian want us to go there for dinner again tonight - there's tons of leftovers, plus Neal forgot to make Grandma's scalloped oysters for yesterday, so we'd have those, too."

He moved his head away from her neck a few inches. "It's okay with me, but can you eat that rich food again so soon?"

She made a face and shrugged. "I probably shouldn't, but I want to."

He grinned, happy that she was willing to admit to him that she was human. "Then we'll go."

She picked up the phone happily and made arrangements about what time dinner would be. When she hung up, he asked, "Should I interpret the fact that we're having oysters for dinner as dissatisfaction with my performance recently?"

It took her a few seconds to make the connection between oysters and aphrodisiacs, but when she did, her eyebrows soared. "No way! In fact, maybe you shouldn't eat any of them!"

He wasn't particularly crazy about oysters, but shook his head anyway. "I'll have to try them at least. They must be something special, if Neal's forgetting them is a big deal."

She smiled, looking a little embarrassed. "We like them, but not everyone does. A lot of it's tradition - Grandma always made them when she came for Thanksgiving dinner."

"Was that the grandmother who owned this house?"

"Yeah. Mom's mom. Besides us visiting her summers, she'd come for a week both Thanksgiving and Christmas. If it wasn't for her, we would have ended up eating dinner out until I got big enough to cook."

He felt a pang of sympathy, even though in his family, dinner out would have been an incomprehensible treat. "Your dad isn't much of a cook, then?"

She grinned momentarily. "You're right. He tried, but it was a big relief to him when I got old enough to take over the house and all that. Neal helped a lot - in fact, until I got to know you again, he was the most domesticated guy I knew."

He growled playfully and nipped her shoulder. "Here I spend years learning how to drive women wild in bed, and all you can say about me is that I'm more domesticated than your little brother?"

She rapped his nose firmly. "No biting! We're going out for dinner, remember - and if you're good, maybe I'll give you a chance to remind me of some of your other good qualities later."

"*Maybe* you will? Well, *maybe* I'll oblige you." He settled her back into a loose embrace, deciding to take advantage of the fact that she seemed willing to talk about the past. "How'd you end up coming to Portland after college? To live with your grandmother?"

She shook her head. "I didn't live with her. I guess maybe it was partly because she was here, though. I had job offers up in Seattle, too, but I thought Oregon was less overwhelming, and I liked the way there's

open land so close to the city. I thought I might eventually want to live out in the country, and it seemed neat that I could still be close to work." She glanced toward the window, and he knew she was thinking about the thousands of other people that lived almost next-door to her.

"Did you ever end up doing that - live out in the country like Neal and Marian?"

"No, and seeing the reality of it, I'm glad. I lived in a couple of different apartments near DesignTek until about three years ago when Grandma had her stroke. I moved here when she was getting ready to get out of the hospital and couldn't live alone anymore. Then she left it to me when she died, and that was lucky because I couldn't go back where I'd come from."

Something about her tone of voice made him ask, "Why not?"

She sighed and shook her head, and he thought she wasn't going to answer. But after a little while, she said, "I was engaged to this guy I knew at work and we were sharing an apartment. He didn't like it when I moved out to help Grandma, and then after she died, I started getting sick. I didn't know it was fibro for a long time, in fact I thought I was just exhausted from everything that had happened. Things between us really fell apart then, and if it hadn't been for Neal, I don't know if I ever would have gotten back together."

Several missing pieces popped into place. "That's why you've been so sure a relationship with me wouldn't work."

She nodded unhappily. "You're way different than Allen, of course, but still..." She sucked in a deep breath and added, "And I know, for myself, what a strain it is to constantly need to take care of someone. Even though I loved Grandma very much, sometimes I just got so frustrated with having to help her all the time. And doing the same things, day after day after day, that she couldn't do for herself."

A completely serious answer was more than he could handle. Instead he quipped, "Then I have nothing to worry about. You need different amounts of help every day." That sounded overly flip, so he added, "Plus, you probably already had fibro then and didn't realize it."

She was unconvinced, but didn't seem any more inclined to discuss the subject further than he was. He moved so his lips were touching her ear and said softly, "I've got a special one-time offer for you, Nikolia."

"What is it?"

"A refresher course on why I'm more than just a domesticated guy." He slipped his hand in between their bodies and left it spread wide, right at her waistline. Not touching anything particularly erogenous, just hinting that he might.

"Oh, I know that," she said, the smile she was suppressing evident in her voice. "You're a world-class masseur, too. I'm pretty lucky."

"More than *pretty* lucky, Nikolia. You're damn lucky." He rolled her onto her back and began proving it to her. At an inopportune moment - from her point of view, that is - he paused and asked, "Don't you agree, Nikolia? You're damn lucky."

To his surprise, she shook her head at the same time as her body urged him to continue. "Uh-uh. Once isn't enough for damn lucky."

"Once? What are you talking about?" He stared at her.

"You said this was a one-time offer."

He had to laugh. "Okay, okay. I lied, just like they do on the ads. It's the everyday special."

She grinned up at him. "Then I'm damn lucky."

And so was he.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The minute she got email about the company Christmas party, Nik knew what would happen. Bill would want them to attend as a couple. Sure enough, he brought the subject up during dinner after a movie on Saturday. "Did you RSVP yet for the company party?"

She shook her head and glanced at the menu for a few seconds before answering. "Not yet. I'm not sure I'll go."

"But you have to! It'll be a great party - and everyone'll be there."

She closed her menu and set it on the table. "Parties are kind of tricky for me. It's always food that's bad for me, and I don't dare have more than one drink, and I don't dance anymore." All of that was true, and she'd sat quietly at more than her share of parties, counting the minutes until she could make a graceful exit.

"Plus, if you go, it means everyone will know we're together, and you're still not okay with that," he said flatly.

"I'm okay with that," she insisted, but even she could hear the tone in her voice that said she wasn't. She'd better try again before he called her on it. "Carolyn already knows, and she must have told Scott, and maybe other people, so it isn't a secret, anyway. The thing is that if we go together, you'll think you should stay with me, and that's not your style."

He looked at her seriously for a long time, and finally answered, "How about you let me decide what's my style and what isn't? Maybe I'll sit with you most of the time, maybe I won't, and maybe I'll get you out on the dance floor once or twice." The moment her head started to shake, he said, "Don't rule it out. Neal says you're healthier right now than you've been since you got sick."

She felt a jolt of realization. He was right. She certainly wasn't symptom-free, but she was doing well, day after day and week after week, and a not-insignificant amount of the credit for that belonged to Bill. She smiled and picked up her menu. "Okay. I'll sign up on Monday."

He stared at her for several seconds before his smile caught up with him. "Great!"

It was fun to catch him by surprise like that.

**

The party went fine, and a fair amount of the fun for Bill was in tracking when people noticed he and Nik were together, and how they reacted after they noticed. They got plenty of stares and he had questions flung at him every time he left Nik for a few minutes. He also saw a fair number of glares directed at Nik - some from women he'd dated, others from the ones he'd always thought of as groupies, and still others from the scandal-mongers.

The groupies were women like Abby, a sweet AA who'd work late day after day on a job for him and

then bring him a plate of cookies when it was done. He hated to admit it, but he'd never asked her out because he knew it would spell the end of that kind of treatment.

The scandal-mongers were led by Phyllis, and if he got extra-special treatment from the groupies, that was more than balanced by the way the scandal-mongers pretended not to notice when he needed help. They were too busy spreading rumors of his every move to get much done at work, anyway. Few of the rumors were true, and luckily they'd missed the juiciest scandal of all - the reason Scott and Carolyn both hated him.

He got along with most of the guys at work, and Nik was well-liked, so they still had plenty of people to socialize with. Phillip, a guy in his group who reminded him a little of Frankenstein's monster, asked Nik a question that Bill had been intending to ask for days. "What are you doing for the holidays?"

"Going to my brother and sister-in-law's in Eastern Washington."

"Just for Christmas, or New Year's, too?" Phillip asked.

"My other brother's doing the driving, but we'll probably come back a couple of days after Christmas." She glanced at Bill then - a little guiltily, he thought.

His suspicion was confirmed on the drive back to her house, when she said, "I meant to talk to you about Christmas before this. I hope you weren't expecting me to invite you home with us."

"Not really." The idea had occurred to him, but he'd known she wasn't ready for it.

She was watching his face, and apparently couldn't tell much from his reaction. "It sounds better than it really is, anyway. Nathan spends all his time at the University, and Dad hangs out with him and his old friends as much as he can. So Neal and I end up with Julie and the kids most of the time, and Julie's a real pain-in-the-neck. If you went with me, she'd be planning our wedding the whole time, and we both know that's never going to happen." Before he could respond - assuming he had a clue of how to respond to that - she rushed on, "Plus, she's the nosiest most intrusive person I've ever met. She'd have your deep dark kindergarten secrets dragged out of you by the time dinner was over the first day."

Not likely. "Don't worry about it. I'm not big on family deals like Christmas, anyway." That sounded wrong - grudging, and maybe like he thought it was stupid for her to care about those things, so he added, "Thanks for explaining, though." Then, determinedly changing the subject, he asked, "So, how many people asked about us tonight when I wasn't around?"

That brought a smile to her lips. "Only a few. I think a lot of people were too shocked to say anything."

"Or maybe they didn't think there was anything to explain," he suggested.

But even if he hadn't been the recipient of a dozen or more incredulous questions tonight, he'd know that wasn't the truth. People at A-W might be divided about a lot of issues, but they were united in one opinion - that a guy like Bill wasn't good enough for a woman like Nik.

He wished their acceptance and approval meant nothing to him, but after a lifetime of not being good enough, it meant much too much.

But he'd gladly live without it, if Nik alone truly accepted him.

**

Nik would never understand Bill. She could have sworn he'd want to go home with her at Christmas. He

might have stopped talking about the whole relationship thing, but that didn't mean that wasn't where his mind still was. For now, she hastened to remind herself. He'd get sick of her sooner or later, and she still expected it to be sooner.

But he'd sounded so unconcerned last night! As though going home with her at Christmas wasn't any more significant than - well, she couldn't think of anything that insignificant. And it *was* significant. If they were truly headed where it *seemed* like they were headed, she would have invited him. She'd have given him the choice of whether or not to go, whether or not to deal with her family.

What that proved, of course, was that their relationship wasn't what it seemed to be.

That realization made her much sadder than she had any right to be.

**

Bill went to Scott's office as soon as he got to work on Monday. "Say, Scott, I was wondering if we could make arrangements for my mother seeing Rachel."

Scott looked up from his desk. "Sure. When is she coming to town?"

"Probably for Christmas." While Nik was conveniently out of town. "What I thought is maybe Rachel could come over to my place for a while the day after Christmas, and we could do the whole gift thing without tying you up all day or anything." And without Scott meeting Ma.

Scott frowned and thought about the idea for a few seconds, then smiled and shook his head in embarrassment. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to act like you'll hurt her or something - I'm just being a typically overprotective father."

"You'd rather be there. I can see that." It would screw up his plans, but maybe he could get Ma to behave like a halfway normal person for the length of her visit with Rachel.

Scott shook his head again. "No. I was being ridiculous. It's not like you'll be taking her to the moon, after all."

He smiled. "No. Only a few blocks."

Scott nodded. "Okay, we'll plan on it, then. Give me a call that morning and we'll coordinate times."

"Great. I'll tell Ma." He should just shut up and leave, but he had to say, "I appreciate this, Scott. I haven't given you much reason to trust me."

Scott pressed his lips together, like he didn't want to have this conversation any more than Bill did. But then he said, "That's true long-term, but not recently. You've made a success of this promotion, and maybe I'm crazy, but I don't feel like you're out to get me anymore."

"I'm not. I -" Oh, what the heck. They'd gone this far. "I'm sorry for the things I did last summer. I had no business blackmailing you and Carolyn."

Scott's look was glum. "No, you didn't. And I have to say I'm sorry we caved in. All I was guilty of was trying to spare Francine's feelings, and I should have known that Seth would believe me about that."

Could Scott actually be saying what it sounded like? "You're saying you told him about you and Carolyn?"

He nodded. "Not until after your promotion, but yeah. Once I persuaded Carolyn to stay, I knew we

couldn't let you have that hanging over our heads forever. If Seth wouldn't accept the truth, we were prepared to go somewhere else and start over."

"You must have told him about the blackmail, too." Why hadn't Seth fired him?

"No." He paused, then admitted, "I didn't want him to know I'd knuckled under." With a shrug that looked more ashamed than casual, he added, "And I figured if I was cutting myself some slack on the deal, I could do the same for you." His eyes burned holes in Bill. "Don't expect me to do the same again."

Bill raised his hands between them. "No way. I -" He swallowed. "I'm grateful, and I - I'll never do anything like that again." Scott didn't appear to believe him, and after a few seconds, Bill began backing to the door. "I'll let you get back to work."

He passed by his own office, driven by something that felt like dread to Carolyn's, nevertheless hoping she wasn't there. She was, and she looked up and saw him lurking outside her door. "Were you looking for me?"

He nodded and stepped inside, shutting the door for privacy. There were too many other offices in the vicinity, and Carolyn's office wasn't designed for private conversations, like Scott's bigger corner office was. He licked his lips. "You never told Scott that I tried to blackmail you, did you?"

Her eyes went wide, and he remembered how obsessed he'd been by her back then. "I said you were threatening to cause trouble again. I didn't tell him what you wanted - he wouldn't have let it go, and I didn't want it to destroy the slim chance we had of making things work here." She sat up a little straighter and challenged him, "Anyway, you're no rapist. You wanted me in your bed willingly, and that wasn't going to happen."

No, not with Carolyn. He suddenly wondered if he'd ever truly thought it might. His obsession with her hadn't started until she'd been firmly allied with Scott against him. Before that, she'd been an attractive woman - although not at all his type - and he'd hit on her simply because that was what he did when he met an attractive woman.

"I didn't tell anyone else, either, in case you're wondering."

That brought him up short. When he'd thought about Nik finding out about the blackmail, it had been the job-for-silence threat he'd considered. Not sex-for-silence, although now that he thought about it, that was even worse.

Geez. Maybe the people at the party had a point. Maybe he didn't deserve to be with somebody like Nik.

"Bill? Are you all right?"

He shook off his stupor. He'd think about Nik another time. "I'm fine. Just - well, I told Scott earlier that I'm sorry for the whole blackmail thing, and I want to say the same thing to you. Only I guess it goes extra for you, because what I did to you was reprehensible."

She shook her head. "It's not a matter of degree, Bill. Both blackmail attempts were reprehensible, and I hope you're being honest when you say you're sorry. But the fact of the matter is that the damage is done. Scott's never going to feel quite as sure of his integrity as he was before this happened - and maybe that doesn't seem like much of a loss to you, but it is to a man like Scott."

She lowered her gaze and he saw her cheeks redden. "And I'll tell you something else, Bill. If you'd come

to me with the card and picture instead of to the two of us, I'd have given you what you wanted, too. Because as much as Scott wants to believe he would have been okay starting over somewhere else without Rachel, he wouldn't have been the same person. I would have done anything to save him from that."

He felt blindsided by her vehemence. He wanted to defend himself, but what was there to say? She looked straight into his eyes and said, "But the past is over. You behave like a decent human being, and Scott and I will treat you likewise. You try to cause us problems, and all bets are off."

"No problems. I swear."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Nik missed Bill all during her shower. That was silly since he was less than ten feet away in the bedroom. But it wasn't completely silly, because when she got up to shower Sunday morning, it signified that their weekend together was over. It would be after Christmas before she'd see him again.

But it was more than the upcoming separation that made her uneasy. It was that something had changed in their relationship recently. Things had been fine - great, even - at Thanksgiving, and for at least a week after that. But since then, it seemed like he wasn't quite as much right there with her in the moment. Sex was still good, so it wasn't their chemistry wearing off.

More likely, he was getting tired of being with her. It had to wear thin for him, always having to worry about what she could or couldn't do. He might even have his eye on a new woman he wanted. Hey - maybe that was why he hadn't minded not being invited to go home with her!

She should have thought about this earlier in the weekend. She would have asked him straight-out, trusting that he wouldn't lie. She hadn't been ready to deal with the possibility of it being over, though. It had gotten too comfortable having him there every weekend, and spending Tuesday nights at his place. Being part of a couple was so much more fun than being alone.

Maybe she should talk to him now. She could skip church one Sunday, especially since the carol service was tonight and she'd be going to that. They could get it over with now, and if she was right, she had the trip home to come to terms with the new reality. No point in waiting, anyway. She wouldn't be able to really relax until she knew for sure.

She stepped out of the shower and one knee buckled. She sank to the carpeted floor and wrapped a towel around her body while she tried to catch her breath.

Breathe in, hold it, breathe out. Breathe in, hold - no, don't pant like that! In, hold, out. In, hold, out. Just think about breathing. Nothing else. Not about Bill -

She curled up tighter. She would make it. She'd known it would end someday. Today was better than next month. The longer it went on, the harder it would be to have it end.

Okay. Enough of this delaying the inevitable. She stood up, dried off quickly, and stepped back into the bedroom.

He sat cross-legged on the bed, facing her, looking more impossibly good-looking than ever. Before she could speak, he asked, "Is that thing at church tonight anything I could go to?"

After a moment of shock, she got her voice back and said, "Sure. Visitors are always welcome."

"Would you mind if I went with you?" He sounded unsure of her answer.

Why would he want to go? Church wasn't the kind of activity someone like Bill would choose to bring life to a dying relationship. Could it be that it wasn't dying, after all? "Not at all, if you're really interested. There's more singing than anything else, but it lasts close to two hours, and we'd have to get there early to get a parking space."

"That's okay," he said. "What time should we leave here?"

She thought back to last year. "Six-forty-five or a little later. We'll be real early, but I like to get a good seat."

"Okay. I'll come about six-thirty. I want to give you your Christmas present before we go."

Her Christmas present. He wouldn't be making a big deal out of giving her a Christmas present and offering to go to church with her if he was bored.

At least, she didn't think so.

**

Bill checked his hair and tie in the rearview mirror before getting out of the car. Church was important to Nik, and he wanted to show it the proper respect.

He greeted her with a simple kiss on the lips and a brief hug. This wasn't the time to demonstrate how powerful a kiss could be, not when it would be more than a week before they could do anything other than kiss.

They sat next to each other on the couch, and he slipped her present out of his pocket and handed it to her. He could barely breathe while she opened it, hoping she'd like it and at the same time, wishing that he'd been able to find something more special.

She took forever to unwrap it, and then paused before cracking open the jewelry box. Her mouth went slack for a moment, and he was afraid she hated it - or maybe it was sacrilegious. He hadn't thought of that before. Finally, she touched a finger to the cross and traced the loop of diamonds. "It's beautiful," she whispered.

"It made me think of you," he told her. He'd been in the jewelry store, wanting to buy her something but not knowing what exactly. And then he saw this necklace and he knew.

She smiled and took it out of its box. "Help me put it on. I'll wear it tonight."

He fastened the chain around her neck. The cross hung in the perfect position, midway between her collar bone and her cleavage. She reached up and caressed the cross, then kissed him. "Thank you, Bill. I love it. And here's your gift." She handed him a rectangular package that had been on the floor next to the couch.

By the size and feel, he was pretty sure it was a picture of some nature, maybe one of Neal's. He didn't waste any time unwrapping it, and sure enough, that's what it was. The pen-and-ink drawing of Nik he'd admired when Neal gave him the grand tour last month.

Nik squealed, "That's not the right picture! I wanted the sketch for his cloud painting!" She started off the couch toward the phone, but Bill snagged her arm.

"Don't be upset," he said, then pulled her onto his lap. "I'd much rather have this drawing than the other one, and I'm sure Neal knows it."

She stared at him disbelievingly. "You can't. That other sketch is wonderful, and this - this is just -"

"It's an extremely well-done picture of his sister, who he dearly loves." He paused, all the moisture gone from his mouth.

The words were right there, on the tip of his tongue. But he couldn't say them. She didn't want him to feel that way and would never return his feelings.

He didn't deserve her to, either. Where he came from and what his family was like was bad enough. But it wasn't just that anymore. He'd proven that everyone had always been right - blood tells.

He and George were tons smarter than their old man, but still they'd learned plenty from him. They'd learned to use and abuse people, and to bully their way to what they wanted, no matter who they hurt. George had systematically destroyed the little self-confidence Francine had ever developed, and he would have done the same to Rachel if he'd lived.

Bill had always held his older brother in contempt for his behavior. He'd been sure that he wouldn't hurt another human being ever, for any reason. He'd been wrong.

And because of that, he couldn't say the simple words that were clogging his throat.

He couldn't tell Nik that he loved her.

**

Nik waited longer than she should have. Bill had almost said something more, and she'd waited, half-hoping and half-dreading that he would. Because if he'd said it, she was sure it would be telling her that he loved her.

He did. She was sure of it - well, at least she was when she wasn't sure he was sick of her and about to dump her. He wouldn't have bought her an expensive gift if he was bored, would he? And he certainly wouldn't have been so thrilled with that sketch of her.

Except love wasn't a word in Bill's vocabulary, and it shouldn't be one in hers, either. She seized on Neal's trickery for something to talk about. "That Neal! I should have known he was pulling a switch when he offered to wrap your present - when he was in high school, he'd bake all the Christmas cookies in exchange for me wrapping his gifts to people."

Bill smiled vaguely, and she could tell he wasn't listening to her. He wasn't really looking at the picture, either, although a casual observer might think he was. What was going on inside his brain?

Something about his inward focus made her uncomfortable, so she glanced away and caught a glimpse of the clock on the mantel. Relief! "It's time to go."

Her words penetrated, and he nodded. They walked out to his car hand-in-hand.

**

Choral music soared into the rafters of the modern church and filled the hollow in Bill's stomach. The hollow where Nik ought to belong.

The hollow didn't hurt so much now. Maybe it was the music, maybe it was something else. In any case,

he could sit here and listen to the music and the occasional reading from the gospel, and he could feel at peace.

This church service certainly wasn't the ordeal he'd prepared himself for. It seemed to have nothing in common with the fire-and-brimstone preaching at the church Pop had marched him and George into every Sunday of their youth. This was nicely-dressed middle-class people gathered together because they wanted to be here, not laborers dressed in ill-fitting and worn Sunday-best clothes, at church only because they were afraid of Hell.

And even though each family or single person sat slightly apart from each other, they still were somehow part of the larger group, and tonight the group exuded a warmth deeper than that of combined body heat.

He could see why Nik might want to come here every week. Maybe he could come here, too.

**

Nik hadn't been home more than a few hours before Julie cornered her in the kitchen. Actually, why she still thought of it as home was a mystery. This was Nathan and Julie's house now, and any resemblance to the home of her childhood was rapidly disappearing.

"I haven't gotten a good look at that necklace you keep playing with," Julie stated as she reached for it, knowing full well that Nik didn't like being touched indiscriminately. "Oh, that's sweet."

Sweet? What a stupid word to use. "I think it's beautiful."

Julie nodded in the way that always seemed insincere and said, "All those diamonds must have been expensive."

By Julie's rules, that meant that Nik was now supposed to spill her guts - either tell what a bargain it had been, or that she'd fallen in love with it and couldn't resist it despite the price, or explain who had given it to her and why. Nik wouldn't be overtly rude, but she also wasn't going to discuss her love life with her gossipy sister-in-law. "I suppose so. By the way, I noticed that Nathan seemed a little distracted during dinner. I hope nothing's wrong at the University."

Julie wagged her finger in Nik's face. "Don't go trying to change the subject. I'll bet that new boyfriend of yours gave it to you."

"What new boyfriend?" How had she found out?

"Nik," she scolded gently. "Did you really think that Neal could keep his mouth shut about something as important as that?" She inclined her head and continued, "Now, I admit he's not exactly forthcoming about the subject, but he slipped up when he told Nathan about Thanksgiving dinner."

Oh, no. "What did he say?" Please, nothing about her knowing Bill back at school.

"Never mind," Julie smiled maliciously. "But I want to know all about him - and whether other diamonds are in your future."

"I told you that I can't get married and have kids," she said, a little desperately.

Julie rolled her eyes. "Because of that condition of yours. I know. But you also said you didn't have the time or energy to date, and apparently you're managing that. It's like I said all along - if you really want to do something, you'll find you're able to."

She patted Nik's arm in a way she might actually think was comforting. "It's all right, Nik dear, I know it was hard for you to get over losing Allen. We understood that was why you had to make up that whole thing about having some disease, rather than to admit you did something to make him not love you anymore. But you're ready to move past that now, and I know Nathan and your father are as glad of that as I am. I'll make us a nice cup of tea, and you can tell me all about this new man of yours." She bustled to the stove and turned on the burner.

Nik took the opportunity to escape to the doorway. "There's nothing much to tell. He's very nice and we're having a good time together, but he's no more interested in getting married than I am. Now, if you'll excuse me, I promised the girls I'd read them their bedtime story."

Julie shook her head sadly. "Nik, Nik, Nik, what will we do with you? I thought you'd learned not to waste your time on men like that." Her mothering attitude waged war and lost against her urge to needle. "The mess with that boy at school - and was it ice cream? Such a shame."

Nik ducked around the corner into the hallway, unable and unwilling to respond. How did Julie know about that? And just how much did she know?

**

Nik lasted until after Christmas dinner, but she finally approached Julie. "Um, Julie, could I ask you something?"

She was elbow-deep in soapy water with half a dozen pots and pans still waiting to be washed. "Sure - but grab a towel and wipe some of those dishes while you ask. Sometimes I think this family considers me an indentured servant."

The barb was meant more for the absent Nathan than for her, but still Nik was stung. "I'm sorry. I should have been helping more."

Julie sighed, martyr-like. "Don't worry about it. What did you want to ask? Do you want some help with that man who's giving you trouble?"

Bill wasn't giving her trouble for the reason that Julie thought, but Nik simply said, "No, not that. It's just that I was wondering about what you said the other day - about what happened when I was at the University."

"Yes? Well, I for one was proud of you for doing it. Men like that deserve to be taught a lesson."

She hated having to ask, but she might as well get on with it. "What I was wondering is how you knew about it. I didn't tell anyone."

Julie chuckled. "That didn't mean it was a secret, you know. Do you remember Sandy? She and I roomed together while Nathan was getting his doctorate." Nik nodded. "Well, at the time, she was going out with a grad student who was a counselor in the dorm where that boy lived. He didn't get involved directly, of course, but nevertheless he heard all about it. And I suppose he recognized your name because he knew I was dating Nathan."

"Did you tell Nathan?" She didn't think she would have avoided a lecture from her stuffy brother, if he'd known, but it also seemed unlikely that Julie would have kept something like that secret from him.

Julie's hand snaked out from the suds and squeezed Nik's arm. "Of course not, Nik. A girl needs a few secrets." She sighed. "But if I'd had any idea you hadn't learned your lesson -"

Neal burst into the room. "There you are, Nik. Look, Marian just called - I have to get up to Vancouver Island right away! There's a gallery that wants to show some of my paintings!"

"That's great! When do we leave?"

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"Remember, Ma. No smoking inside, and if you smoke out on the patio, use the ashtray."

"Sure, Billy." She stood in the middle of the living room, gazing around like she was in a museum. "This is really your place? *My* Billy lives in a palace?"

"Come on, Ma. You've been here before." Except he guessed she hadn't been. He always made her stay in a motel - a decent- enough place, but not the suites place close by where they might run into someone he knew. He'd picked her up there and taken her to dinner at one of those cafeteria-style all-you-eat buffets that she thought were so great, and later to Francine's to see Rachel. He hadn't been about to let her loose where he lived - still wasn't, for that matter. He'd keep a close eye on her today, too.

She was touching his stereo cabinet now, getting fingerprints all over the shiny black laminate. Oh well, Rachel would be here later, and she'd make a mess, too. Ma said, "This is like somebody on my soap has - you know, the guy who -"

He cut her off. "No, I don't, Ma. I keep telling you, I don't watch soaps."

She turned to face him, obviously sorry for all he was missing. "You could tape them and watch them after work. I skip over all the commercials, and it goes real quick."

"I know, Ma. Remember, I'm the one who showed you how." He dropped the subject as pointless. "Now, when I go for Rachel, I'll get a pizza to bake, and I've got pop and milk for her to drink. Her presents are under the tree over there -" He gestured at the metal tree sculpture he'd bought specially for the purpose.

"That's not a Christmas tree! You shoulda got a real tree, and lights, and bunches of big shiny balls."

"Did you see that on your soap, too?" Because it sure as heck didn't have any relation to any Christmas he remembered from when he was a kid.

Her already-pasty face got more pale, and tears jumped into her eyes. "Oh, Billy. I wanted us to have Christmas, really I did. There just was never any money, and your old man didn't like wasting what little there was -"

"Not on us, anyway. He liked getting drunk just fine."

She sprang to Pop's defense - big surprise. "He had a hard life. You don't know what it's like, doing heavy labor your whole life like he did. He didn't have the advantages you and George had - he had to support his sisters and his mother from the time he was eleven."

He knew better than to argue with her, but he couldn't help himself today. "Did he have scars and broken bones from being beaten every damn week of his life?"

She drew herself up to her full height and fired back at him, "He never broke your bones!"

"He broke yours, Ma - and don't lie to me. I was there!"

He saw her shrink into her shell, like she used to do when Pop started one of his tirades. "Geez, Ma, I'm sorry." He reached his hand out to touch her, and she shrank into herself even more. *Like she thought he was going to hit her.* "I won't hurt you, Ma."

It took her a few seconds, but she finally managed, "No, of course not, Billy. I knew that." And she smiled in that pathetic way she'd smiled at Pop, when she was trying to pretend that everything was okay.

Except that everything hadn't been okay then, and it wasn't okay now, either.

**

Nik slept for a few hours after Neal dropped her off. She'd tried to sleep in the car, but that didn't work too well under the best of circumstances. With Neal so excited he was practically bouncing, it was hopeless.

She was excited for him, too. The gallery owner liked the two pictures Marian had taken with her, but wanted to see more in order to choose the ones his patrons would be most likely to buy. So, after he dropped her off, Neal was headed to Marian's house to load the rest of them into his SUV, and then he'd drive to Canada. Marian was expecting him tonight, and they had an appointment at the gallery tomorrow morning.

They'd left Nathan's Christmas evening, a full day-and-a-half early. Even without the exciting news, they'd been ready to get out of there. They both found it difficult to deal with the chaos that Nathan and Julie's two little girls caused, and it seemed like every time they visited, Nathan and Julie were less and less of a couple. The tension level made the visit not much fun anymore.

Nik was anxious to see Bill again, too. She still didn't know how to interpret his behavior before she left, and she hoped the separation had made things clearer, one way or the other.

When she woke early in the afternoon, she almost picked up the phone and called him. But she decided that she really needed to see him face-to-face, so she showered and ate lunch before driving to his apartment. If he wasn't there, she'd look for his car at the office, and if she struck out there, too, she'd go grocery shopping.

She didn't strike out, at least not exactly. The door was answered promptly, by a very weathered middle-aged woman. "Billy's not here," she announced flatly.

Who was this woman? Definitely not Nik's replacement. Maybe the cleaning lady? "Do you know when he'll be back?"

She shrugged. "Soon. He just went to take Rachel home." She stepped away from the door. "You wanna wait? I likta meet my boy's friends."

Oh. This was Bill's *mother*. Hardly the type of person she'd imagined all this time, what with the tobacco haze hovering around her and her discount-store wardrobe. She smiled and stepped inside. "Thanks, I will. My name's Nik Harding, and I'm very pleased to meet you, Mrs. Adams." She offered her hand, and after a moment, Bill's mother shook it.

"You Billy's girlfriend?" she demanded.

"Yes."

"Billy's a good boy, and generous. He treats you good, I bet."

"Yes, he does. You must be very proud of him." Nik felt like she was in the funhouse at the carnival, where nothing was the way it should be.

The other woman grinned. "Like I say, he's a good boy. He didn't take after his old man a bit - not like my other boy. You didn't never know George, did ya? He was smart as a whip, just like Billy, but he was *mean*, too, like his old man. My little grandbaby's lucky he died when he did."

What a strange comment to make to a stranger! Nik didn't know how to respond, and looked around the room, hoping for inspiration. "Oh, what an interesting sculpture - Bill must have just gotten it." She crossed to the table where the metal tree stood.

"He calls it a Christmas tree," his mother said in disgust.

It was hardly a normal Christmas tree, but it fit in this ultra-modern and impersonal apartment. "It is an unusual choice," Nik agreed. Well, no point being the one doing all the answering. This might be her only chance to find out anything about Bill's life before she'd met him. "It's nice that you could come into town for Christmas. Do you still live near Tri-Cities?"

"Yeah. Billy don't come home often, but he's good about helping me out with things." Things most likely meaning bills. "His old man left me kinda laid up, so I can't work many hours." Nik purposefully closed her mind to the implications of that statement, especially when coupled with the comment about him being mean.

Mrs. Adams let out a hacking cough that wouldn't let up. Finally, she wheezed to a stop and looked at Nik. "You know where Billy keeps his booze? It's the only thing that helps my cough."

"I'll look," she offered. She started in the kitchen, having a vague memory that she'd seen some bottles in a cupboard somewhere out there. While she was poking around, she heard the apartment door open.

"Look, Ma, I'm sorry about earlier. I shouldn't have yelled at you. I just -" He broke off, and she could tell from his voice that he'd decided to change the subject. "How about I buy you a nice steak dinner tonight to make up for it?"

"I know you didn't mean it, Billy, but I won't turn down steak. Your girlie can go with us."

She hadn't intended to hide, but the conversation between Bill and his mother had been too interesting to miss. She stepped around the corner into the living room. "Hi, Bill."

He gaped at her. That was the only word for it, and it wasn't an attractive way to be greeted by one's lover. Horrified shock appeared to be his dominant reaction, not the pleased surprise she'd been hoping for. "Nik," he said, weakly, a bit like he was a fish, flailing on the dock, trying desperately to breathe.

This wasn't good.

**

Bill couldn't take this. Especially not now. Nik meeting Ma was unthinkable - except it had already happened.

Maybe she'd just gotten here and didn't know yet what Ma was like. He'd only been gone - what - maybe twenty minutes? Certainly not more than that. They couldn't have had time to do more than say hi.

Ma started hacking again, and he stopped himself before telling her - again - not to smoke so much.

When she stopped coughing, she said, "Tell the girlie where your booze is. I need some for my cough."

Correction. They'd had way too much time together already. He hurried toward the kitchen. "I'll get it, Ma. I'm sure Nik's got better things to do than wait on you." How could he get rid of Nik politely, before any *more* damage was done?

"I don't mind," Nik said. "I'm really glad I got back early. I didn't realize your mom was coming for Christmas."

"Yeah, I -" He stopped himself before lying to her, fumbling around in the cupboard longer than necessary to give himself an excuse for not finishing the sentence. He brought out a bottle of whiskey, poured a little into a glass, and handed it to Ma across the breakfast bar. "Here you go, Ma. Take it easy, though. It's -"

Ma tossed it back like he'd seen Pop do. He hoped she'd choke on it and make Nik think she wasn't used to hard liquor, but no such luck. "Nice hooch. Hit me again, Billy."

Oh, geez. Could this get any worse? As he poured another shot into her glass, he got an idea. If he left Ma and the bottle here, he could go into the living room and Nik would follow him. Then she wouldn't see how much Ma drank.

He modified the plan partway to where Nik was standing, and included a big hug. She liked that a lot, but he could tell that his kiss wasn't up to snuff, so he gave up on that. He left his arms loosely around her body - with his body conveniently blocking her view of Ma - and said, "I'm glad you're back." Well, that wasn't a complete lie. He'd been missing her horribly. "What happened to change your plans?"

She grinned. "Marian called yesterday, and a gallery up on Vancouver Island wants to feature a few of Neal's paintings. He had to come back to pick up more of his canvases and then drive up there for a meeting tomorrow morning."

"That's great." He wished he could really pay attention to what that meant, but he couldn't. Getting Nik and Ma separated permanently was much more critical.

Nik pressed in close, and by reflex, he drew her even closer. Damn, he'd missed the way she felt, up against him like this. She murmured softly, "I kind of thought we could have a nice little reunion today, but I guess you're tied up with your mom." She said it more like a question than a statement, making it clear that she hoped he'd say she was welcome to stay.

"Yeah, I am. It's too bad." He said it flatly, so she'd know he wouldn't change his mind.

She was clearly disappointed. "When does she leave?"

"Tomorrow, I think." Tomorrow, he *knew*, because he'd go crazy if he had to put up with Ma any longer. But it was going to take him some time to put himself back together after this visit - and some time to figure out how to deal with Nik knowing about Ma.

She smiled tightly and asked, "Are you going in to work tomorrow?"

"Yeah." Then he realized to add, "Unless she's still here and wants to go somewhere or something." Like that would happen - or like he'd take her shopping or sightseeing if she wanted to go.

"Okay. If you're there, I'll stop by your office."

He nodded. "That would be good." Because he really was glad she was back, he hugged her again, long

enough that his body started getting way too many ideas about what he should do next.

She buried her face in his chest for a few seconds, then stepped out of his arms. "It was nice to meet you, Mrs. Adams. Have a nice visit with Bill."

Ma swung her head around toward Nik, and Bill could tell she was half-hammered already. "You leaving, girlie? I thought we was goin' for steak."

Bill responded quickly, knowing Ma might get belligerent otherwise. "I'll take you for steak, Ma. But Nik's got other plans."

Nik gave him a funny look, but he pretended not to notice. She obviously didn't understand about dealing with drunks.

In fact, she didn't know a damn thing about his kind of life, and she never would.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Nik went grocery shopping and started a pot of soup. She'd been eating too much rich food this week, so she planned to emphasize fruits and vegetables for a while.

She wouldn't even think about Bill. It was perfectly understandable that he'd want to spend time alone with his mother, and she wouldn't translate that into any sort of comment on the nature of their relationship.

Besides, she'd probably get to see him tomorrow, and that was as soon as she'd expected. She'd use her time this afternoon and evening to get back into her regular exercise program. Even if she'd had the time while at Nathan's, there wasn't a place where she could exercise, and the house never quieted down enough for meditation except in the middle of the night. She'd go to bed early, too - she never slept well away from home, and especially not with Julie in the vicinity. She was so definite about Nik's fibro being a figment of her imagination that Nik typically ended up awake for hours in the middle of the night, wondering if that was possible.

But after her healthy dinner consisting of vegetable soup, fresh fruit, and plenty of ice cold water, Nik found herself doing something she hadn't done in months.

She sought the comfort of chocolate.

**

Bill took Ma over to the eastside of town for the steak dinner he'd promised. He couldn't run the risk of somebody he knew seeing them. Although, why should that matter anymore? The most important person in his life had not only *seen* Ma, but gotten up-close-and-personal with her.

Ma wouldn't let up on talking about Nik, either. What kind of name was Nik for a girl? Was she a hoity-toity rich girl like George had married? What other plans for dinner had she had that she couldn't change? And last but not least, why hadn't Bill persuaded her to stay longer and chat? Didn't he know that Ma wanted to get to know his girlfriend?

That last question - more like a demand - was more than he could tolerate. They were in the car after dinner, and almost all the way to Ma's motel. He seethed silently until they pulled into the parking lot, reminding himself over and over that Ma was pathetic and old before her time - and that he'd hate himself if he lost his temper with her twice in one day.

None of it helped, and when he parked, he turned off the engine and faced her. "You know why I didn't ask Nik to go to dinner with us, Ma? Because you're a lush, you smoke like a chimney, you talk like a kindergarten dropout, and I don't want anyone to know I'm related to you!"

Ma's mouth dropped open and he just knew he was in for a doozy of a crying jag. Eventually, he'd write her an extra check to soothe her hurt feelings, but he'd still feel guilty for weeks.

But she didn't start crying. She didn't say anything. She sat there, stricken, for a long few seconds, then simply got out of the car and walked into the main entrance of the motel.

Leaving him alone all night, feeling guilty for the way he'd treated both of the women in his life, but unable to do anything to fix either situation.

**

Nik restrained herself on Monday, waiting until early afternoon to check if Bill was in his office. The other building was virtually silent, and as she passed empty office after empty office, she realized why. Nearly all the developers and QA personnel must have taken the day off.

Bill hadn't. He was working away in his office, his back to the open door. She said, "Hi, Bill. I see you made it in. Your mom must have left."

He raised a hand in acknowledgment and typed for another fifteen or twenty seconds before turning around. "Yeah, she did." He looked and sounded very strange - as though he hadn't slept in days.

"Are you okay? You look exhausted." He was probably beyond the social niceties of inviting her to sit down, so she slipped into a chair.

He shrugged and sighed heavily. "I'm okay. My brain's pretty zapped, but all I need is a good night's sleep."

She wouldn't have expected entertaining his mother to rob him of that much sleep, especially when long nights of lovemaking had only seemed to energize him. But then, dealing with family baggage caused a different kind of fatigue, as she well knew. "I guess I'd better let you get caught up on your sleep tonight, then."

He sighed again, not meeting her eyes - and she suddenly realized that he hadn't met her eyes this whole conversation. "I'm sorry, Nik. I wouldn't be good company tonight."

She bit her tongue to keep from saying that she wasn't looking for good company. She was anxious to reconnect with the man who'd been her lover for close to three months. If he was worried about something, she'd be glad to help.

But he didn't want to hear that message, and she might as well take that as notice that their relationship wasn't what she'd grown to hope that it was.

**

Bill killed some time by going to the club for a workout after work, but eventually he had to go home. Once there, his guilt wouldn't let him alone, and he finally called Ma, half-hoping she was out getting drunk.

She wasn't. "H'lo?"

"Ma, it's Bill. I'm sorry about last night -"

"Ya meant it, din't ya?"

He wouldn't lie about it. "Pretty much, but -"

"Your brother gave me a whole buncha rules for when I went to his wedding that time. He picked out my clothes, and I wasn't allowed to say nothin' most of the time, and no booze or cigs. I figured it was just him being a pain in the ass like his old man - 'cept then I met his in-laws and I unnerstood." This was an amazingly-coherent speech for Ma. She usually lost track of her point before this. "That girlie of yours has parents like that, don't she?"

"Nik's father is a college professor," he admitted.

"See? I knew it!" She was triumphant. "You're a good boy, Billy, and your girlie's nice enough, but it's not good to pretend to be somebody you ain't."

"I'm not -" But he was. He pushed the thought away. "Anyway, Ma, I shouldn't have said that stuff last night, and I'm sorry. I'll send -" He heard Ma's doorbell in the background.

"Oops, my ride's here. I gotta go, but don't you worry about what you said. You're right about me bein' a lush, and that ain't no way to be." She hung up before he could ask what she meant and why she was getting a ride somewhere.

He thought about the revelation he'd just had. Of course he was pretending to be something he wasn't. He'd done the same thing ever since he went away to college. Some of the other freshman were from poor families. They'd talked about not having money and how if they hadn't gotten scholarships, they'd be scratching for jobs, just like their parents and most of their friends. Bill had been careful not to put himself in that same category, instead emulating the guys who had it made - the ones with looks and charm as well as bucks. He couldn't compete monetarily, but he'd discovered that didn't really matter in the insular world of the university. Fancy dates and expensive gifts weren't expected - having fun together and being a little daring were.

Daring was easy for him. Why not? His whole life had been lived on the edge, beyond the comprehension of the nice middle-class girls who lined up, wanting the package he was promoting. The dangerous-seeming guy who was in reality perfectly safe.

And he'd been safe for hundreds of women over the years - all except the ones who wanted more than he was offering. The ones who wanted an emotional relationship in addition to the physical one. The ones who thought that something was missing in his life that she alone could provide. Those women had gotten hurt when he hadn't been willing to get involved.

Now, finally, he was with Nik, and he felt a yearning for something more. He thought she felt the same way, but it was hard to know for sure. More than that, this whole thing about Ma's visit and the way he'd blackmailed Scott and Carolyn had been driving him crazy. He was so ashamed of where he was from and what he'd done that it was hard to enjoy being with Nik anymore - and unthinkable to try for the something more he really wanted.

But that was dumb. If what he had with Nik wasn't strong enough for her to accept the real him, there was no point in dragging things out.

He might as well learn to live without her now.

**

Nik faced a crisis after her sensible soup dinner. She'd eaten the last of her stash of chocolate last night and had forgotten to stop at the store for more on the way home. So, what to do? Drag herself out to the grocery store less than a mile away, or do without?

Do without was the right answer, of course. She'd eaten enough things that were bad for her at Nathan's to last a month. Anyway, chocolate was a crutch she ought to learn to live without.

Easier said than done. On a purely physiological basis, she knew that eating sweets and other rich foods primed her body to eat more of the same. Sugar, salt, and fats just plain tasted better to her right now than more healthy alternatives. If she stuck to her largely-vegetarian diet pretty religiously for a few weeks, she'd develop more of a taste for fruits and vegetables and would be better able to resist the other. Eating chocolate every night would slow that adaptation process significantly.

But the real reason she wanted the stupid chocolate bar wasn't physiological. It was psychological. If she couldn't have Bill here with her, pampering her and making her feel special, chocolate was the next best thing. Maybe even better in certain ways - after all, chocolate wasn't going to find another woman it would rather be with.

Not that she thought that the current problem with Bill had anything to do with another woman. He wouldn't be acting so strange if it did. He'd either tell her straight-out or he'd just stop seeing her.

And how was that different than what he was doing? She'd been back a day and a half now, and she'd gone to his apartment and then to his office. He hadn't come to see her, he hadn't called, and he hadn't given her more than the vaguest sign that he was glad to see her, much less that he had any intention of ever being with her again. This whole thing about his mother visiting was probably a red herring. She'd simply been a handy excuse to get Nik to leave yesterday.

She was *definitely* going to need chocolate to deal with this!

But when she passed the front door on the way to the garage, she saw Bill opening the gate and stepping into her small yard. She tried to keep her hopes down in the mud where they'd fallen, but she couldn't keep the smile off her face. He was here! She swung the door open. "Hi. I didn't expect to see you tonight."

He could have said something sweet, like that he couldn't sleep without holding her again. He didn't. He said, "We need to talk."

What awful words! He was warning her that something serious was going on, yet not giving her a clue as to what it was. Did they need to talk because he needed advice about something and trusted her opinion? Probably not. In her experience, people said "We need to talk" when relationships were broken or about to get broken.

So she'd been right earlier. They were through, and she guessed he was being nice by telling her to her face. Most women he dated didn't get that courtesy.

She'd deal with this maturely. After all, she'd known it would happen. She ought to be prepared. "Come in. We'll talk in the living room." She led the way and sat in her recliner. "So, what's up?"

"What's up?" he echoed, then seemed to realize what she was asking. "Um, well, it occurred to me that I was kind of rude to you when you stopped by yesterday and again today."

He was *rude* to her? This was what he meant by needing to *talk*? She'd dump that excuse into the trash can where it belonged. "That's okay. You weren't expecting me, and I know you don't see your mom

real often, so it's natural you'd want to spend as much time with her as you could."

He shook his head. "Not at all. I hate spending time with her." He sucked in a huge breath. "See, that's the thing. The reason I don't like being with her's the same reason I didn't invite you to go with us to dinner. I'm ashamed of her and I couldn't stand for you to see what she's really like. That's what I'm really like, too."

Bill, a pathetic victim of life?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Bill forced himself to sit right there, waiting for Nik to respond. He wasn't normally like this. Normally he didn't mind confrontation and was confident of his ability to come out on top. But not with Nik. She mattered too much, and this wasn't a war of words. This was life.

She frowned in what seemed like puzzlement and finally said, "I'm sure you *are* like your mother in some ways. I don't see much similarity, though, other than that you probably get your coloring from her. What about her is so upsetting?"

Oh, geez. She was going to be *polite* about it! "You saw her, Nik! You know what she is -" He hated to say the words, but he just knew she was going to make him do it. "She's white trash, plain and simple, and so was Pop. I'm their kid, and that makes me white trash, too."

She wrinkled up her forehead and nose and stared at him, but not like he was an animal at the zoo, the way the nice girls at home always had. "That's ridiculous. Labeling never does any good. You're a smart guy - you know that. You're who and what you make of yourself, just like everybody else. And maybe your mom's not as sophisticated as the Worthingtons, but everybody is different and has their own good points."

How the heck did she think she could get away with lecturing him about this crap? "Tell me, little miss professor's daughter, exactly what is so great about Ma? She's a lush, she talks like a caricature of a redneck hillbilly, and she'd have let Pop beat her to death rather than lift a hand in self-defense." They'd see what the little white bread princess thought about *that*!

She didn't react, damn it. She just came right back at him with, "She loves you, Bill. And she's proud of you. And if your father was as much of a jerk as it sounds like, then she must have been a pretty good mother. Because you didn't get to be the decent caring person that you are without someone helping you along the way. Maybe she didn't always make the right decisions - and maybe she still doesn't - but she's your mother and she deserves your love and respect."

"I know that! I take care of her - I've done it since I was fifteen. I got her a nice apartment and a new car when I started to make money, and I send her a check every month - usually two." She couldn't say that wasn't enough.

"You see her what - maybe once or twice a year? And when she comes to town, I'll bet you're careful not to let her meet anyone you know."

"She sees Rachel."

She acted like that wasn't important. "Well, of course - she's her grandmother." She paused and thought for a few seconds. "But that's not the real point here. The point is that you seem to think that because you come from a poor background, it makes you somehow inferior, and that's simply not true. If anything, it makes what you've done with your life even more impressive."

She undoubtedly intended that in a different way than he took it. "Oh, yeah, I've done great things. I've taken advantage of several hundred women, I've skated on my brother's reputation most of my career, and then I blackmailed my way into a promotion. All I need to do now is ruin your life, and I'll have a perfect record."

This whole talking deal was overrated. Nik couldn't possibly accept the real him, and nothing she said could convince him otherwise.

**

Nik wasn't going to let Bill make her lose her temper. She could tell that was what he was after. Something inside made him need confrontation - or was it distance? In all they'd shared so far, his background had been conspicuously missing, and now she might understand why.

She moved over to the sofa, within reach of him but not touching. "I have a question for you, Bill. Are you looking for a reason to stop seeing me?" She waited until his lips were forming a denial before adding, "Because you don't need an excuse."

He shook his head wildly. "No, that's not it! It's -"

She kept her voice calm, hoping he was rational enough to listen. "In that case, let's drop the dramatics and talk about what's really happening."

"What do you mean?" She had his attention, but she needed to make her point quickly.

Now, what did she want to say? "You reacting so strongly to me meeting your mother seems to indicate that you think I'll feel differently about you, now that I've met her. But I don't, other than to be pleased that you have a mother who cares about you. And like I said before, coming from a poor background isn't anything to feel ashamed about. Lots of people do, and anyone who'd judge you based on that isn't worth worrying about."

Words burst out of him. "It's not just that we were poor. That sucked, but a lot of people in that town were even poorer than us. It's -" His face was tight and his eyes huge and horrified. Suddenly, he grabbed her hand and said, "Come on. I'll show you."

He pulled her down the hall to the second bathroom, the one he used when he stayed over. He flicked on the lights, peeled down his slacks and briefs, and bent over. "See? See the scars?"

Her stomach tried to escape from her body, but she forced herself to look. The scars were there, plenty of them, small pale marks covering his buttocks and upper thighs. She hadn't noticed them before this, and that amazed her. When she steeled herself to touch a couple of them lightly, she discovered that they were hard and didn't feel at all like normal skin. "I see," she whispered, then tried to pull his pants back up.

He resisted for a couple of seconds, then stood and finished the job himself. "I don't think you really do," he said, facing her. "Pop got drunk at least once a week, and when he got home, he'd come after me first. And after he got warmed up on me, he'd move on to Ma. She's got scars all over her body, and some broken bones that didn't heal right because she wouldn't go to the doctor."

The horror was too much to let in all at once, so she focused on a probably-irrelevant point. "What about George? Didn't he get it, too?"

Bill made an unpleasant noise in the back of his throat. "Once in a while, if George did something that pissed off Pop. But not as a rule." His eyes narrowed and his face tightened even more. "That's why it

went on so long. I was too little to stop it, but George was bigger. I'd beg him to help me make Pop stop, and he'd say, 'If you don't want to get beaten, stop bugging Pop.' How could I? What I did wrong was to be born!"

She winced and threw her arms around him. His body tensed, but gradually relaxed, and eventually he wrapped his arms around her, too.

Finally, he continued, "The first year George was away at school, Pop was worse than before. He was having a hard time keeping a job, and he spent just about all he made on booze. Anyway, this one night, he was in a really foul mood, and I could tell that he was hurting Ma worse than usual. So I grabbed the sharpest knife we had in the kitchen, snuck up behind him, and held it to his throat. I made him stop, and I gave him five minutes to get out of the apartment. I said I'd kill him if he ever came back."

"That was really brave." She had to ask, but she wasn't sure she wanted to know. "Did he ever come back?"

He blew out a breath and stepped out of her embrace. "Not while I was there, but other times. I could always tell when he'd been there. Ma'd be all kind of giggly, and in a really good mood for a day or two." He shrugged and walked into the bedroom, where he stood staring out the window. "And when I went away to school, I didn't go home anymore and I'm sure she let him move back in."

"Was he still the same way?" Maybe Bill's threat had led to him reforming.

He almost laughed. "He never changed. He still beat her up whenever he felt like it. He'd be doing it today if he hadn't choked on his own puke my junior year at school."

Nik didn't know what to say. He hadn't told her all this to gain her sympathy. But on the other hand, he wasn't trying to push her away anymore, so she'd made some progress. They'd be okay, if only she could figure out where to go from here.

He stared out the window with an intensity that had to mask emotional chaos. "My whole life, I swore I'd never be anything like Pop. I'd never hurt someone for any reason, much less just because I could. But now I know that's all a lie. I don't use my fists or a belt like Pop -" His face spasmed and he gripped the windowsill so tight his knuckles turned white. "But neither did George. We're both so goddamned smart we can destroy people without getting blood on our hands."

She was completely lost now. He couldn't be right, yet he obviously believed every word he said. It suddenly occurred to her that they were so far into uncharted territory for their relationship that she couldn't remember what used to be reality.

She wasn't going to lose everything now, simply because of emotional overload. She slipped her hand into his. "We'll talk about that later. First, let's lie down on the bed and relax."

He growled and tried to pull away. "I don't want -"

"Shh." She brushed her fingertips across his lips, and a small electric shock passed between them.

He turned to her, and the wildness in his eyes was suddenly sexual. He advanced on her with such purpose that she took a step back. He pushed her onto the bed and followed, straddling her body. And then he kissed her with all his desperate anguish.

She thought she might drown.

**

Bill was starving for her touch, for her taste, for her soul. He'd been starving forever, it seemed, and only Nik could fill his emptiness. He pressed her down onto the bed, his fingers tangling in her hair, their bodies still much too far apart. Still two separate beings.

He pulled away from her mouth and raised himself on his knees, needing to dispense with their clothes before he incinerated into a pile of ash.

She stopped him with her palm pressed against his chest. "This isn't what I meant, Bill."

"It's what I need." Couldn't she see that? Couldn't she *feel* it?

She half-smiled. "Wait a bit first. Give yourself a chance to deal with all this."

"I dealt with it a decade ago!" But something nagged at him, saying there was something new. Something other than Pop, and the shame of not being able to stop it from happening. But no. There couldn't be.

It was Nik who couldn't deal with this. "You don't want me to touch you anymore, do you? Not now that you know I'm one of the nasty trashy boys your daddy warned you about."

Anger leaped into her eyes and she shoved him off of her and onto the floor. She sat up and leaned over him. "You stupid jerk. When are you going to figure out that I don't give a damn about any of that garbage? I'm sorry for your miserable childhood, and I'm sorry that you have such horrible memories, but none of that changes the fine person you are. And none of it has the least little bit to do with whether I want to make love with you. I do. Very much. I'd just rather wait until it has a bit more to do with making love and a bit less to do with pushing away bad memories."

"That's not -" he faltered. It was. Making love was about two people becoming more than their individual selves. It wasn't about losing oneself in the other, and that's what he'd been looking for.

She moved fully onto the bed and said, "Come lie next to me. I'll show you some simple breathing exercises to help you relax."

But in the end, what helped him relax the most was finally believing that she truly accepted him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Nik couldn't sleep. For once, it wasn't because her body hurt in more places than she could count. She couldn't sleep because her mind was busy thinking about everything Bill had said - and everything he hadn't. She was almost sorry she'd stopped him before he explained those strange remarks about his life. Only almost sorry, though. Any more revelations right then would have been too much.

He was sleeping now. It had taken an hour to get him relaxed enough to make love, and more time after that for his exhaustion to finally tip him into sleep. Her imagination made her think he was resting more soundly than usual, now that his past was out in the open. But she knew that was her imagination talking - just like it was saying that their relationship was suddenly much more serious simply because he'd told her about his past.

No. Bill might trust her with secrets he'd rather no one knew, but she would still be crazy to think he'd stay much longer.

**

It was hell being a responsible boss, and even worse having another responsible boss as a lover. Bill wanted to stay right here in Nik's bed all day long, and maybe all week long. She'd been away for nearly

a week, and now that he knew she accepted the real him, they had a lot of catching up to do.

Six months ago, he would have done it - or at least put a fair amount of effort into persuading her to agree. But now, when she said she had reviews to write and meetings to attend, he remembered the work that was waiting for him, too.

He wasn't going to give up entirely, though. While they both dressed, he asked, "You're coming over tonight, aren't you?" It was Tuesday, after all.

"The reason I usually see you on Tuesday is because I don't see you on Monday." He heard the smile in her voice. "In case you've forgotten, we spent Monday together this week."

"But we didn't spend the weekend together - or last Tuesday, for that matter." It suddenly occurred to him that they hadn't talked about her health since she got back from Christmas. "You're okay, aren't you? Your trip home wasn't too tiring or anything, was it?"

"I'm okay," she said, but he wasn't sure if he could believe her. "I don't sleep real well when I'm at Nathan's, so I'm kind of tired." She paused for a few seconds, and he thought about telling her to forget it, that she should get some extra sleep tonight. But he wanted her *with* him, even if she was too tired to do anything but sleep. "Let's say this - I'll come for dinner, and unless I feel worse than I do now, I'll stay the night. I'll need to sleep, though."

"That's fine. Sleep as much as you want." Anything so he could have her near.

**

Bill glanced up when someone knocked on his office door. It was Seth. "Good afternoon, Bill. Do you have a few minutes?"

It wasn't much of a question, not when it was the big boss asking. "Sure. What can I do for you?"

Seth smiled as he shut the door and sat down. "Actually, I came by to thank you for your hard work this past year. You know that I was somewhat leery about how you'd handle this project lead role, and I think it's only appropriate for me to say that I have no reservations on that score any longer."

He'd been more than "somewhat leery", but there was no reason to mention that. "Thanks for saying that. I've done my best."

Seth nodded. "I can see that, and that's why I wanted to give you this personally." He handed him a sealed envelope. "It's your bonus check, and I hope the amount will please you."

That must mean it was more than the measly couple hundred bucks he'd gotten the last few years. "Thanks. I'm sure it will."

Seth smiled a bit tightly. "There's something else I wanted to touch upon today, and that's your salary. The details will have to wait until after the first of the year, but I thought you'd like to know that Scott recommended you for a significant raise, and that I've approved his recommendation. We both feel that the new amount more adequately reflects your contributions to the company than what you're currently making."

A *significant* raise? How much was that?

"One more thing, Bill. I'm aware that you and Scott have had your difficulties in the past, and frankly, that was one of the reasons I was so concerned about giving you this promotion. But I'm impressed with how

well you and he have worked together the last few months, and I want you to know that I appreciate both of your efforts in that regard."

Before Bill could think of an appropriate response, Seth was on his feet and out the door. A good thing, too. Despite the bonus and the promise of a big raise, all his mind could focus on was what Seth had said about Scott.

How on earth could Scott stand to deal with Bill, much less recommend him for a raise?

**

Nik hoped Bill hadn't been expecting her earlier. She hadn't mentioned it this morning, but she hadn't dared skip her after-work workout. He didn't answer the doorbell right away, and she thought about suggesting that they exchange keys to avoid this hassle in the future.

But then he opened the door, and the suggestion flew out of her mind. "What's wrong?" she asked. Something had to be. He was wired like he'd been last night and appeared surprised to see her.

"Wrong?" Awareness popped into his eyes. "You're here for dinner. I'll -" He turned and started for the kitchen.

She hurried after him. "Don't worry about dinner. I want to know why you're so upset."

He clattered around the kitchen, gathering ingredients and cooking implements haphazardly, totally unlike his normal self. She finally stopped him by taking his hands in hers, pulling him into the dining area, and pushing him into a chair. After a moment, he nodded and said, "You're right. It would take too long to cook. We'll go out."

Before he could stand up, she stepped in front of him and put her hands on his shoulders. "Dinner can wait, Bill. What's going on in your head can't." He didn't say anything, so she asked, "Does this have anything to do with the stuff we talked about last night?"

He groaned and dropped his head forward. "I'm a damn fraud, and Scott knows it, but the jerk's too damn *nice* to do anything about it!"

A connection clicked in her head, one that was so awful it couldn't possibly be real. "You said you blackmailed your way to your promotion. You didn't mean that literally, did you?"

He raised his head slowly, until he was looking straight in her eyes, and she suddenly knew what his answer would be.

She knew he'd done it, and she knew the details weren't going to redeem the situation.

He'd done something unthinkable.

**

Bill couldn't believe that he'd actually forgotten about the blackmail. Last night, he'd been all set to tell Nik everything, knowing that he probably wouldn't get it all out before she'd run away in horror. But she'd handled the stuff about his past so well, and then made him stop talking. Sometime while she was calming him with what felt like love, he'd just plain forgotten that there was anything more he needed to tell her.

Seth's visit had reminded him of reality.

His whole body sagged at the prospect, but Nik needed to know the complete unvarnished truth. "You should sit down. This is going to take a while."

She reached behind her blindly for a chair and sat facing him. "I'm ready."

No, she wasn't. He wasn't ready, either, but that didn't matter. "You may or may not have heard that Francine died at my apartment, but she did. And I guess you know that Carolyn was already working at A-W, but you wouldn't have heard that Scott and Francine were having problems."

"Are those things connected somehow?"

He wished he could smile at her eager interest. "Yeah, but not in a simple way." He laid it all out for her then, both what he'd known then and what he knew now - and the worst part, what he'd done about it. He kept going, too, after his promotion, explaining about how he'd threatened Carolyn, how she'd laughed at him, and what Scott had told Seth.

She looked shell-shocked when he finished, so he added the bit about his recent conversations with both Scott and Carolyn, and what Seth had said today.

That seemed to spur her into words. "You feel guilty about what you did, is that what you're saying?"

Guilt? What a mild word! "Guilt - ashamed - embarrassed, whatever you want to call it. And I can't see how I could have done it. My whole life, I've hated the way Pop was, the way he beat up on Ma and me just 'cause he could, and I've sworn I'd never be like him."

"You aren't. Just because you did something wrong doesn't mean you're like him."

He shook his head, annoyed that she didn't get it. "I told you what Carolyn said - that Scott's different now because of what I did. I made that happen, Nik. I hit him right where it hurt the worst. Just like Pop did."

She stared at him in exasperation for a few seconds, then blew her breath out. "People hurt people all the time, Bill. I hate to sound cynical, but if Scott was as all-fired sure of his integrity as Carolyn said, then he'd never been tested before. It's part of growing up, to learn that principles are all very well and good, but that sometimes other things have to take precedence." She shook her head and added, "And as far as being like your father, I don't recall you saying anything about him ever being sorry for hurting anyone."

"Well, no," he admitted. "He thought we deserved it."

She laughed although there wasn't anything remotely funny about the situation. "He figured he could get away with it - isn't that more like it? The wife who apparently loved him no matter what, and the son who was smaller and weaker. She wouldn't have reported him, and if you'd tried, she would have denied it."

"I guess." No guessing about it. She was absolutely right, and by making him see that, the horror of being like Pop faded away. A huge load lifted for the first time in weeks. "You mean you don't hate me for what I did to Scott and Carolyn?"

She gave him a long serious look that felt like a spike to the gut. "I don't hate you, but that's about all I can honestly say. You did something that I find virtually unimaginable, and if -" She broke off, shaking her head. "I don't know. I'm sorry."

She stood slowly and walked away.

**

Nik felt dizzy and physically sick to her stomach. She'd tried hard to keep an open mind while Bill explained what he'd done, and she thought she'd succeeded. She'd looked at it as honestly as she could, without the extra layer of self-condemnation he'd added, and without putting herself in either Scott or Carolyn's positions.

He'd done an awful thing. How - She turned back to face him. "You feel guilty about this now, but you didn't at the time?"

He shook his head. "I figured Scott deserved it. He needed something not to go his way for once -" He swiped his hand through his hair quickly. "I hated the way he waltzed right into the company after George died. I wanted that job for myself, and I was convinced I deserved it - I know now I would have made a mess of it, but I didn't know that at the time. And suddenly he's seeing Francine and acting like Rachel's daddy, and Seth starts treating him like a son instead of an employee -"

"But that was years ago!"

"So?" He flared in annoyance. "Things didn't get any better, and nobody ever seemed to care that I was good at my job. Scott was the golden boy, and the only time Seth bothered with me was when he lectured me about -" The indignation he'd been working up suddenly disappeared.

"About sexually harassing the women at work," she filled in, feeling sorry for him until she remembered what he'd done to Carolyn. "Okay, I can see that you had a grudge against Scott. But why Carolyn?"

"Because of Scott," he answered quickly, then shook his head. "Geez, that's not it - not all of it, anyway. It goes back to -" He broke off suddenly, swiping his hand through his hair again, then jumping up and heading into the kitchen. "Look, I'll tell you, but I can't just sit there and spill my guts. I'll make us some scrambled eggs."

That was probably a good thing. Part of her stomachache was undoubtedly hunger. "Okay." She perched on a stool by the breakfast bar where she could watch his face while he talked. She needed to hear the whole truth.

While he was whisking the eggs, he continued, "Carolyn's had this negative attitude toward me from the first time I met her, during her interview. Not just that she wasn't interested in me, like she is with the other guys, but like the idea of having anything to do with me was repulsive. Kind of like the nice girls in high school acted toward me - and I guess that's why I couldn't let it go. So, I'd needle her and think up things to say that would make her blush - not much of a challenge, I have to admit. But in reality, I didn't really care that much about going out with her or anything, because she's not my type - physically or any other way."

He grabbed a pan and started heating some butter in it. "But then Francine got all paranoid about her and Scott having a thing on the side. I couldn't really believe that Mr. Straight Arrow would do that, but it kind of griped me if Carolyn was playing all impossible-to-get around work and then cheating on the boss's daughter. So, then Francine brought me those things of theirs right before she died, and I figured I had the perfect way to bring Scott down, and I didn't mind that it would ruin things for Carolyn, too."

"That's not why you propositioned her." It couldn't be.

He shook his head as he carefully poured the eggs into the pan. "No, it's not. The way it worked out, I guess I got to know her a little better, and I found out that she wasn't all icy control. She'd get mad about how I was treating them - him, mostly, I think - and she'd be suddenly red-hot. And I got, like, kind of fixated on that fire-ice thing, and I'd imagine -"

He groaned and covered his face with his hands. "Geez, Nik, do I really have to spell this out for you? You gotta see what I'm talking about!"

Unfortunately, yes. She could see it clearly. She could see Bill in bed with Carolyn, doing one of the many absolutely incredible things that he knew how to do. And she could see him driving Carolyn right over the edge of control, just like he did to Nik almost every time they made love.

And she suddenly saw how much Bill liked doing that to a woman, how much he needed to make her lose control. That realization prompted another one - that Nik was a lot like Carolyn. They both were intelligent career-minded women who knew how to keep most people at a distance. An impossible challenge for Bill to resist.

She swallowed, hoping for enough moisture to form the words she needed to say. "Oh, yes, Bill. I see. I see that after Carolyn shot you down, you were fortunate enough to find another woman a lot like her - one who wasn't able to resist your offer. I've wondered all along why you didn't get bored with me and move on, like you always do. But now I know - it's no credit to me. It's the fact that you still can't have Carolyn, and you never will."

He was staring at her now - undoubtedly horrified that she'd figured out the truth. "You think I still want Carolyn? And that's why I'm with you?"

She nodded. "Scott's got Carolyn. You need somebody."

He shook his head, slowly at first, then more rapidly. "Nik, you're so incredibly wrong! I don't want Carolyn - I want you." He reached across the breakfast bar and grabbed her hand. "Nikolia, sweetheart. I *love* you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Bill had never told a woman he loved her before, but he was damn sure that her staring at him in apoplectic shock wasn't a good sign. Nik ought to be sighing or grinning or saying that she felt the same way.

Not that he'd done it right. He'd just spent an hour or more telling her what awful things he'd done - and geez, even how hung up he'd been on Carolyn! And then, suave as anything, he'd cruised right on in to a declaration of love. No wonder she was horrified.

"You're crushing my hand," she said, and of course she was right. He let go and watched her flex some life back into it, and while he was beating himself up about that, she added, "The eggs will burn if you don't stir them." She was right about that, too.

He concentrated on the eggs. They needed to eat, even if food seemed completely irrelevant at a time like this. Besides, he'd said enough, maybe too much. He had to give her a chance to think this through.

The eggs finished cooking before long, and he took them up onto their plates. They ate them right where they were, Nik on the stool across the breakfast bar from him, and him standing at the stove. He'd never done that before. He'd always thought the way Ma ate right out of the pan was the epitome of low-class, so he'd made a point of eating at the table, on real plates, with real utensils. The point seemed pretty stupid now.

After they ate, he washed their dishes and straightened the kitchen, putting away the things he'd taken out when Nik first got here. Then he dared a glance at Nik. He couldn't tell anything. Her face was closed, yet seemingly not set against him.

Finally she asked, "Did you say that because you thought it would make me feel differently about what you did?"

He didn't need to ask what "that" was. He knew. "I told you I love you because I've been holding it inside for weeks now, because I knew I didn't deserve to ask you to love me back." His voice didn't want to let him say the rest, but he forced it out. "And I needed to say it, and I figured I'd better do it before you walked out."

"You thought I was going to walk out?" She sounded incredulous, although he couldn't imagine why.

"Sooner or later. Maybe not right away, but eventually. I've spent my whole life shouting to the world that I'm as good as everybody else, but I'm not, and now I know it." He made himself shrug, as if that was an easy admission to make. He turned away, wishing this was her house, so he could leave and preserve some dignity. "You're not going to want to bother with me now that you know the truth."

Suddenly, he felt her hand on his back, so lightly that he thought he must be imagining it. "The truth that you make mistakes, you mean? I knew that - you're human, like everybody else, and we all make mistakes."

He wanted to accept that, to sweep everything aside with those simple words, to lean back into her touch and make the truth go away. He wanted that so much that he couldn't speak for a moment. "We don't all blackmail other people to get what we want."

"No, and I agree that was an awful thing to do." Still, her voice was soft and somehow comforting. "But I think we all do things that horrify us later. Look at Scott, for instance. For whatever reason, he decided not to tell Francine about Carolyn, and to offer Carolyn the job that brought her here. He should have known better - he *had to* have known how foolish that was. Yet he did it, and I'm cynical enough to think he was just a little bit relieved when Francine conveniently died, leaving him free to be with Carolyn."

He opened his mouth to argue, but found he agreed with her.

She continued, "But that's not my point. My point is that, whatever he did, whatever he felt, you can bet that he knows he's at least somewhat to blame for the pain he caused. And some part of him wishes he'd done differently."

"Yeah, but he didn't set out to hurt anyone - that's not how he operates."

"No, he did what he did because it was in his own self-interest, and that's what you did, too. Now, I'm not claiming that what you did is no worse than what he did - it is - but you already know that. What I'm telling you is that you're not a horrible person because you did this one awful thing, nor because of what your parents were like. The kind of person you are comes from the thousands and maybe millions of things you do, both bad and good, over the course of your life. And overall, you're a good person."

He turned to face her, but instead of putting his arms around her like he wanted to, he settled for resting his hands on her shoulders. "You really think that? Even after the way I've treated women my whole life?"

She smiled a bit and said, "It's not a crime to take what a woman offers you, as long as you don't deceive her into believing things that aren't true. And from what I've heard, any woman who's been deceived did it to herself."

He felt a funny quivery feeling in his stomach. It sounded like she still accepted him, even now when she

knew the worst. "That's true. I never promised anything other than a good time." He couldn't leave it there. "Until now."

"You still haven't." She looked like she was going to say more.

He didn't wait. "Sure I have. I love you -"

"That's not a promise." Her smile was gentle and made him want to listen. "You love me today, but you might not love me tomorrow or next week."

"I'll love you forever!" But even as he said it, he realized he didn't know if that was true. He knew nothing about forever.

She shook her head and put her hand on his arm. "You're not ready to promise that, Bill. But that's okay. I'm not ready to promise that, either."

What did that mean about how she felt about him? She squeezed his arm and said, "You know that I've tried to keep things simple between us, and that I objected to you saying we had a relationship. Well, none of that did me any good. Despite my intentions, I fell in love with you."

Her words echoed in his brain. She loved him, too!

**

Nik bent her left knee slightly and shifted her weight forward. Maybe the ache in her hips would subside a little now.

It did, but now her knee and legs hurt more, and the pain in her left leg was sharp like a knife. What if she turned onto her other side? She moved carefully, not wanting to disturb Bill's sleep.

The new position wasn't really any better, but she'd stay like this for a while, anyway. It was a change, and that was the best she could hope for.

She felt tears gathering in her throat, but she choked them back. Okay, sure, she was headed at breakneck speed into a down cycle, but crying wouldn't accomplish anything and Bill might hear her. She couldn't deal with his questions right now, not in addition to her own.

Why did it have to happen now? Why not in a week or two, after the situation with Bill settled into whatever its new state would be? It was pointless to ask the question, of course, just as it would be pointless to wish she didn't have to have a down cycle at all. She had fibro, and that meant she had frequent flares and occasional down cycles. She could do every single thing possible to take care of herself, and she'd still have them. That was all there was to it.

Of course, knowing they were inevitable didn't make them easy to accept. And it didn't make her feel able to explain to Bill about the soon-to-come reality. Not yet.

"What can I do to help, sweetheart?" His voice came out of the dark. Had her moving around made him wake up?

"I'm fine," she lied. "A little restless, but you don't need to worry about me."

"After all I've put you through the last few days, I'm not going to let you suffer alone. Would a massage help?" The room was suddenly lit by the dim glow of his bedside touch lamp.

"I'm not sure. Some of my muscles are pretty tender."

He rolled to face her. "I know. You should have told me I was hurting you."

She shook her head. "You weren't. Not really." But it was the first time his loving her didn't take the pain away for a little while.

"You're supposed to enjoy making love."

"I do!" She owed him an explanation, though. "Just - well, tonight, some of it wasn't as comfortable as it usually is. It wasn't anything you did - it's just the way my muscles are right now. I would have told you if it was a problem."

He breathed out impatiently. "Nik, it's a problem anytime you can't fully enjoy something we're doing." He paused a few seconds before continuing. "Seriously, sweetheart. It's important to me not to cause you pain, and after, when I realized I had -" He shook his head rather than completing the thought.

Of course. Hurting her would remind him of his father. "I'm sorry. I'll tell you next time." It would almost certainly be next time they made love. And the time after that, and the one after that. But she couldn't face telling him that yet. Instead, she said, "You could try giving me a massage, if you'd like. It might help."

He was eager to try, and it did help ease her aching muscles. She drifted into a light doze before he finished, and the rest of the night eased by.

**

Bill kept his eye on Nik the next morning while she dressed, and he didn't like what he saw. She moved awkwardly, as though she had many fewer moving parts than most people - and like the parts that did move were rusty. It wasn't like the morning after she'd had the flare in early November, when she'd only seemed a little tired. He could tell she didn't want him to say anything about it, though.

He'd approach the matter differently. "You know, I'll bet no one at work would mind if we both took the rest of the year off for a little vacation. New Year's is this weekend, but I've heard that some of the hotels still have rooms available. How about if I see if I can get us some reservations?"

He heard her heavy sigh and wished he'd kept his mouth shut. Since he couldn't take the words back, he tried to offer an easier alternative. "Or we could take the time off and just hang out here or at your place. That would be just as good, and there wouldn't be any crowds to deal with."

She sagged onto the side of the bed and sighed again. "I'm sorry, Bill. I think it would be best just to stick with our normal schedules as much as possible." Her voice shook a little as she added, "And as far as New Year's Eve, maybe you'd better make plans without me. I can't handle a big party, or even a small one."

He dropped down next to her and slipped his arm around her waist. "I don't care about a party, sweetheart. Just as long as we can be together, I'll be happy. And as far as taking time off work, I just thought we could both use a few days to kick back and relax. I know you're tired, and to be honest, so am I. This whole thing about my mom and talking about what happened with Scott and Carolyn kind of wiped me out."

She looked at him with troubled eyes. "I know, Bill, and I wish I could do something to help you. But I can't do any more than I already have. I realized last night that I'm headed into a down cycle, and my life's really not going to be worth much for the next few weeks."

"A down cycle? What's that?" It sounded awful - maybe not so much the words themselves as the way

she said them. His fears were confirmed when she explained, but he didn't have any question about how to respond. "What can I do to help? I can do the cooking and other stuff around the house, and give you massages anytime you want, but isn't there something more?"

Her smile was tight as she shook her head. "That's a really sweet offer, but there's no reason for you to get involved in all this. I won't be able to see you very often, but I can take care of my own needs just fine." She gave his hand a squeeze. "See, this is what I was talking about when I said I couldn't really manage a relationship. We've got stuff going on between us that's complicated, and you're dealing with things of your own, and here I'm effectively out-of-it for a couple of weeks or more. It's not fair to you, and I'm sorry."

"You don't need to be sorry! You've been great, even though it's obvious now that you haven't felt good in days. All that stuff's over with now, anyway. We love each other and everything's great." Suddenly, he remembered that she'd refused what she'd called his offer. "And that wasn't an offer - it's how things are going to be. I'm going to be there and take care of you when you need it. And when you're feeling okay again, I'm still going to be there and we'll take care of each other."

After all, that was what love was all about.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Bill wasn't sure whether Scott had canceled this week's project meeting or not, so he went by the conference room a couple of minutes early to check. Carolyn was already there. "I guess we're having our meeting," he said and took a seat.

"Scott was on the phone a minute ago when I went to ask, but he nodded when I asked."

All of a sudden, he noticed that she was wearing an engagement ring. "You got a ring for Christmas."

Predictably, she blushed but didn't say anything. He guessed she expected him to be rude about it. He smiled. "I'm happy for you - honest. When's the wedding?"

Scott stepped into the room as she answered, "The end of March."

Scott looked back and forth between them and added, "The Worthingtons have offered to have it at their house, and we've accepted." A pointed reminder of just who had the boss's full support and approval. Scott obviously wasn't convinced yet that he didn't need that trump card in dealing with Bill.

"That's great," he said, and meant it. "I'm sure you'll be very happy."

"We will," Carolyn replied, sending Scott a glance that seemed to suggest he let the subject drop.

He did, and nothing more was said for a couple of minutes. Finally Scott frowned and said, "Phillip's in today, isn't he?"

Carolyn shook her head. "He was, but he left at noon to take his sister to the airport. He said he'd be back by three. How about Jake?"

"His wife's having some medical tests this afternoon," Scott said. "So, it's just us, then. Anything to report?" He glanced at Bill, probably since he'd already heard anything Carolyn might mention.

Bill's chest felt suddenly like a bubble was filling it. He hadn't really planned to go into this at the project meeting, but it *was* just the three of them. "Not really to report, no, but there is something I wanted to mention." Politely interested looks now from both Scott and Carolyn. "Uh, well, you know I've been

seeing Nik for a while." They nodded. "It's - um - more than that now. We love each other."

Scott clearly didn't believe him, whereas Carolyn blushed again and looked about ready to burst. She fought the reaction back and eventually managed a sarcastic "Are we supposed to declare a national holiday or something?"

He should have known better than to say that. It wasn't the part he needed to discuss, anyway. "Well, the thing is, Nik's having some health problems, and I'm going to be taking care of her. I don't think it'll interfere too much with work, except that I won't be able to work extra hours for a while."

Now Carolyn was guilt-stricken. "I'm sorry. I hadn't heard. I hope she'll feel better soon."

Scott was more pragmatic. "Is this related to her fibromyalgia?" Of course, Seth would have told him about it, probably before she was hired.

He nodded. "It's what she calls a down cycle, and from what she says, she expects to be able to keep working through it, but I don't know how reasonable that is. She'll be sleeping a lot, though, so I thought maybe I could borrow the laptop you take on trips. That way, I could get at least some stuff done evenings."

Scott shrugged. "Sure. It's at home, but I'll bring it in tomorrow." He fought a grin and shook his head. "I've got to say, though - I never thought I'd see the day when you'd be offering to work evenings."

Bill grinned back at him, for a second almost feeling accepted. "I have to say I didn't foresee this, either. But times change -"

"And apparently so do people," Scott added. "Good luck. I hope it works out."

Not a complete reversal of opinion, but maybe they were headed there.

**

Nik had cautioned herself all day not to be upset with Bill. He loved her and wanted to help her - that was a good thing. He simply didn't understand what her life would be like for the next few weeks. Once he did, she'd be able to persuade him to let her suffer through it on her own.

Still, when he arrived with what appeared to be a full carload of possessions and food, it was hard to remember her good intentions. He put most things in the spare bedroom, and the small closet was full by the time he finished filling it with hangers full of slacks and shirts. How many clothes did the man own?

He frowned at her as he put the last things away. "Why are you still standing there? You should be lying down - or at least sitting."

Time to set some ground rules. "Bill, you're going to have to learn not to make assumptions about what I should or shouldn't do. I know you have my best interests at heart, but I've been dealing with fibro a lot longer than you have."

"I know, but you try to do too much. That's why I'm here - to make your life easier."

Hassling with him over every little thing wasn't going to make anything easier. "Let's go in the living room and talk about that."

"I'll make us some dinner first. What would you like to eat?"

Patience, she cautioned herself. "I already ate, but you can fix something for yourself, if you'd like."

"What did you have?" he asked suspiciously.

"Yogurt, not that it's any of your business." She was going to lose her temper if she didn't get out of here. "I'll be in the living room when you're ready to talk."

He followed her, apparently not noticing she was about to take his head off. "Yogurt's not enough for dinner. I'll make something more after we talk." He dropped onto the couch and asked, "So, what's to talk about?"

She counted to ten, twice, before she felt calm enough to respond. "What's to talk about is that you're trying to take over my life. I realize that you think I need taking care of, but I've gotten along without you for a whole lot of years, and I've lived through many more of these down cycles than I care to remember."

"But it's different now - I love you, and you say you love me, too." The last part had a flicker of doubt in it, probably caused by her less-than-welcoming attitude.

"I *do* love you, Bill. But loving you and wanting you to run my life are two different things. I'm used to being on my own and making my own decisions, and that's not something I'm willing to give up for you - or anyone."

"I don't want to run your life," he protested. "I just want to make things easier for you, so you don't have to waste so much energy on cooking and laundry and stuff like that."

Okay, he was actually listening to what she was saying, and responding appropriately. That was good. She'd do the same in return. "That's a really nice idea, but there are a couple of reasons why that might not work real well. First off -" No, what she'd intended to say was too embarrassing. She'd save that for later, if they worked the rest of it out. "It wouldn't save me any energy if we had to hassle about things all the time. I don't eat much during these down cycles, for example. Part of it's that my digestive system usually goes berserk, so there's not a lot I can safely eat. I don't get hungry, either, and since I never lose more than a few pounds and that comes right back when I get better, I don't worry too much about eating." She certainly wasn't going to admit the horrible cravings she sometimes succumbed to during and just after a down cycle. He wouldn't approve of eating huge bags of cheese-flavored snacks.

"So you're saying I shouldn't push you to eat." He sounded a bit like a sullen little boy. "But what I worry about is that you might not want something because you think you'd have to make it yourself."

She smiled apologetically. "I know you'd be glad to cook anything I wanted. How about if I let you know if there's something special I'd like?"

He nodded. "And I'll really try not to bug you about eating. What else worries you about this?"

She sighed. "Well, honestly, the whole thing. It's one thing for you to cook and do stuff weekends when we're together, but this down cycle hasn't even really started yet, and it'll last at least a couple of weeks. That's a long time for you to hang around waiting on me. Isn't there something else you should be doing?"

"Nope. I talked to Scott today, and I'm going to pick up a laptop tomorrow. That way I can keep up with work while you sleep."

"I'm going to keep working, you know," she warned him. If he argued about this, all bets were off. She wouldn't be able to trust him.

But he simply nodded. "I know. But I'm hoping you'll take it easy and not stay late and all."

Okay. He actually seemed to be getting the point here. Maybe this was workable, after all. "But won't you get awfully bored? I won't be any company at all most of the time, and my TV's not even hooked up to cable."

That actually fazed him - for all of two seconds. Then he shrugged. "No big deal. I didn't bring it in, but I've got a boombox and CDs in the car -" He grinned. "Headphones, too, so don't worry." His face sobered and he said, "So anytime there's anything I can do for you, I'm here to do it, and when you need me to leave you alone, you've got that, too. The point is, I'm here for you. Okay?"

Okay, except for the thing she hadn't said earlier. "That all sounds good, but there's one other thing we really have to discuss." Her stomach felt all jittery - a totally ridiculous reaction after they'd been lovers for months. "Sex."

He raised a hand to stop her. "It's okay, Nik. I realize you'll need to take it easy."

She shook her head. "Taking it easy won't cut it. You remember last night, how stiff I was - well, that's nothing to how I'll be in a few days. I wouldn't be able to -"

Suddenly, he was there, his fingers covering her lips, an arm surrounding her. "Don't worry about it, Nikolia. Making love will keep until you feel better. What matters now is making you as comfortable as possible and doing everything possible so you'll be healthy again soon."

Something about the way he held her supported against his strong chest let her muscles relax, and her self-control followed. This really *was* happening. Bill was going to take care of her, and she knew he'd do a fabulous job. He'd let her feel like a pampered princess instead of a pathetic excuse for a human being. And, through it all, he'd love her.

The tears wouldn't stay inside any longer.

**

Bill had never been more scared in his life. Here he was, making promises left and right to Nik, and he didn't know how he was going to deal with any of it.

He'd do it, he knew he would. He wouldn't tolerate anything less of himself. But how could he stand to watch the woman he loved - or any woman, for that matter - suffer for weeks at a time?

And now she was crying. She didn't cry easily, so he couldn't pretend it was a tactic she was using against him, like so many women did. She must be in excruciating pain, and that made him sick to the stomach to contemplate.

"Can I help you somehow, sweetheart?" he asked, struggling to keep the panic out of his voice. "Maybe carry you in to bed and undress you?"

"I'm okay," she said, still crying but controlling it a bit more now. She sucked in a big shaky breath and continued, "You're being so wonderful. It feels so good to know I'm not dealing with this all alone."

"No, you're not alone. You're crying because of a good thing?"

"Uh-huh." She cried even harder for a minute, then gradually regained control of herself. "I've been alone my whole life, and the last few years have been even worse. But now, even if it's just this one time, I've got you, and it's such a huge relief."

Oh, geez. There was that "you love me now, but maybe not tomorrow" thing again. It couldn't really

work like that, could it? He couldn't love her so incredibly much now and *ever* feel any differently, could he?

He wanted to shout out that he'd love her forever, that he'd be there to help her with her down cycles when she was seventy-five years old. But he couldn't do that to her. He couldn't tell her something like that if he wasn't completely and totally positive of it.

Especially now that he realized how badly she needed to hear it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Nik settled herself a little more comfortably on the couch and asked, "Have you actually heard of any of these groups?"

Bill adjusted the pillows that surrounded her. "Sure. I've even got CDs by some of them."

She sighed. "What Neal says is true, then. I'm completely out-of-date." She stared at the TV intently, but she couldn't keep the question inside any longer. "I need you to be completely honest. Aren't you at least a little sorry to be stuck home with me on New Year's Eve instead of out partying?"

She heard the indulgent smile in his voice. "Not a single bit, sweetheart. I admit I'd like it if you felt better, but only so we could really celebrate together."

This couldn't be called celebrating, that's for sure. The only reason she was up was because she hadn't started sleeping constantly yet. She'd been in bed, trying and failing to sleep, when he came in a little while ago and asked if she wanted to watch the New Year's show. He'd piled nearly every pillow in the house on the couch and in his lap, and then she'd stretched out on top of them. It was pretty comfortable - for now.

"You've gone out other years, haven't you?" she asked, really hoping she didn't come off either nosy or whiny.

"Sure," he said easily, ruffling her hair. "Sometimes to somebody's house for a party, other times to one of the bars where I hang out -" He chuckled. "Where I *used* to hang out, that is."

"You don't miss hanging out at those places? You must have had friends there."

"Friends is a little strong," he said. "Sure, I knew all the regulars, and the people who worked there and all, but not well enough to miss." He sighed. "The truth is, Nikolia, you're the only person I've been close to my whole life."

For a brief moment, she thought he must be exaggerating. But then she realized he wasn't. "That's so sad. But why, Bill? You've got a great personality."

It took him a minute to respond. "Shame, I guess. When I was a kid, I was scared to run the risk of anyone finding out what it was like at home. Bad stuff happened to the other kids, too, I know, but it seemed like it was worse at our place." He thought for another few seconds. "I kind of got used to that, I suppose, so it seemed like the normal way to be. And still, I can't really let my guard down with anybody but you. They wouldn't think as much of me if they knew -"

She groped for his hand, which she knew would be close to her side. "You're wrong about that. People you know now wouldn't care about what happened way back then. All they care about is what you do now."

She heard disbelief in the way he breathed. "You say that, but that's because your past isn't anything to be ashamed of."

She squeezed his hand. He wasn't ready to see the truth, so she said, "I think you're wrong, but I won't argue the point. The question is, what's so different about me?" She knew what his immediate answer would be, so she forestalled him. "And I don't think love has anything to do with it. That came later, after you let yourself get close."

"Well, maybe not love, but there was definitely something. Because even the way we were at first, when we'd just go for coffee after your shift at the computer lab - I've never done that with anyone else."

"You haven't?" She'd assumed it was part of his normal seduction technique, at least back then. The no-pressure talking about computers, or about which classes and professors were good and which weren't - all that had camouflaged her growing attraction to him. And then, that night after she bought them hot fudge sundaes to celebrate getting an "A" on her research paper, he kissed her. No kiss had ever rocked her more.

His thumb was busy, drawing circles on her palm. "Everything with you is different, Nik. I knew that back in school - that's why I kept saying you were special. I just didn't understand *how* special, or how much better it was to be with you than with anyone else." He let his breath out in a long sigh. "I don't think you can imagine what it was like to go to the University and have all these beautiful girls suddenly be willing to be with me. It wasn't like in high school, when a couple of them would once in a while act interested - but only because they were feeling rebellious or trying to make their football jock boyfriends jealous. These girls actually liked me, and they wanted to go to bed with me, and besides sex, I got something I'd never had before - affection - and I was hooked."

She said softly, "That's what hooked me, with you. I really felt special, like you said I was, and I hadn't ever felt that way with a guy before." She'd hardly ever felt that way at all, in fact, but that wasn't relevant.

"Oh, Nik. If only I'd been smart enough to recognize what we had. But it was like I'd been starving my whole life, and suddenly this whole world of possibilities had opened up to me. Girls would come on to me, and every time, it was like I was liberated from the past all over again."

She suddenly began to understand. "You've been running all this time, haven't you?"

"More trying to prove I'd left it behind, I think. Not just the women, either - all the fancy meals and the wardrobe that even *I* realize is way more than I need."

"And the apartment that looks like a fancy furniture showroom," she added, hoping he wouldn't be offended.

He laughed and squeezed her hand. "Ma says it's like some guy has on her favorite soap. But yeah, that's why, and that's why I keep it so clean. Ma's a slob - and a rotten cook, which is why I learned how."

"It's handy for me that you did." She heard shouting on the TV and glanced over to see numbers flashing on the screen and the ball of lights in Times Square dropping. "Oh, look. It's almost New Year's."

"I'd rather look at you," he said, bending awkwardly to look at her, facing away from him in his lap. "Happy New Year, Nikolia."

She squirmed in his lap, eventually managing to roll over and partially sit up. "Happy New Year, Bill." She wrapped an arm around him and struggled to face him enough to kiss him.

He helped her get better positioned and supported her in his arms. "I love you, sweetheart."

Their New Year's kiss was even sweeter and more heart-stopping than their first hot fudge-flavored one.

**

Bill tiptoed out of the bedroom the next afternoon. Nik was sleeping, as she'd been almost constantly since they went to bed last night. That apparently meant that her down cycle had moved on to the next stage. The first stage, with its increasing muscle pain and nearly-complete insomnia, was over. Nik had warned him that she'd sleep most of the time for the next several days, and that he shouldn't bother waking her to eat. He hated leaving her alone like that, but he'd respect her wishes.

While he had the chance, he'd better call Ma and wish her a Happy New Year. He went into Nik's office/gym and shut the door in order not to disturb her.

Ma answered right away. "H'llo?"

"Hello, Ma. It's Bill. Happy New Year."

"Same to you. You been out? I tried callin' you earlier."

He had to tell her at least a little of the story. "I'm staying at Nik's for a while, Ma. She's sick and I'm making sure she eats and all that." She was probably the one person in the world who'd believe that. He'd done the same thing often enough for her.

"Is she sick or hurt?" Suspicion in Ma's voice now. She still wasn't totally sure he wasn't like Pop.

His stomach knotted. "She's sick, Ma. I - Ma, I couldn't ever do like Pop." She had to believe him!

After a few seconds, Ma grunted her agreement. "I guess you couldn't, Billy. I forget sometimes how much you hated what he did to me."

How could she forget that? All the times he'd tried to protect her, only to get beaten worse for it? All the times he'd begged her to run away with him - even at ten, he'd have run away and taken care of her forever if she'd been willing to go. She hadn't run away, but he was taking care of her forever, anyway.

He suddenly wondered if he'd done the right thing. Had Ma been glad when he got rid of Pop? Should he have left home instead? He couldn't ask her now. "You doing okay, Ma? Should I send an extra check?"

"I'm - all right," she said, noticeably hesitant. "I - ah - well, I'm going to meetings every day."

"Meetings?" Her part-time job at the convenience store didn't involve *any* meetings, as far as he knew.

"Yeah. What you said last week got me thinkin'. I been hitting the booze pretty hard since your old man kicked, but nothin' don't ever get fixed by suckin' down the joy juice. So I started hitting these meetings instead, and I'm doin' my best to dry out."

"That's great, Ma!"

"It's hard as hell, is what it is. This one lady I met over there says I oughta go to one of them clinics like the movie stars do, but that's gotta cost a bundle and it's prob'ly no better'n doin' it alone."

It might be more likely to work, though. "I think it's a good idea, Ma, and I've got the money. Ask her

where she thinks you should go and I'll set it up."

"I wasn't askin' you to pay for it!" she protested, but he knew she'd at least hoped he'd suggest it.

"I know, Ma, but I -" Well, geez. He might as well say it. "I love you, Ma, and I want you to get better. I know it's tough to stop drinking, and those places know the best ways to help you."

"Oh, Billy," she sobbed. "You're such a good boy."

Geez. Nik talked about him being sweet and a nice guy, and Ma said he was a good boy. At this rate, his reputation would be totally destroyed.

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Nik needed to go to the bathroom, and it was no use pretending she didn't. Everything hurt while she was simply lying here, anyway, so it wasn't like she was saving herself any pain.

Okay. First, roll onto her side. Then, inch her legs over the edge of the bed, and use the weight of her legs dropping to help tip her top half into a sitting position. Now rest a minute, so she wouldn't get dizzy when she tried to stand.

Standing after being in bed for hours was the part she hated the most. It made her feel like an old-old-old lady - not the pain so much as the way she couldn't stand up straight and had almost no balance. She had to stand with her legs a foot or more apart, her knees bent, and the rest of her body hunched over like - well, like a hunchback.

And walking the ten feet into the bathroom was like staggering a mile! She put her hand up and ran it along the closet door as she went, not really supporting herself with it, just having it there in case she needed it.

Bill came into the bedroom while she was sitting on the toilet. He glanced in and asked, "You okay, sweetheart?"

"Sure," she said, wishing suddenly she was wearing a nightgown. She felt incredibly vulnerable, naked on the toilet.

He wasn't looking, though. He was busy smoothing the sheets and rearranging the covers. "Since you're awake, you should have something to eat. What would you like?"

"Oh, I'll make something after I get done in here."

"That's one of the reasons I'm here, Nik," he reminded her. "Just tell me what you'd like. And later, if you want to move around a little, I'll help you do some exercises before you go back to sleep."

She knew he loved her, but still, it was hard to believe he'd continue being this sweet and helpful for her whole down cycle. No point in borrowing trouble, though. "You're going to think this sounds gross, but what I want is milk toast."

"What's that?"

"Well, you start by putting a piece of bread in the toaster. Then you get out this special serving bowl I keep on the same shelf as my plates. You pour soy milk about an inch deep into the bowl and zap it in the microwave for a minute. When the toast pops up, you put butter on it and put it in the bowl of hot milk. The milk soaks into the bread and makes it all mushy, and then I eat it."

He turned around to stare at her, his lips pulled back from his teeth. "That sounds awful! Are you sure you don't want something else?"

"I'm sure. It's nutritious and comforting to my system." She'd better explain. "I don't know if I said this before, but my digestion gets really messed up when I'm having a down cycle. I have to be super careful of what I eat."

His face contorted with sympathetic pain. "Okay, but isn't there anything we can do to make this less awful for you? Maybe there are new treatments -"

She hated to dash his hopes, but she shook her head. "I keep up on all the literature, and try out virtually everything the researchers suggest." It was eating at him, she knew, and she needed to make him understand. "What I do isn't elegant, but it works fairly well for me. I know it's frustrating to see this happening and not be able to stop it, but you have to realize - just by being here, you're helping an incredible amount."

His lips pressed together tightly, he shook his head. "I wish I could do more."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Bill grabbed the phone on the first ring. Nik was sleeping, and he didn't want the phone to disturb her. "Harding residence."

There was a pause, then Neal's voice asked, "Bill?"

"Neal! You finally got back!" Nik had hoped he'd be back right after New Year's, and now it was a week later. "How did it go with the gallery?"

"Great! The guy up on Vancouver Island took three of my pictures, and he says when they sell, he wants more. And on the way back, we stopped in Bellevue where this woman who comes to Marian's sometimes has a gallery, and she took two."

"Hey, that's great. Say, I wanted to tell you how much I like the sketch of Nik."

He laughed. "Thanks - I knew you did, that's why I switched it on Nik. You wouldn't believe the lecture she gave me on the drive home about it, though! 'If you ever pull that kind of stunt again' - blah, blah, blah. Say listen, I had a message to call her. Is she around?"

He sighed. "Look, Neal, she's asleep right now. How about I tell her to call you sometime?"

"I guess." He sounded suspicious. "But it's only eight o'clock. Is she okay?"

Now it was Bill's turn to say, "I guess - maybe you can tell me for sure. She's having one of those down cycle things -"

Neal interrupted, "Oh, no. How bad is it?"

"How should I know?" he demanded, then caught himself. "Sorry, I just feel kind of lost about the whole thing." Lost wasn't what he felt - gut-wrenching scared was more like it. But maybe Neal's experience would help reassure him - unless she was sicker than she said and he really *should* be scared. "She says she's okay, but she's been sleeping every minute she isn't working for a week now, and that doesn't seem right."

Neal sighed. "I know what you mean. It's so hard to see her suffering, and not be able to do anything

about it. But a week isn't unusual at all - in fact, if anything, it'll probably go on for another week or more."

Just what he wanted to hear! "Damn. And there really isn't anything I can do? I'm taking care of the place, and feeding her the little she'll eat, but I keep wondering if there's something more she won't ask me to do."

"You're staying there?"

"Yeah."

He made an amused sound. "Then consider yourself lucky. She's letting you do a lot more than she lets me do. All she lets me do is get her groceries for her."

"I thought you lived with her for a while."

"Yeah, but that was years ago, when she didn't have the fibro under control at all. Once she got onto this diet and exercise kick and started feeling better, she wanted me out of there. I made her nervous, just being in the same house - so don't feel funny if you get on her nerves, too."

She hadn't said anything about it, but he'd have to ask. It wouldn't be right for her to have to put up with that, along with everything else.

**

These nightly massages were addictive. They didn't really fix anything, but Nik thought they helped her sleep a little better. It made sense - a lot of times, pain was what woke her up. She'd be sleeping and go to roll over, and it would hurt, and zap - she'd be awake. Bill's massages helped her muscles relax, and relaxed muscles were more flexible and less painful. The effect only lasted a few hours, but a few hours of relief was way better than nothing.

She wasn't getting into that zone of bliss as much as usual tonight, and the reason was incredibly embarrassing. It was totally idiotic, but her body wasn't interpreting Bill touching her as asexual massage. Her stupid body was getting turned on.

Maybe that was understandable. It had been a couple of weeks since they'd made love, yet they were living together and sleeping together the whole time. And Bill was a sexy guy - she'd thought about that this morning when she saw him drying off after his shower.

The problem was that she was still in way too much pain to make love. So she had to forget about this completely-pointless fog of desire he was inadvertently creating and work hard at getting better as quickly as possible.

She shifted slightly on the bed, bringing her legs closer together and hoping that he'd interpret that as time to move on from her upper thighs and buttocks. Once he got to her back, she wouldn't need to worry. Those muscles were tight enough that even his gentlest touch would hurt, and that would blast the arousal away.

He didn't take the hint. In fact, he probed exactly where she didn't want him to, and then he leaned over and spoke right into her ear. "Does that feel good, Nikolija?"

She couldn't lie, so she said, "You shouldn't do that."

He kept on doing it and asked, "Why not? You seem to like it."

She tensed her muscles and rolled onto her side, facing the edge of the bed. "Because we can't make love, and all that'll do is frustrate both of us." He was so helpful and understanding most of the time - why did he have to pick now to be clueless?

He was suddenly lying right next to her, his body pressing into her back, and his arm around her waist. "No need for frustration, sweetheart. I'll just hold you and touch you, and it'll be almost as good as doing it the other way."

And with that, he tipped her partway over on her back, so that her weight was resting on his body. He slipped his right arm between her and the bed, and started using *both* hands on her most sensitive areas. His mouth rested just below her left ear, and he somehow managed to transform those few inches of skin into an unbelievably erogenous zone in their own right.

It still seemed wrong, though. He shouldn't go to all this trouble and not get anything out of it. She could feel his arousal through his clothes, pressing into her at just the perfect location - and that gave her an idea. "We could make love in this position."

"That's right, sweetheart. That's what we're doing." He continued making her feel so incredibly good that she could barely believe it.

"No - not *this*! Take your clothes off!"

He kissed the outer rim of her earlobe. "Baby, just relax. This'll be good, and I won't hurt you this way. I couldn't stand to hurt you."

"You won't hurt me. This position doesn't put any strain on my muscles at all." Well, maybe that wasn't completely true, but it was close enough. He was supporting her body, and she didn't have to hold her limbs in awkward positions.

"Then maybe we'll try it next time. For now, just enjoy."

Suddenly, she almost hated him. He knew her body so well, and he was using that knowledge to cloud her mind and her will, driving her farther and farther, assuming he could make her forget what she really wanted.

She wasn't going to let him win. She shoved his hands away. "Either you get your damn clothes off in the next five seconds, or I'll rip them off myself." And that *would* hurt.

"Okay, okay." He sounded annoyed, amused, and a bit pleased. In any case, he rolled away. He was back in a few seconds, and the warm hard length of him against her body made her want to purr. He groaned. "Geez, Nik, you feel so good."

Right after that, he took her breath away, and rational thought flew out the window.

**

"Ma, I told you before - I'll call you tomorrow to let you know. I have to see how Nik's doing first." Bill hated being short with her, but she just wouldn't let up.

"Whatever you say, Billy," she said in that meek voice that made him feel like a bully. "Goodnight, Billy."

"Night, Ma." He hung up and let out the sigh that had been building during their whole conversation. He used to think it was her drinking that drove him wild - but she wasn't drinking now, and it still happened. It must just be her.

"Does your mom want you to do something this weekend?" Nik's voice came from the next room, her office/gym. He'd left her sleeping earlier.

He hurried in there, only to be shocked again by the sight of her wearing her leotard and stretching on her exercise platform. "Should you be doing that?"

She managed a small smile as she made wide circles with both arms. "I have to do it. I come out of down cycles faster and better if I start working back into my exercise program as soon as I possibly can."

"You're finally feeling some better, then." She should be! It was nearly three weeks since the down cycle started.

"Definitely. And don't worry about my exercising. I know to take it very easy for the next week or so. So, what was that with your mom?"

He sighed. "Oh, she wants me to take her up to Spokane on Saturday, but I don't really have to. I told her I didn't think I should leave you that long."

"How long?"

"Well, I'd have to go out there Friday after work, and probably get back late Saturday. There's a lady Mom knows who'd take her, so I figured that would be the way to go."

"Why don't you want to go? Because of me, or because of her?"

"Because of you." He decided to level with her. He hadn't bothered her with any of this before because she'd been so sick. "See, Ma's admitted she's an alcoholic, and she's going to this place up near Spokane for some treatment. They'd kind of like me to take her, since I'm her only family, but we can do all the interviews and such over the phone."

Nik stopped exercising abruptly, sat up, and squeezed his hand. "You must be relieved. I know you've worried about her." Had he been? He guessed he had, but he'd been too embarrassed by her to think about it like that. "And of course, you should take her up there. She must be scared, and it's important for you to be there for her at a time like this. I'll be fine alone."

Was Ma scared? Was that why she'd been so insistent tonight? "Are you sure? You're still a long way from your normal self."

She smiled and squeezed his hand again. "Of course I'm sure. You're spoiling me rotten, and I've been enjoying it, but you need to take care of your mom now."

"I guess you're right. It's just -"

She raised her hand to stop him. "I know. But you need to realize this happens all the time to me. I'm getting better every day now, and as nice as it is to have you here cooking for me and giving me massages every night, I can get along without you for one night."

It *was* only one night, he realized, and he certainly wanted to do everything he could to help Ma succeed. "Okay, I'll go, but I'll get back as early as I can on Saturday."

**

Nik stretched her arm as far as it would go - and success! She finally managed to grab that last washcloth from where it had wedged in the bottom of the washing machine. She threw it into the dryer

and started the load.

How long had it been since she'd done her own laundry? Most of a month, certainly, and to be honest, she hadn't done laundry a whole lot of times since October. Bill was awfully handy to have around, as well as enjoyable for more than one reason.

But she wasn't letting herself miss him. It was nice to be alone in the house for a change. For one thing, she didn't have to worry tonight about what time she ate dinner. She could take her exercise session slow and cautious, stopping frequently when she got tired, and then rest for a little while before fixing dinner. Maybe her dinner wasn't as attractive and tasty as the meals Bill made, but it was nutritious and didn't take much time or energy to prepare.

And because he was gone, she spent an hour or so reading a book after dinner. She hadn't done that since before Christmas, and it felt great. Maybe she'd read more tomorrow.

Her bed felt empty without him, but again, that was a matter of habit. Once he moved back to his place, she'd get the hang of spreading out across the whole bed like she'd done before.

He *would* be moving back to his place, she reminded herself, and probably pretty soon. He was here because of her down cycle, and she was close enough to normal that she ought to tell him she was ready to go back to their old arrangement.

But she wasn't, really. It was so nice to have him here.

That didn't matter. That was her weakness talking. Of all the guys in the universe, Bill was one of the least likely permanent caretakers. He was in love with her now, and if she wanted him to keep loving her for as long as possible, she needed to stand on her own two feet.

She wanted his love to last forever. That wasn't in the cards, but she'd settle for however long she could have.

That meant she needed to get back to being his lover instead of his patient.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The timer went off and Nik opened her eyes, momentarily a bit disoriented. That happened sometimes when she meditated - she thought it was when she'd been particularly successful at clearing her mind of everyday concerns.

She sat up slowly. Oh, yes. Her neck and shoulder muscles felt much better now. This had definitely been worth the half hour she squeezed in after her shower and before getting dressed for dinner. Good thing she'd already planned what to wear - she passed Bill in the hall on the way to the bedroom, and he was ready to go. "I'll be in the living room, Nikolia," he said and squeezed her hand.

Bill had made reservations for dinner tonight in honor of Valentine's Day, which wasn't until Monday. He wouldn't say where they were going, only that it was someplace special and that they were going on Friday instead of Monday because it would take the whole evening.

She'd hurried home from work right on time. Her down cycle was finally over, and she wanted to be as rested, mentally and physically, as possible. The dress she chose was one that made her feel more feminine than usual - and of course, she wore the necklace Bill had given her for Christmas.

Once she was dressed, she poked her head into the living room and said, "I'm ready."

He smiled and said, "Come join me for a minute." Once she did, he reached into his coat pocket and she had the momentary crazy idea that he was pulling out an engagement ring. But the box was too large for a ring, and she swallowed her stomach back into place. "I got you a present. I think it'll go with your necklace."

She took the rectangular box and opened it. And gasped. It was a gold bangle-style bracelet, decorated with a number of small diamonds. "Bill, this is too much!"

"You don't like it?" he asked, but not like he really thought that.

"Of course I like it - it's beautiful! But you shouldn't have spent so much."

"Why not? I love you and I want to give you beautiful things."

There was no answer to that, so she slipped the bangle over her wrist, instead. It looked like it belonged there - of course. Bill had wonderful taste in jewelry. "Thank you," she said past the lump in her throat.

He smiled and gathered her close for a quick hug. "I'm glad you like it."

On the drive across town, she said, "I'm sorry I didn't get you a present. The only thing I saw for men in the ads were those silk boxer shorts with lips or hearts all over them, and they were just too silly. Plus you don't even wear boxers."

He said, "I'd have worn them, if you gave them to me." Before she was consumed by guilt, he added, "I'm glad you didn't, though."

The restaurant was one she'd heard of a thousand times, a place where dinner was an event that took several hours. It was located in a stately old house, and what used to be the living room now contained a handful of small tables. All the tables Nik could see were full, but the lighting was low and the music just loud enough that it felt like they were alone. The menu was limited, with only a few selections for each course, but the waiter described each choice so completely that ordering took close to ten minutes. The food, when it came, did justice to the setting and the presentation.

Strangely, though, she felt almost isolated from Bill. He sat within an arm's length of her, and they talked frequently during the long meal. It was the conversation of near-strangers, though - comments about the food, about the décor, about the waiter. Nothing personal, not even any suggestive remarks.

Every time she moved her arm, she felt the bangle shift position, and a little thrill ran through her body. It was silly, she knew, but wearing the jewelry he'd given her made her feel different than her normal self. Prettier. More feminine. Much more desirable. Bill must think she was those things, or he wouldn't give her expensive jewelry. So why did he seem so distant now?

Eventually, toward the end of the meal, she realized that he must be nervous. But what would make a man like Bill nervous? Certainly not being in a romantic setting with his lover.

Her normal suspicious mind would answer that question with the concern that he was becoming tired of her. She'd expected it to happen long before this. He was used to variety, and to a much more active social life than she was able to lead - or than she wanted to lead.

But she didn't think that was the answer. He'd seemed perfectly natural earlier, and she seriously doubted that he would have spent so much money on a Valentine's present for a woman he no longer wanted to be with.

There had to be another explanation. But what?

Her answer came almost before she formed the question. In the pause before dessert was served, he reached across the table for her hand and blurted, "I want us to live together."

**

Bill had thought the matter through, pros and cons, for the last couple of weeks. He was sure living together would be great for both of them. Too bad he hadn't spent even a couple of minutes putting his thoughts into words - he'd simply assumed the words would come, like they always had when he wanted to talk a woman into bed.

Because he hadn't, Nik was staring at him like he'd gone crazy. "I don't think you realize how tough living together is."

"We're doing it now."

"But that's only temporary, until -" She broke off, looking confused, then continued, "Well, it was only supposed to be while I was sick."

"Have you been wishing I'd go back to my place?" He hoped he knew the answer to that.

Her pause seemed way longer than necessary. "Not really. But I assumed it would happen fairly soon, so -"

She was making excuses, so he interrupted, "Let's not worry about that. Tell me what your concerns are, instead. Okay?"

"Okay." She blinked a couple of times before saying, "It makes splitting up a lot harder, for one thing."

He nodded. "That's fine. I'm not planning on us splitting up. Are you?"

She blinked in surprise. "No, but it'll happen."

"Not necessarily. I love you, Nik, and you say you love me. Why can't it last?"

He couldn't pick out what changed about her expression, but something guarded crept into her face. "It could, I guess."

She was leery, and he should have expected it. He should have approached the idea differently, not head-on like this. And if he wanted to convince her, that's how he'd have to go about it.

He gave her a smile that felt shaky. "I don't expect you to agree right away. Let's talk about it a little over the weekend and see how you feel then. Okay?"

She looked surprised, but relieved. "Okay."

Now all he had to do was find the right arguments and the exact right moment to mention them.

**

Nik kept waiting for the other shoe to drop the rest of the evening. But Bill never mentioned the subject again, not even after they were back at her place. He didn't seem annoyed or distracted, either, and they were as much in tune with each other's rhythms as ever. It was almost like she'd imagined the whole discussion.

She knew she hadn't, though. Bill wanted them to live together, and sooner or later they'd have to discuss

the issue. It would have made it much simpler if she was sure it would never work.

Finally, after they'd made love the next morning, she said, "I'm sorry if I seemed awfully negative last night. It's just that I've lived with a couple of guys, and it didn't turn out particularly well."

He shifted position slightly so he was looking at her face-to-face. "That's okay. I didn't mean to spring it on you like that, anyway. But I *would* like to talk about it, because I really hate the idea of moving back to my place."

"I would have thought you'd be relieved to get back to your apartment, after all the time you spent taking care of me."

"No way - I mean, my apartment's fine. The problem's that you're not there."

Well, there was an issue, something concrete, to discuss. "Assuming, just for a second, that we went ahead with this, where would we live? Here or your place?"

He shrugged. "It wouldn't matter."

"Have you thought about it?" If he hadn't, she couldn't see how he could be very serious about the whole idea.

"Well, yeah," he admitted. "My place doesn't make any sense, 'cause it's just rented, plus it's not big enough for two people. Here would work - or I was thinking we could even buy something together. I looked some at the ads last Sunday, and it looks like there'd be a lot to choose from, even right around here."

So he'd been thinking about this as long ago as last weekend. That gave her a funny unsettled feeling in her stomach. "Buying real estate with someone is a pretty big step," she said, trying for neutrality - and very definitely to not let him know how thrilled part of her was that he was ready to consider that type of commitment. "It might be smarter to wait on that for a while."

"You're right," he said quickly. "And your place is fine. I thought maybe I could put some of my furniture in the extra bedroom. Unless you want to keep that as a bedroom?"

She shook her head. "The only person who's ever stayed there is Neal, and that was when I was sick the first time." She realized suddenly that it sounded like she'd already agreed, and that wasn't the case. "But let's not get ahead of ourselves. I know I sound like a broken record, but living together's a big commitment, and I'm afraid you'd start feeling trapped before long."

"Why would I feel trapped?" he asked, gently brushing a strand of hair off her face.

"Because you would," she insisted. "Because living with someone full-time means that you can't just go home if we get on each other's nerves. Because I'm never going to be healthy enough to go out as often as you'd like us to."

He smiled. "I used to go out all the time because I didn't like being alone and was afraid of letting anyone get close to me. That's not an issue anymore - and getting on each other's nerves never has been, as far as I'm concerned."

"Didn't it drive you crazy when you needed to be quiet all the time so I could sleep?" She'd hated admitting to him that even the sound of the TV turned down low in the living room was enough to keep her awake.

"It drove me crazy, all right - with worry. Nik, when you're in pain like that, all I want to do is make it go away, and when I can't, nothing else matters." He pressed a finger to her lips. "And before you ask, no, it wouldn't have helped if I'd been back at my apartment. It would have been worse, because I'd have been worried about how you were and not dared to call, in case I woke you."

"But that's now. You'll get used to my flares and down cycles eventually, and they won't seem as important."

His forehead creased and he said, "That's another way of saying what we have now will change, and that I won't want to be with you as much or at all. And you might be right - I've never been in love before, so I don't know. But my whole life, I've seen people move in together and even get married, and I never understood why they'd do it. All I could compare it to was the horror of my parents' marriage, and I knew that was something I had to avoid. But I understand now. Loving someone is a lot more than making love with them, and the way I feel now, I won't ever stop loving you."

She didn't know how to respond. He hadn't said anything to change her mind, but what good would persuasive words be in the long run, anyway? He sighed. "I'm not convincing you. Is it just an issue of trusting me, or is there something more?"

"It's not that I don't trust you," she admitted. "I know you're being honest. And I know that the future is impossible to predict, so it makes no sense to promise we'll love each other forever."

"Are you still concerned about me cheating on you?"

She shook her head. "No. You're different now. If you did, it would be because you wanted out of our relationship."

He frowned and looked surprised at that, but didn't challenge her. "Do you simply not feel the same way I do? Would you rather have us spend most of the week apart?"

She sighed. She wouldn't lie. "No. I missed you like crazy when you took your mom to the rehab place last month." She had to try to explain. "Part of it's fear, I admit. I've been through this living-together thing a couple of times before, and I always swore I wouldn't do it again."

"You didn't intend to get involved again, either," he reminded her gently.

"I know. And our relationship's different than any I've had before, too." This was difficult, knowing which fears made sense and which didn't. "But one of the reasons I didn't want to live with anyone again was because of my fibro. I didn't want to inflict my weird lifestyle on another person - and before you say anything, I realize that's already happened with us. But the difference now is that you can always go home if you get sick of tiptoeing around the house, or eating mostly vegetables. If you were living here, you couldn't."

He smiled. "I thought about that, and it's not an issue. There are plenty of places I could go, if I needed to get away for a while - my athletic club's open twenty-four hours, or I could go to a movie, or one of the pubs. I admit that I've thought I might mind the food long-term, but it hasn't happened so far. To the contrary, I've found that I appreciate a good steak or lobster tail more, now that I don't have them all the time."

He seemed to have an answer for everything. Could that possibly mean it was a good idea? Well, here was something they hadn't discussed. "Another issue is that you've ended up doing all the work recently. That's not fair, but I don't know how we could do anything different. Since I got fibro, I've scraped by with doing the minimum around the house, and you're a lot neater than I am."

"You're neat," he said. "I'm a little obsessive about dust and clutter, I admit, but that comes from growing up the way I did. I don't mind cleaning - or cooking, for that matter. Doing either of them always reminds me how lucky I am now, to be out of that mess." His mouth twitched. "Actually, being with you's helped me get over my problem with leftovers. Ma used to serve the same damn thing, night after night, no matter how bad it had been the first time. When I started cooking for myself, I swore I'd never eat leftovers again - and you can't imagine the amount of perfectly good food I've thrown away, just for that reason. But last month, you had me make those big pots of soup, and I felt stupid only eating it once. So I ate it every time you did, and I realized that what I'd hated wasn't that it was leftovers per se, but that the original meal had been awful."

His words made her list of possible problems fly out the window. He, a man who'd spent his whole life keeping the world at an arm's length, felt safe talking about his past with her. He, a man who'd never dated a woman more than a handful of times, had been involved with her for four months and now wanted to prolong that indefinitely.

She licked her lips and swallowed hard. "Give me a few days to think about it. Okay?"

**

Bill had a hard time concentrating on work on Monday. Nik hadn't said anything more about living together, and he was doing his best to give her enough time to decide. That alone would have been enough to keep him on the edge of his seat all day, but added to that, it was Valentine's Day.

He was glad he'd already ordered her flowers before the weekend, or he'd have been tempted to make them outrageously showy, just to demonstrate how much he wanted her answer to be yes. Of course, she'd probably think they were extravagant, anyway, even though he'd only gone for a dozen and a half deep red roses. They were supposed to be delivered here, but he guessed they hadn't come yet. Nik would have at least called to thank him if they had - he thought.

Unless she'd decided against living together. Then, she might think she should wait until tonight to break the news, and not feel comfortable talking to him before that. No. He wouldn't think negatively like that!

Scott stopped by mid-afternoon, seeming almost aimless at first, as though they were pals and he was there to shoot the breeze. After a minute or two, though, he said, "There's something I feel kind of funny saying to you, but I really think I need to."

Geez - what a lead-in! "What is it?" Had he screwed up somehow? "You want to sit?"

Scott leaned against one of the guest chairs, but didn't sit. "Nah, I'm okay. It's - well, I was just doing some calculations on lines of code written and stuff like that, and I realized that your numbers are way out of line with everyone else's."

"That's because I've got all these reports and meetings and stuff." Just like Scott did. What were *his* numbers like?

Scott shook his head emphatically. "No, no. That's what I expected, but your numbers are the opposite - you're writing tons of code these days. More than Carolyn, and that's frankly amazing."

More than Carolyn? She was a one-woman coding factory. "Maybe your numbers are wrong. I mean, sure, I write code most nights and some on weekends, but it couldn't add up to *that* much."

"It does," Scott insisted. "And that's what I wanted to talk to you about. Seth's given me the speech a zillion times, so I ought to have it down pat by now - basically, it's not healthy to work so many hours so

consistently. Your mind needs a chance to rest other than when you're sleeping. It's not good for your eyes to stare at a computer screen for so many hours, either."

Bill couldn't help it. He had to laugh. "So you're telling me to *stop* working so much?"

Scott joined the laughter. "I know. It's pretty unbelievable, isn't it? But yeah, that's what I'm saying." After a moment, he sobered. "Seth used to say I should spend more time with Francine. I wish I'd listened to him more. Maybe things would have worked out better for her." He flicked a very serious look at Bill and said, "I *did* love her, and no matter what you think, not a day goes by that I don't wish she was still alive."

Bill felt the sincerity in his words. "I don't doubt you." He needed to respond in kind, to help strengthen whatever kind of bond was developing between them. "I'm glad the things I did last summer didn't keep you and Carolyn from getting together. The two of you are going to be great parents for Rachel, and I really wish I deserved to ask to be part of your wedding."

Scott's jaw dropped, but no words came out of his mouth - probably a good thing. Just then, Carolyn appeared in his office doorway, carrying a vase of flowers.

Bill welcomed the interruption, and he was reasonably sure Scott did, too. He smiled at Carolyn and said, "You already got flowers this morning. Do you have a secret admirer, or is Scott in the doghouse and trying to buy his way out?"

She grinned. "These aren't for me. They're for you." She handed them across the desk to him, and he nearly dropped them in his surprise. They were gorgeous - a mixture of huge red tulips and amazing white lilies - perhaps a dozen of each. The vase was clear glass, adding to the weight of the arrangement. With a smirk, Carolyn added, "Nancy says these are the best flowers so far. She was getting tired of roses."

"I wonder who they're from?" Scott's tone made it clear he had a pretty good idea. As Bill reached for the card, he heard Scott ask Carolyn, "So where are my flowers?"

Carolyn probably answered, but Bill had no idea what she said. He was too busy staring at the card. At the single word written on the card.

"YES!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Nik made a list of things she and Bill should discuss. How could they rearrange the bedroom to provide enough space for his dresser? Could she free up enough closet space for his clothes? What furniture from his apartment would he like to use in the living room? The list went on and on with the practicalities of living together.

But then, she heard the front door open and she dropped the pad on the table - making a mental note to add reorganizing the garage to her list, so they could both park inside - and ran to greet him. He grinned and slipped an arm around her waist. "As I remember from old sit-coms, aren't you supposed to bring me my pipe and slippers when I come in from a hard day at work?"

She - well, she guessed she had to admit she giggled at that, and burrowed in closer to his chest. "Sorry."

He placed a soft kiss on her lips and said, "This is just fine - perfect, in fact." They kissed some more.

At some point, she noticed that he was holding her with only one arm, and when she glanced at the other arm, she saw a bottle of champagne. "You brought champagne?"

"I thought we should celebrate," he said with a guilty hesitancy that melted her heart all over again. "I know you don't drink much, and with it being a weeknight and all, maybe you won't want to."

She reached for the bottle. "Tonight's a special occasion." She giggled again - twice in two minutes? She was clearly out of her mind. "The champagne'll go great with the Chinese food I ordered for dinner." Just the fact that she'd ordered out was amazing enough, but wait until he got a load of *what* she'd ordered! Two wonderful main dishes, super- fancy fried rice, hot-and-sour soup, and - her favorite - a double order of egg rolls. To heck with her diet tonight!

They walked into the kitchen hand-in-hand. Her list would have to wait until another time.

**

"Hey, Phillip." Bill was careful to use the preferred version of his co-worker's name, rather than Phil which he'd called him in the past to annoy him.

Phillip looked up from his desk. "Hey, Bill. What's up?"

He hated asking for favors, but sometimes it was necessary. "Uh, you still have that pickup, don't you?"

"It's my dad's, but he doesn't mind if I borrow it. Why? Do you have something that needs moved?" It always gave Bill a start to hear someone as educated as Phillip use that awkward colloquialism.

"Yeah." His smile felt weak. "My stuff. I'm moving in with Nik."

"You are?" Phillip's face lit up with that goofy grin of his. "That's great! I hardly know her, but she seems real nice."

"She is." Oh now, *that* was certainly brilliant conversation!

"How much stuff? Just your clothes and stuff, or your furniture, too?"

Geez. He should have thought about that. A pickup wouldn't hold all his furniture. "The whole shebang - but I guess maybe I should hire somebody to do it. There's an awful lot."

Phillip waved one of his larger-than-life-size hands. "That's okay. I've helped a bunch of people move whole apartments of stuff. If we get a couple of the other guys to help, we can do the whole job in a few hours."

"Really? You wouldn't mind?"

Phillip shrugged. "Nah. The way it usually works is you buy everybody pizza and beer when we finish. It's kind of fun, actually. I bet Rollie would be glad to help - but I have to warn you, he eats a *ton* of pizza. And maybe Jake or Barry - or even one of the support guys. When do you want to do it?"

"Maybe this next weekend." He'd spent at least an hour a day the last week at his old place, and Nik had helped him all weekend. He was pretty sure he'd be ready by Saturday.

"Cool. I'll talk to the guys and see who I can round up."

"Great."

Scott appeared in the doorway then. "Just the people I was looking for."

Phillip laughed. "Let me guess - you need help moving Carolyn's stuff into your place." When Scott looked mystified, he continued, "That's what Bill and I were talking about. He's moving in to Nik's next weekend."

Scott looked at Bill, and his expression was more than moderately surprised. "Hey, that's - great." In answer to Phillip, he said, "Actually, no. Carolyn doesn't have that much stuff, and she's getting rid of most of the furniture." He stepped back so he could see both Phillip and Bill at the same time and said, "What I wanted to talk to you two about is that we've been planning the wedding. As you know, it's going to be at Seth and Annabelle's, on the last Friday in March. We're hoping you guys might like to be ushers."

"Oh, neat! I was an usher at my sister's wedding." Phillip turned to Bill. "It was great - I was paired with this friend of hers I'd had a crush on when I was a kid, and we got to sit at the head table and everything. We wore tuxes, too - are we going to wear tuxes this time?"

Scott grinned, as did Bill. It was hard to keep a straight face in the light of Phillip's enthusiasm. "If you don't mind. Seth's my best man, and he and I are planning on it. He has his own, of course," he added with a roll of his eyes.

Bill had his own tux, too, but he knew to keep his mouth shut about it. "I'll be glad to. And thanks for asking me. I appreciate it."

He and Scott exchanged a private glance and Scott said, "It seemed appropriate." Including Phillip again in the conversation, he said, "I'm glad you're both willing. I'll tell Annabelle, and she'll let you know what's what. She's running the show, thank heavens."

Phillip grinned. "It'll be a good party, then. She does a great job."

And Bill would be part of it!

**

Nik was home alone, waiting for Bill and the other guys to bring over his furniture, when the phone rang. "Hello?"

"I need to talk to Billy," his mother's voice said.

"Oh hello, Mrs. Adams. This is Nik, and I'm sorry, but Bill's not here right now. He should be back in a couple of hours. Would you like me to have him call?" She was still in rehab, though, so maybe she couldn't receive calls. "Or I could take a message."

She sighed. "Oh, it don't matter, anyway. I'm gettin' out of here tomorra. I'll jus' get somebody else to pick me up."

"Don't do that! I'm sure Bill will want to come - what time should he be there?"

"I woulda thought you'da learned by now, girlie - my boy don't take kindly to bein' ordered around. Jus' like his old man that way." She sounded somewhat proud of that, although Nik couldn't imagine why.

Conveniently, she heard the front door open just then. "Say, Bill just walked in. I'll get him for you." She put the receiver down and hurried to meet him. Despite herself, she was surprised to see that he was sweaty and his face was streaked with dirt. She didn't remember ever seeing him messy or dirty before.

"Your mom's on the phone," she told him. "She's getting out tomorrow and wants you to pick her up."

He groaned softly and rolled his eyes. "I'm not going to be able to *move* tomorrow - but sure. Find out what time."

She shook her head. "Sorry. She wants to talk to you."

He headed toward the phone, muttering, "So all this time, it wasn't the booze."

She went out front to intercept Phillip and the other guys. Luckily, she knew where nearly everything went - into the rooms they'd emptied of Grandma's old furniture by donating it to a couple of local shelters. Bill had been surprised that she didn't mind giving so much away.

He still had no idea how much she was gaining in the process - and she didn't mean the expensive furniture the guys were starting to carry inside.

**

Bill was the main force in organizing Scott's bachelor party. That role traditionally went to the best man, but Seth was Scott's best man, and any party he organized would be way too lame. Not that Scott was the type for a girl jumping out of a cake, nor even a raucous good time with plenty of booze, but they needed a place where they could relax and not worry about people at the next table complaining about their noise.

They ended up in a private room at one of the local eateries, with a buffet set up for food and a waitress who brought them drinks from the bar. Seth came for a while, but had the grace to leave after eating so the rest of the group, all present or past employees, could enjoy themselves. And enjoy themselves, they did. Even Scott, Mr. Responsibility, loosened up enough to get mildly drunk, something Bill was willing to bet hadn't happened more than a handful of times in his entire life.

Still, the party ended early. By ten-thirty, Bill was taking care of the check and chatting with Larry, a former co-worker he'd often cruised the bars with. Larry wanted to know, "What's this I hear about you moving in with some woman?"

He shrugged. "It's true, if that's what you're asking."

"How come?" Larry demanded. "She got an extra boob or something?"

"You're the one with the breast fetish," he said, wishing the guy would give it a rest.

"Coulda fooled me, the way you were all over that blonde, last time I saw you. She had one fine rack on her."

Yeah, she did, but there'd apparently been no place in that body for a brain. She hadn't been able to keep two thoughts in her head at once. "Listen, Larry, people change."

"Yeah, I know," he said sadly. "What a waste - although, I have to say I'm not going to mind the lack of competition for babes." He grinned. "Speaking of which, one of your old girlfriends is out in the bar."

"Really? Who?" Not that he cared.

Larry shrugged. "I don't know her name - you were real jealous of her, wouldn't even introduce us. She works in that sexy clothes store at the mall."

"Tanya's out there? She doesn't usually cruise the bars." His information was at least six months out of

date, so he could be way wrong. Nevertheless, she was one of the few women he'd dated that he'd enjoy seeing again. "Come on. I'll introduce you to her tonight."

As they left the private room, Larry said, "If it's all the same to you, the brunette she's with is more my style."

"Whatever." Larry could have both of them, as far as Bill was concerned. He'd just stop by their table, say hi, and hit the road. Maybe Nik would still be awake.

Tanya and her friend were definitely the class of the bar, but somewhat surprisingly, they were sitting alone. She jumped up as Bill approached their table. "Bill, sweetie! It's been forever!"

"Hey, Tanya. How're you doing?"

"A lot better now," she said, wrapping her arms around him and giving him a kiss. She was a great kisser. "I was just telling Callie that I wished you'd come whisk me away -" She turned slightly back to her friend and slipped a hand into his back pants pocket. "Wasn't I, Callie?" His arm slipped around her waist of its own accord.

The brunette whose name was apparently Callie nodded. "It's nice to meet you. Who's your friend?"

Larry magically procured a chair from a nearby table and squeezed in next to Callie. "Hi, Callie. I'm Larry. Can I buy you a drink?"

She giggled in the typical airhead way and said, "I really shouldn't, but maybe just one more. To keep you company, you know."

Tanya said, "Come on, let's sit down and we'll see if you can make me forgive you for not calling all this time."

He sat down, wanting to give Larry at least a couple of minutes to talk to Callie privately. He'd tell Tanya about Nik, he decided. She might not be pleased personally, but she was basically a nice person and would be happy for him.

She landed on his lap right then, and when his mouth flew open in surprise, her tongue ended up playing tag with his. Her whole upper body pressed against his, and those incredible nipples of hers were hard already. He'd always enjoyed her enthusiasm for sex and the endless creativity she brought to it, and his body was quick to respond. He kissed her back and started to wrap his arms around her, wanting to make sure she stayed right where she belonged - as close as possible to him.

Except that *wasn't* where she belonged - that was Nik's spot now. Tanya was a sexy woman, but that didn't matter. She didn't belong here on his lap - nor anywhere else near him. When she paused to take a breath, he'd tell her.

Except when she stopped kissing him, she started up with these rhythmic presses of her leg against a part of his body that didn't need any extra attention from her. He tried to change positions so she couldn't continue driving him crazy, but she knew just exactly what she was doing.

"So, Larry," she said casually. "Did Bill tell you where Callie and I work?"

"Yeah," he said, barely glancing at her. All his attention was needed for Callie, who was taking a lot of deep breaths and using every opportunity to display her well-filled sweater.

"Callie models part-time, too - lingerie, like we sell in the store." She twisted back around to say to Bill,

"She thinks I should try it, too. Do you think I have the body for it?"

"Definitely," he said, knowing full well the question hadn't been a question. It had been a reminder of the many times he'd gone into the store and had her help him choose a sexy item of lingerie. Later that night, she'd modeled the item for him in the privacy of his apartment. Those modeling sessions had usually lasted until the next morning.

He tuned into Larry's conversation with Callie for a second, only to tune out again right away. She was telling him how her sweater was made from some incredibly-soft wool or some garbage like that, and inviting him to touch it. Yeah, right, the guy was going to be noticing the damn sweater!

Geez, he'd better get out of here while getting was still possible. "Well, I've got to get going," he said and gently pushed Tanya out of his lap. He stood up, telling Larry, "See you around," and saying, "Nice to see you, ladies" to Tanya and Callie.

Tanya grabbed his arm before he got five feet away from the table. He stopped, ready to be blunt if he had to be, but she shook her head and said urgently, "Look, just give me a ride home, okay? I rode over with Callie, and they're not going to want a third wheel around."

He sighed and took a long hard look at her. She'd dropped the man-eater act and seemed suddenly vulnerable. "Okay. A ride it is." He led the way across the parking lot quickly, not wanting her to get any ideas about his intentions.

She settled into the passenger seat with an "I love these leather seats!" and he had to smile at the memory of her excitement when she'd seen all the leather furniture in his apartment. If she ever got tired of the sexy clothing business, she'd be dynamite at one of the stores that specialized in leather furniture. He got in his side of the car, intending to suggest it as a possibility, but the words died halfway to his mouth.

Her blouse was hanging open and the excuse for a bra she had on wasn't much of an excuse. Geez - no wonder he'd felt her nipples earlier!

He was feeling one of them now, too. She'd taken his hand and put it right where she knew he liked it to be, cupping one of those miracles and circling her nipple with his thumb. "Yeah, that's right," she said, her voice already husky.

He'd forgotten how creamy-soft and delectable her breasts were, how smooth and silken her skin. He'd loved to bury his face in her flesh - the minutes spent that way had been a kind of meditation, only a whole lot sexier. His hand closed greedily around her, needing to possess it *all* right this second. She groaned and murmured, "Oh, yes!"

No! This wasn't right, and he didn't want any part of this - at least he didn't *want* to want any part of this. He ripped his hand away from her body and fastened it around the steering wheel. "If you seriously want a ride, get dressed. Nothing's going to happen here."

"Oh, silly!" She slapped his hand lightly. "Of course we're not going to do it right here in the parking lot! Your place'll do just fine."

"I'm living with my girlfriend, Tanya." He stared straight ahead, not sure how much more temptation he could take.

A little giggle. "That's all right. We'll go to my place, instead - and don't worry, I won't keep you out all night."

"I'll drop you at your place, but that's it. I'm not interested." He started the car and pulled out of the lot.

She probably hadn't buttoned her blouse, but he didn't want to abandon her in a bar parking lot, half-dressed. The sooner he got her to her place, the sooner he'd be on the way home.

Her hand snaked through the dark and unerringly landed where he least wanted it. She said, "That doesn't feel like a lack of interest. Not one teeny tiny bit." She stroked him through his pants while he struggled not to react, but just about the time he knew he had to do *something*, her hand disappeared. "I'm not going to force you, sweetie. If you really don't want to do it, I'll leave you alone."

"I really don't." He began to breathe again.

"Is her body better than mine?" Her voice was half-sultry, half-pouty.

He answered carefully. "Different, not better." She might not understand, but he'd explain anyway. "I never thought I could love someone the way I love her. My relationship with her is so totally different, so deep -"

She interrupted, her voice totally changed from a few seconds earlier. "I thought I was in love with somebody, too."

"It didn't last?" he asked.

"He left. A couple of weeks ago." She sounded sad and more than a little ashamed. "He cleaned out my bank account on the way."

His stomach churned. "Oh, Tanya. I'm so sorry. Look, do you need money? I could loan you some."

She said softly, "Thanks, but I'm okay. I sold my car - I can take the bus most places, and all it ever did was break down, anyway. I've been really depressed, and that's why Callie took me to the bar tonight, but I'm not ready to meet anybody new. You seemed like the answer to my prayers."

No wonder she'd seemed so desperate - and his old self would have loved every minute of it. "I'm sorry for getting your hopes up." He pulled into her apartment complex and found a visitor's space. "I'll walk you to your door, if you like."

**

Nik stayed at the party for Carolyn a lot longer than she'd planned. It was a nice party, held in the house Scott and Carolyn would be sharing after tomorrow. Carolyn's matron of honor, Eileen, was supposedly the hostess, but she'd just gotten in from Florida yesterday, so someone else must have done most of the work.

They ate delicious finger foods and many of the guests drank champagne like it was water. Nik stuck to plain water, and only tried a few of the most-irresistible-looking treats. To Nik's relief, they didn't play any silly games, and their only organized activity was Carolyn opening her gifts.

Word of mouth had been passed around work that this was a bedtime shower, meaning gifts were supposed to have something to do with bedtime. The phrase "the sexier the better" was added lest anyone get the wrong idea and give Carolyn a nice pillow or a CD of relaxing music.

That made for some pretty explicit gifts, lots of embarrassed and excited titters, and a non-stop blush on Carolyn's face. Nik's choice - a slip-like nightgown in turquoise - was quite mild, but she suspected Carolyn was more like to actually wear it than the French maid's costume someone else gave her.

Eileen's gift was a set of edible body paints in several different colors. Each color was a different fruit

flavor, and when Carolyn admitted she was mystified by their purpose, Eileen gave a graphic explanation of exactly how to use them. Carolyn turned flame-red shortly after the explanation began and remained that way long after she finished.

Nik didn't get home until ten-thirty, and she went right to bed. She doubted that Bill would be home anywhere near this early, and hoped she could get an hour or so of sleep first. She'd been having a minor flare the last day or two and they hadn't made love.

After all the sex talk tonight, she planned on changing that.

**

Bill had never been to Tanya's apartment before. It was close to his old one, but the complex was nowhere near as nice.

She wasn't much of a housekeeper, either. Every surface was full of old newspapers, used glasses, unopened-looking mail, and the like. He even thought he saw some dirty underwear over in the corner.

It was hard to see anything, though. The overhead light in the living room was burned out, and the light she turned on lit only one side of the couch. "I have to see if I can get that replaced," she said in a besieged voice.

"Do you have a bulb to replace that one?" he asked. He was tall enough to reach up and take down the globe.

"I guess - you mean, you'd do that for me?" Like it was an amazing feat that only a few select people could do, and only with great difficulty.

"Sure." She wandered off and he unfastened the globe, then took it to the tiny kitchen to wash it.

She brought back two bulbs and said, "The bedroom light's burned out, too. Would you mind doing both of them?"

"Not at all. Hold this for me while I do this first bulb." Once they got into the bedroom, though, he wondered how smart an idea it was to be in there with her. He reached up and took that globe down. It was full of dead flies and might never have been washed. "Here, go wash this while I change the bulb." When she got back, he was ready to put the globe up, which he did with no wasted motions.

He tested both lights quickly and headed for the door. "It was nice to see -" The words he'd been about to say vanished - along with all the oxygen in the room.

Geez. There she was, six feet away, wearing just that lacy bra and panties that were - well, even lacier and skimpier than the bra. She smiled like she was about to devour him and took a step forward. Then another, and another, and suddenly, she wasn't even six inches away. "You weren't going to leave without kissing me, were you?" Her lips reached out to draw him in.

"We kissed before," he said, his attention riveted on her mouth. He had to get out of here - *now*.

She shook her head, her tongue peeking out between her lips. "That wasn't a real kiss. Come on, baby, you can do better than that."

She closed the remaining distance between them, and when their lips met this time, his brain started replaying a thousand scenes of them all at once. Her mouth was so sweet, yet at the same time so incredibly hot. And her body felt so good pressed into his like this.

Somehow, they moved so that his back ended up against the front door. She plastered herself to his front, her hands laced through his hair like she thought he'd run away if she let him.

He remembered the many times *she'd* been the one with her back against the door or the wall - and the times they'd used the dining room table or the coffee table instead of a bed - and he was lost. She was just too hot for him to turn down.

He loved Nik, but she really couldn't expect him to be completely faithful, could she? It wasn't like anything he did with Tanya would harm their relationship - this was sex, not-so- pure and not-so-simple. What he and Nik had was so much more.

This was maybe even good for their relationship. When she was having a flare like earlier this week, they couldn't make love, and he could see how he might sometimes kind of resent that. But an hour or two with Tanya would wipe that resentment away, and he'd be better able to be patient and understanding with Nik.

Good thing he hadn't gotten around to taking the condom out of his wallet. He'd assumed he wouldn't need it ever again, but he'd carried one ever since he'd been a hopeful sixteen- year-old. Customs like that were hard to break.

His arms fit perfectly around her body. She was built just right for modeling lingerie, with lush breasts and ample other curves, yet with no excess flesh. And the look on her face was lust-crazed enough to drive a man insane!

He unfastened her bra, but it was caught between them and she wouldn't move back even a single step so he could take it off and have his fill of those gorgeous breasts. When he began working her panties down her backside, she made a purring sound deep in her throat and - as impossible as it seemed - shifted even closer.

Well, he wasn't going to let her rush him. He might be half out of his mind with need, but this would be a whole lot better if they took some time with it. Doing it pressed up against a door might take the blunt edges off their frenzy, but time and finesse would turn it into a work of art.

He shifted his hands so they were under her butt, then lifted her off her feet and took a tentative step forward. She was heavier than Nik - not a lot, but she was taller as well as curvier.

The movement caught her attention and she tilted her upper body slightly away from him. She smiled with catlike satisfaction and said, "See? I *knew* you wanted me!" Her bra straps slid down her arms, and she slithered out of them and tossed the bra away. She put both hands under one of her breasts and raised it to his mouth. "Have a taste, baby."

Oh, geez! Creamy smooth - and her nipple was so perfect for his mouth! He wasn't going to make it to the bedroom if he didn't take things a little slower. And it would *definitely* be worth making it to the bedroom. With how hot they both were, it wouldn't be long before he was inside her, making her control finally shatter -

No. Wait. That wasn't what it was like with Tanya. He was thinking about Nik. About how she *wasn't* blatantly sexy like Tanya normally. About how *she* reacted with *him*, not how she reacted with a random guy off the street.

He suddenly saw Tanya in a whole different way, a way that made her not quite as irresistible as she'd been a minute ago. A random guy was all he was to Tanya - he wasn't Bill Adams, a man who'd come from a horrendous childhood and done some awful things, but who she still thought was worth loving.

That's who he was to Nik. To Tanya, he was better than a night alone in this dump.

He set her feet firmly on the floor and reached for the door knob behind him.

The lust in her eyes was dulled by shock. "Baby?" She reached for him again. "Please?"

He suddenly saw something else in Tanya's eyes - loss, fear, and pain - and he questioned his resolve. Why, when he'd gone this far, should he deny her what she so obviously needed? The act wouldn't have anything to do with love - it was simply satisfying a normal human need. A need he had, too.

But that was the point. Having sex with Tanya couldn't possibly be construed as an altruistic gesture - it was selfish as hell, and it *would* be cheating.

The chill of the night air welcomed him back to sanity.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Nik cracked her eyes open in the nearly-black room. It seemed late. Wasn't Bill home yet?

Oh. There was the sound of the garage door opener. He was here now. She struggled to clear the sleep cobwebs from her brain.

She heard him come down the hall, and when he stepped into the room, she said, "Hi there."

He didn't speak for a second. "Oh, hi. I thought you'd be asleep."

"I was, earlier. How was the party?"

"Pretty good. How about yours?"

"Nice. Not as much fun as yours, obviously."

It sounded like he gulped. "Oh, it's been over for quite a while. I spent some time with Larry after - you don't know him, but he's a developer who worked at A-W for a couple of years." There was something strange about his voice, probably the effect of the drinks he'd had at the party. "Look, I'm going to take a quick shower before bed - I must have smoke and half a dozen other smells on me."

She heard his bathroom door close behind him and moments later, the sound of him throwing up.

Poor guy. It was no fun getting sick from too much to drink.

**

Bill lay in bed for hours, not sleeping a wink. What had possessed him tonight? Was he bound and determined to sabotage the best thing that had ever happened to him?

At least he'd come to his senses in time. But that thought wasn't as comforting as he would have liked because it meant that he'd *lost* his senses in the first place. Cheating wasn't something Nik could have forgiven, and in all honesty, he didn't think she was wrong.

They were in a long-term and hopefully permanent relationship. There was no room for other women in his life, and he didn't want there to be.

**

Nik had a hard time not laughing the next morning when Bill asked if she wanted him to make her breakfast. He must be trying to prove he didn't have a hangover. Did he think she hadn't heard him throwing up last night? "No, thanks. I'll just grab a nutrition drink on the way out. You'll need your car later, won't you?"

"I guess. I promised to go down early and help set up for the wedding. Unless you want to come with me?"

She shook her head, even though his back was to her. "No, I'd better come back here and rest for a while." She was used to it, but still she hated always having to make allowances for her fibro. Why couldn't she be like any other twenty-nine-year-old and have infinite energy?

He patted his pockets and smoothed his hair one final time, then crossed the room to kiss her goodbye. "Good idea."

She couldn't put her finger on it, but there was something funny about the way he was acting this morning.

Probably just a bad hangover. She hoped he wouldn't have to suffer all day.

**

Bill tried to get into the wedding spirit. It shouldn't have been hard. Scott was every inch the eager bridegroom - proud, ecstatic, and nervous in approximately equal proportions - and Seth and Annabelle seemed as thrilled as though he was marrying Francine. And Rachel! She was flying around the Worthingtons' mansion at approximately the speed of sound.

The mood eluded him, though. He kept busy arranging rows of chairs in the outdoor tent for the ceremony and placing last-minute decorations inside for the reception. After he and Phillip changed into their tuxes, they had some dead time, waiting for the first guests to arrive. Phillip complained, "I told you we should have given Scott something at the party last night. Did you hear all the stuff Carolyn got?"

He shook his head. "No. Anything good?"

Phillip's almost-white skin got blotchy with embarrassment. "I'll say! It was all sexy stuff - one of the things was this goop you spread on somebody, and then - like -" He was too mortified to finish the sentence.

"Somebody gave *Carolyn* body paint?" The image cheered him up for a few seconds - until he remembered about Tanya.

**

The wedding was beautiful and the reception lovely. No assembly-line feel, no crowded room full of tables with preassigned seats, no long drawn-out meal that turned out to be tasteless.

Instead of a reception, Nik felt like she was at an elegant but very comfortable party with friends, or people who might become friends if she got to know them. Both food and drink were plentiful and delicious, and even though most people stood and mingled, there were plenty of seats available for anyone who wanted one.

Bill's official duties were over once the wedding and photo session finished, so they spent most of the reception together. He was as sweet and thoughtful as ever, but something still wasn't quite right with him. She wondered if the fact that this was a wedding was on his mind. He might think that now that they were

living together, she'd expect him to marry her. She didn't, and she'd need to make that clear.

But not right now. That conversation was one they needed to have in private.

**

Bill drove home from the reception slowly, like a coward putting off his execution. How could he act natural at home with Nik? She was already looking at him funny, and he'd barely spent any time with her since last night.

Thanks to the stupid wedding, he was feeling more guilty than ever. It was that damn "forsaking all others" phrase. He'd been listening along, nodding to himself, thinking how much like a marriage living together was. And then the sky fell in. Scott and Carolyn stood there, in front of all those people, repeating those words like they were no more and no less important than all the other promises they were making - and he'd suddenly realized the magnitude of what had happened last night.

Before, his guilt had all been personal, all about how he felt about Nik and about how important their relationship was to him. But this forsaking all others stuff wasn't personal. It was how people lived their lives if they wanted their relationships to survive, and he'd blackmailed his way to a promotion based on less of a lapse on Scott's part than what he'd done last night.

He'd actually been proud of himself a few times since last night, thinking how easy it would have been to let Tanya have her way. And really, Nik would never have found out. Larry might have had his suspicions about what happened, but he wouldn't have said anything about it, even assuming he met Nik someday.

But easy didn't matter where love was concerned. Doing the right thing - always, no matter if it was significant or if anyone would ever know about it - that was what was required.

And Bill had blown it.

His only hope was for Nik to never find out.

**

Nik would have been amused by Bill's anxiety tonight if she wasn't so scared by it. Maybe he was having second thoughts about this whole living together thing - or maybe even loving her. The domestic way of life was a radical change for him, and maybe it didn't suit him.

He jumped up from his black leather recliner for about the millionth time tonight and said, "You know, I think I'll go to the club for a quick workout before bed. I haven't been going very regularly and you wouldn't want me to get fat."

That wasn't going to happen in this lifetime and he hadn't been fretting about getting fat all evening. It was time to confront reality. "I think you should stay home and we should talk about what's on your mind."

The horror on his face made it clear she wasn't imagining anything. "What do you mean? There isn't anything on my mind." His denial was ludicrous.

She shook her head. "I'm not buying that, Bill. Something's going on and we need to talk about it." Maybe it would help if she suggested things he might be thinking. "Does it have anything to do with the wedding today?"

The question startled him. "Why would you think that?"

"Because you've been weird all day. Our relationship is more serious than what you've had in the past, and going to a wedding might have made you think about that."

"You mean I might be sorry that we're together?" He clearly seemed to think that was crazy - definitely a good sign, from her point of view.

"Well, yeah. Or maybe more confused or amazed than sorry. The thing is, if you're feeling that way, it's okay, but we probably ought to talk about it." She hadn't done a very good job of explaining. It was hard to remember sometimes that Bill really didn't have much experience with what she'd consider a real relationship.

He shook his head and sighed. "That's not it, but you're right. Something is." He grabbed the footstool of his chair and straddled it. "Nik, I did something awful last night. Not as bad as it could have been, but pretty bad."

A rock landed hard in the pit of her stomach. What had he done? Could she even stand to hear him out? Maybe she should run away and hide - or tell him she didn't want to know what he'd done. Except the way he was acting, they'd never get past this unless he told her. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

"No." His eyes were wide and he looked as scared as she felt. "And I wasn't going to. But I think I have to."

She made her head move up and down in a nod. "Okay then." She slipped her hand between the arm of her chair and the cushion. She'd hold on to the cushion until she knew how bad it was.

He nodded back at her. "Okay. Well, you know about the party for Scott. And I told you about talking to Larry for a while after, but what he really wanted was for me to introduce him to a couple of girls in the bar because I knew one of them. Tanya. I used to - well, she was one of -"

She didn't want to hear this, but she had to. "One of the many women you had sex with."

He flinched. "Yeah, but she's - well, she's the one who was there when Francine died. It was kind of a big deal."

Bill and Francine and *Tanya* had been at his apartment that day? That wasn't in the story she'd heard, and it made the situation sound even weirder. "You were having a three- way?"

He goggled at her. "No way! She came over to see me that morning - she'd just found the stuff that proved Scott and Carolyn had been involved before - and Tanya'd spent the night. So she was there when Francine had that allergy attack of hers, and she called 911 and stuff."

And how was that relevant now? A possible answer occurred to her. "So, that experience made you feel closer to her, is that what you're saying?"

He nodded. "Exactly. And it had been a long time since I'd seen her, so I didn't mind when Larry wanted an introduction."

"Okay. So you went out there and introduced him, and then what?" And then, he obviously took her back to her place and screwed her brains out, but Nik wasn't going to make it easy for him. Those words were going to have to come out of his mouth, not hers.

"She threw herself at me, which I basically ignored, because I wanted to give Larry a chance to get friendly with Callie before I left."

She carefully kept her mouth shut.

"I left after a few minutes, but Tanya came running after me, wanting a ride home. I shouldn't have agreed, but I figured I could handle her." He undoubtedly could, and had.

He continued after a few seconds, "In the car, she was incredibly blatant, so much so that I threatened to make her walk home. But then I thought she got the message, because she started talking instead of groping. I felt bad for her because a guy had just walked out with a lot of her money -"

She couldn't help it. She snorted, and when Bill looked shocked, she asked, "You didn't buy that, did you?"

"Well, yeah. Why would she lie?"

"For sympathy, for one thing! And it obviously worked." Suddenly, this play-by-play recounting was too much like Chinese water torture. "Look, could we fast-forward ahead here? I don't need to know every detail - just tell me what you did." She squeezed the cushion to death, praying that he was having an attack of the guilts over something inconsequential.

"We didn't have sex," he blurted.

She felt suddenly dizzy from relief, and her hand started unclenching. But then she noticed that he wasn't any calmer - in fact, he seemed to be hyperventilating himself into either passing out or throwing up. "But you did something."

He nodded. "I came damn close. I -" He swallowed. "Nik, I was going to. We were kissing, and I had my hands all over her, and -" He shook his head in denial, buried his face in his hands, and whispered, "I'm so sorry."

Not as sorry as she was.

**

Bill discovered he was huddled into as small a shape as possible, as far from Nik as he could get without moving the stool. Like she was suddenly going to produce a leather belt and start beating the crap out of him. He deserved it, that was for damn sure - unlike most of the beatings Pop had dished out.

"And you *stopped*?" She didn't believe him.

He nodded. "I stopped. I pushed her away and walked out. I -" How could he explain? How could he say the things he needed her to hear?

"Why did you stop? Did you stop wanting her?" Her questions were like blows. His training was to cringe and wait for it to be over. Arguing or talking back to Pop only made him get it worse. "Answer me! And I want the *truth*!"

"I -" He blinked hard, needing the panic to recede and his brain to come to life. "She's not *you*, Nik - you're the one I want!" Maybe she'd cut him some slack now. She had to be glad to hear that.

"But you didn't know that until you were practically in bed with her?" No slack yet.

"No - I mean *yes*, of course I knew that -"

"Then why the *hell* did you kiss her and put your damn hands on her?" Geez, he sure hoped the slack would get here soon. She was nailing him to the wall.

"Because -" Just looking at her made him cringe and need to babble. "Nik, *please* - I'm *sorry*. Don't be this way!"

"Then start talking to me like a rational adult instead of a five-year-old caught with his hand in the cookie jar!" she snapped. Suddenly her mouth dropped open and she asked, "That's what's happening, isn't it? You're freaking out because I'm yelling at you."

He managed a small nod. "I'm trying not to. I know we have to talk about this, but I can't think straight." He gulped in some air, but it didn't help. "I didn't need to do anything wrong for Pop to beat me, but the times I did, it was worse."

He licked his lips, hoping for some saliva. "I remember this one time. I was playing ball with some kids down the street and I screwed up and hit it through this old grouch's window. The other kids all scattered, and he came out and made me take him home with me to tell my folks. Just Ma was there - and George - and the guy said he wanted the money for the window the next day. After he left, Ma said she was sorry, but I'd have to tell Pop because she didn't have any money. When Pop got home hours later, he said since the window was going to cost him all that money, he'd get his money's worth by beating me half to death. He did." Remembering that beating was enough to make him need to throw up.

All of a sudden, Nik was there holding his head against her chest. "Oh, Bill. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you like that."

Just having her hold him like that made him feel a little more safe and able to think. "I know. I know I deserve your anger, too. Me cheating's kind of the same thing for you as Pop beating me up is for me."

Her body went still for a moment, then she stepped back, leaving her hands on his shoulders so he didn't feel abandoned. "You're right. And I don't think either of us can be rational about this situation right now." She bit her lip and the look on her face was pained. "I'm sorry, but I - you're going to have to sleep out here tonight." After another moment, she sighed and turned away.

He waited for a reprieve for a very long time, but it never came.

**

For once, Nik wished she was a crier. She'd throw herself face-down on the bed, kick her legs and pound her fists into the mattress, and cry her heart out. But it wouldn't help.

Why? He claimed to love her - how could he even *want* another woman? She didn't want another man.

She knew that wasn't a fair analogy. She worked differently inside than Bill did. She hadn't ever wanted anyone else, not even when she was first with Allen. She'd *wanted* to want Allen, but even at its best, sex with him had been an after-thought.

Part of the betrayal she felt must be left over from last time. She'd trusted him and, the minute her back was turned, he'd bedded another woman. It was different this time.

But how different? Different enough to save her from another heartbreak?

**

Bill had never tried to sleep on his sleek leather couch before, but he suspected that the old overstuffed one Nik had inherited from her grandmother would have been more comfortable. Not that it was fair to judge from last night - he wouldn't have slept, anyway.

He'd gone over the scene with Nik a hundred times in his head, still shocked at the way her anger had triggered something irrational deep inside him. As part of her recovery, he and Ma were talking a lot about the past, and he finally understood that it hadn't been so much that she didn't *want* to leave Pop, but that his brutality had created at least the illusion of a stable life for her. Bill hadn't thought they had much in common that way, but now he wasn't so sure. He certainly would have traded a beating for the uncertainty of this situation.

But he'd spent most of the night struggling with his conscience, trying to understand why he'd let Tanya ruin his life right in front of him. Okay, sure, he'd been a little horny, and yes, she was incredibly sexy. But not enough to make him lose his mind!

Nik would be angry all over again when he didn't have answers for her this morning. Dreading her reaction and wishing he could avoid it, he suddenly thought of a way to show her how much he loved her and how committed he was to making their relationship work. So when he heard her shower go on, he went out to run a quick errand. Nik came into the kitchen a couple of minutes after he got back and said, "I thought I heard you leave just now."

He shook his head. "I just got back." He handed her the hot fudge sundae with peppermint ice cream he'd gone out for and unzipped his jeans. "I deserve it, Nik. Dump it right in there."

She set the sundae on the counter. "Don't be silly. That won't solve anything."

"Sure it will. It's what you did before to show me how much I hurt you." He pulled the waistband of his jeans open, demonstrating that he was wearing no more than he had been last time. He shivered, remembering just how damn awful this was going to feel. "Here, I'll hold this open for you."

She shook her head. "You already know you hurt me. There's no reason for me to do that."

"Yes, there is," he insisted, but he knew she wasn't going to change her mind. "Okay, then."

He didn't dare pause, or he'd never be able to go through with it. He kept one hand on his jeans, holding them open, and picked up the sundae with the other. In one motion, he overturned the container and shook it out, right on target.

Damn! That was cold!

CHAPTER THIRTY

Nik hadn't stayed around last time to see Bill's reaction to having a sundae in his pants. She'd been too busy trying to get back to her room before letting her tears out.

This time, his reaction was almost stoic. It was clear he was in something close to agony, but he just stood there and took it, looking kind of proud of himself.

"Why did you do that?" she demanded.

"Because I hurt you, and I deserve to suffer." His jaw tightened and he shifted miserably in place.

"And having ice cream in your jeans is supposed to make me forgive you, is that it?" How on earth could he think something as stupid as that? She needed rational answers, not a crazy stunt.

"I guess." He made a face and shook his head, suddenly seeming to take in her reaction. "It was a dumb idea, wasn't it? I'd better go shower."

Before he took a step, she put her hand in the middle of his chest to stop him. "Hold it right there for a minute. I want you to understand what's going on here. This isn't about punishing you for what happened last night. You suffering or me hurting you or anything like that is pointless. We already know you did wrong and that you're sorry. This is about us figuring out how to salvage our relationship - *if* we can salvage it."

He nodded urgently, like he was in dire need of going to the bathroom and would agree to anything to be allowed to go. She guessed the situation was pretty similar, but she wasn't going to let him off the hook that easily. "What I want to know right now, Bill, is why I don't need to worry about you meeting up with Tanya again - or any of the others. Tell me what you learned."

He groaned. "Nik, I'm dying here."

"Don't waste time then." The ice cream wouldn't do any real harm, and it might help him focus on her questions instead of flashing back to the past. Besides, it had been his own idea.

"Okay, okay." He raised both hands in surrender. "What I learned is that being turned on isn't what's important. Tanya's sexy as hell, but it's all fake - none of it has anything to do with her and me. With you, even when you're pissed and yelling at me, you're still you and you still care about who I really am. And I'd rather be right here with you, with hot fudge and peppermint ice cream in my pants, than anywhere in the universe with her or anyone else I've ever been with." A tremor went through his body, and she wasn't sure if it was emotion or a chill.

She looked him straight in the eye and asked, "Do you swear that's the truth?" He nodded and she saw tears pooling in his eyes. "You know I couldn't forgive you if you cheated again."

He nodded and swallowed some of the tears. "I know. I couldn't forgive myself, either. I love you, Nikolia. Please forgive me."

It was hard to catch her breath enough to say, "I love you, too, Bill. And I forgive you."

He wrapped her in his arms for a good long time, then suddenly tensed. "God, that ice cream's cold." He caught his breath, then asked, "Would it be okay -"

"Of course. Go take a shower."

He paused on the way out of the kitchen. "I don't suppose you'd be interested in helping me get rid of all this ice cream and fudge sauce, would you?"

"You might be able to persuade me," she said with a chuckle.

He did, and then she did, and together, they created quite a mess of melted ice cream and sticky fudge sauce.

It was worth it.

EPILOGUE

Valentine's Day Weekend, The Following Year

Nik saw the sign by the front door while they waited for it to be answered. "Martha's Madness" - okay, now she knew where they were. This was the B&B that friends of Scott and Carolyn's ran. She'd seen email about it, and heard how nice it was from a couple of people who'd been here. "You didn't need to be so mysterious about where we were going," she said to Bill, but it wasn't really a complaint. He

seemed to enjoy planning these little surprises, and every one of them gave her that warm glow inside reminding her that he still cared.

The door swung open and a petite blonde invited them in. "Welcome to Martha's Madness Bed-and-Breakfast. I'm Brittany Fiore, your hostess."

"I'm Bill Adams and this is Nik Harding," Bill said, offering his hand. "We spoke on the phone."

Her smile broadened. "Oh, yes! Everything's all ready for you. Let me show you around." She gave them a quick tour of the public areas on the main level, including the dining room where breakfast would be served in the morning. Nik was sorry it was already dark because both the living and dining rooms had huge walls of windows looking out at the beach.

Then, Brittany led the way upstairs to their room - or as it turned out, a suite consisting of a bedroom, a full bath, and a sitting room. Both the bedroom and the sitting room looked out toward the ocean, too. "Sometimes, couples like to have breakfast here in front of the window. If you'd like to do that, we'll be glad to help you carry it upstairs."

Nik said, "This is a lovely place. Am I right that you're friends with Scott and Carolyn Richards?"

Brittany laughed. "Oh, definitely. I've only known Scott since they got married, but Carolyn and I have been best friends ever since we were roommates freshman year in college. We met my husband Tony that year, too. As it happens, she and Scott are spending the weekend at the Worthingtons' house a ways up the coast, and they're going to stop by for a while tomorrow. I'll tell them you're here." She glanced around the room, as though checking that everything was in place. "Be sure to go up the stairs to the lookout tower sometime during your stay - the view is definitely worth it. Now, do you have any questions before I leave you to get settled?"

"Just one," Bill said. "Any recommendations about where to eat around here? I have reservations up in Manzanita for dinner tomorrow, and all we need is something fairly simple tonight."

Brittany replied, "There's a notebook in the living room with a number of menus in it, but for simple and local, you might try the seafood place right on the beach in the middle of town. Their fish and chips is good, and they have a number of other alternatives, too."

"That sounds good to me. Nik?"

She smiled. "Fine." In fact, she'd been so healthy recently, she might take a chance and have something deep-fried for once.

**

Bill juggled the tray he was carrying and finally managed to turn the doorknob without spilling anything. After arranging breakfast on the small glass table in the sitting room, he tiptoed into the bedroom and kissed Nik. "Ready for some breakfast?"

She yawned. "You go ahead. It'll take me forever to get dressed. I slept like a log last night."

"No need to get dressed, just come into the next room. It's all ready for you."

"How sweet!" She gave him a hug and padded into the bathroom. "I'll just wash my face and comb my hair first."

He thought of telling her not to bother, but knew she'd be happier if she did. When she got to the table,

she said, "Those cinnamon rolls look fantastic! And is that quiche?"

"Tony said it's strata, but that's similar. He's doing the cooking this morning, by the way - it turns out Brittany's pregnant and can't face food in the morning."

Nik laughed. "That's got to be pretty inconvenient, when you run a place like this." She took a bite of her cinnamon roll and groaned. "This is great. It's a good thing we're only here for the weekend."

Bill enjoyed watching Nik clean her plate, but didn't eat much himself. He couldn't help being nervous, even though he told himself it was silly. "Are you glad you let me move in with you last year?"

She grinned at him and teased, "Sure. I couldn't afford to hire a full-time housekeeper and cook, not to mention a personal masseur."

"How about your very own sex machine?" he teased back.

"Is that what you are? I thought you were just my lover."

"*Just* your lover?" He had to smile. She'd given him the perfect opening, completely innocently. "Maybe it's time to take care of that, Nikolia."

"Take care of what?" she asked, a little nervously.

"This bit about me being just your lover. Didn't you wonder when you were getting your diamond jewelry for Valentine's Day? Here it is - but there's a little catch. To get it, you need to agree to marry me." He pulled the box out of his pocket and showed it to her.

Her eyes and mouth went round. She stared for a few seconds, then said, "It's gorgeous, Bill. But marriage? Really?"

"Marriage, really, Nikolia. I've loved you for nine years now, and I'll love you for nine hundred more. You help me be the person I never knew I could be, and I like to think I make your life better in some small way."

"You make it so much better in so many ways!" she assured him. "But I'll always have this disease, and eventually you'll get tired of catering to me all the time."

He shook his head. "I won't. I love you too much." He swallowed. "It's taken me a long time to be able to say that, but I know now it's been true all along. I also know that you've thought marriage and kids wasn't something you'd ever be able to manage, but together, it's not out of reach."

Her eyes shining, she said, "I can see where marriage might be possible. It's not that different from living together, after all. But kids are something else, and -"

He cut her off with a smile. "I've figured out how we can make that work. If we stay in your house, we could afford for you to stay home, and to hire someone to help with the kids and the house. That way, you could do as much or as little as you were able to, and the kids would still be okay."

She bit her lower lip, and a few tears slipped down her cheeks. "You'd be willing to do that, even though you've never wanted kids?"

He blinked away tears of his own. "It's not so much that I don't want kids. It's more that I've always been afraid of turning out like Pop. But I don't have to be scared of that anymore, not with you around. And I really want you to have the kind of life you've always dreamed of, and I know that kids are part of that

dream."

She reached for his hand and squeezed it. "Oh, Bill, that's so sweet. But my dream of marriage and kids was just how I imagined life was supposed to be - and a symbol of what I thought I'd lost when I got sick. I know now that I don't need children to be satisfied with my life. Having children would take away from the time and energy I'd have for you, and you're the most important person in my life."

He clasped her other hand in his, looked deep into her eyes, and saw only truth. Truth and love. "Does this mean you're accepting my proposal?"

Mischief lit her eyes. "I don't recall being proposed to. Yet."

He wasn't a fool, so he quickly knelt at her feet and asked, "Nikolia, will you please do me the honor of becoming my bride?"

"I will," she said, her grin rivaling the brilliance of the sun.

**

Nik kept her hand firmly in Bill's as they walked down the stairs around noon. She felt like she might lose her grip on the floor and float up to the ceiling if he let go of her hand for even a second.

Scott and Carolyn were in the living room, along with Brittany and Tony, when they got there. Brittany looked questioningly at Bill and he grinned. "Yes, get out the champagne. We have an announcement!"

Brittany and Carolyn jumped up and came over to her - to see her ring, she finally realized. Tony disappeared toward the kitchen, and Scott said, "Congratulations, you two." When Tony returned with a bottle of champagne and a tray of glasses, it dawned on her that they had all known about Bill's proposal before she did.

Tony did the honors opening and pouring the champagne, glancing at Brittany before giving her only enough for a toast. When he began to pour Carolyn's, she cleared her throat and said, "Just what you gave Britt." His mouth dropped halfway open and she turned the beet-red color that people at work were always teasing her about. "We, um, have an announcement, too."

Brittany squealed and ran to hug her old friend. "When are you due?"

"Early October," Scott answered with a proud smile.

Bill said, "Well, I guess we'd better drink to that news, too," and they all raised their glasses and toasted each other.

A few minutes later, Nik happened to glance at Carolyn and Tony, standing a foot or two off to the side. She heard Tony say, "I'm happy for you, babe."

Carolyn replied, "Thanks, Tony. I'm so glad that things worked out for both of us. I was afraid they never would."

He nodded. "I know. It's good there's such a thing as second chances. We sure needed them."

Nik slipped her arm a little tighter around Bill's waist and murmured, "We did, too."

The End

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