

PRIORITIES

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Chapter 1

Capone practiced his defenses outside the apartment: charming smile, contrite frown, remorseful glower. Satisfied, he pushed through the door.

Kim stood in the small kitchenette. “Look what the cat dragged in.” She eyed him coldly. He flashed his charming smile.

She reached for a cigarette from a box on the table. “Or was she more of a dog?”

“She who? I’ve been at the studio; last minute audition stuff,” he replied smoothly.

Touching a match to the end of the cigarette, she dragged hard. “Were you alone?” Her words mingled with the wisps of smoke she exhaled.

He knew the cigarettes were a bad sign. She’d been off them for over a year. “Curt and Erik were with me.” His eyes dared her to doubt him. “You can call them if you don’t believe me.”

She ground the cigarette into an already overflowing ashtray. “I don’t have to call them. They were here most the night.”

He fished for a logical explanation. “Okay. The truth is...” His expression emphasized the sincerity of his words. “This audition with RJF has really got me wound up. I just needed to get away. From the studio, the band, everything.”

She lit another cigarette and watched him

skeptically. “Where’d you go?”

“Mike’s.”

“Wrong! I called there.”

“I stopped at Mike’s... He wasn’t home.” He smiled convincingly. “So I went to Tracy’s.” The words were out before he remembered Tracy was on vacation.

“Capone,” she said wearily. “If you could, just for once, stop lying. Maybe we would have had a chance...” She stubbed out her cigarette and headed into the bedroom, reemerging with a bulging suitcase. “Instead, I’m outta here.”

“Come on, Kim.” He reached for the suitcase. “You know I love you...” his tone was repentant.

“Me and every other girl you can get your hands on.” She gripped the suitcase firmly. “It’s time for me to face reality. I’m never going to change you. And I need something more solid in my life.”

He couldn’t believe she meant it. “Right before the audition?”

“You need to face reality too, Capone. This audition’s no different from the others. You weren’t meant to be a star.”

He stared at her, wounded. “Is that what you think?”

She nodded, her face hard.

“Well, you’re wrong,” he said thinly, releasing his grip on the suitcase. “Dead wrong.”

She turned to the door without answering. He made no move to stop her.

Chapter 2

Although she'd taken the shortcut, she was still late. The driveway was empty; thank God Alex wasn't home yet. The boys had started dinner, Jason boiling water for spaghetti and Jeremy chopping lettuce for a salad. She hugged them quickly before heading upstairs to change.

"Mom." Jason yelled behind her. "Somebody named Capone called for you. He said it was important." She stopped in her tracks.

"Capone? Are you sure?"

"That's what he said. Pretty hard to forget a stupid name like that."

"What else did he say?"

"That it was important. And that he'd call back later," he repeated.

"Okay, honey. Thanks," she answered casually. Andy Capone? Now? After eighteen years?

He called back just an hour later.

"Hey, Babe. How you been?" As if they'd seen each other just last week.

"Fine."

"I guess you wonder why I'm calling?" When she didn't reply, he continued. "I got a gig, Shelly, a really big gig. An audition with RJF Records."

He expected some kind of reaction. Congratulations, surely. RJF was the hottest label in the industry. But more likely, a way to get in on the action. Shelly said nothing. "I need a female lead." He tipped his hand.

"You're calling me?"

Her ambivalence astounded him. "I'm in a bind," he continued.

"Capone... The last time I sang was with you."

"Are you kidding?" He'd wondered so many times. "Why?"

"I got married, had two children. Singing wasn't important anymore."

"Not important? Shelly, a voice like yours..."

She remained silent.

"Well, what do you think? Can you help me out?"

"I told you, I have a family. A job."

"I'm not looking for a lifetime commitment here, just somebody to sing with me on this *one* audition. I can take it from there. I'll pay you twice what you'd make at work. I'll find a babysitter for your kids. Anything."

"Why me?"

"Like I said, I'm in a bind. My female lead walked out on me. You're the only other singer I know with a voice even close. RJF has the demo tape; I can't go in there with a totally different sound."

Encouraged by her silence, he continued. "I know I can patch things up with her... But probably not in time for the audition."

"Capone, I can't!"

“Shelly I know how bad I treated you. I deserve it if you tell me to get lost. But I’m begging you! I’ll fly you out here, pay for the hotel, pay you double time. Whatever it takes.

“It’ll be like a vacation. It’s just a couple of hours of hours on Friday. You can spend the rest of your time sightseeing. You always talked about seeing New York City. Here’s your chance.”

He smiled, sensing a spark of interest. “Shelly? Are you there?”

“Yes,” she murmured.

“So what do you say? Are you gonna save my life? I can have an airline ticket to you tomorrow.”

She thought hard. There was no way. She had work... The boys... Alex. It was impossible to even consider running off to New York on the whim of someone who had proven himself to be thoughtless and unreliable. It was insane!

So why was she taking down his number, promising to call the next day?

As she finished up dinner, the phone call ran through her head. Crunching gravel in the driveway signaled Alex was home from work. She mentally rehearsed her story as she set the table.

Their nightly, ritual stroll in the garden provided the perfect opportunity for her to speak to him alone. She stopped before a roughhewn wooden bench, brushing away

a few dried leaves before sitting down, and patted the seat beside her. He joined her obligingly.

She snuggled into his chest. “Cathy called today.”

He leaned back contentedly, closed his eyes and propped his long legs on a block of cement. “What did she have to say?”

“A lot, really. She got these free plane tickets and she wants to give them to me. So I can visit her in New York...”

“Huh.”

“They have to be used this week.”

He blinked. “This week?”

“Yeah. Like Wednesday.”

“The day after tomorrow?”

“I’d be back home Sunday,” she offered hopefully. “I have some vacation days left at work, so I wouldn’t be losing any pay.”

“But you’d have to pay for taxis and food. And other stuff.”

“Cathy is paying for everything.” She dismissed the objection, knowing that expenses would be his first concern.

“What about Jason and Jeremy?”

“They’re big boys now, Alex. They’ll be fine.”

He didn’t want her to go; but knew he was being selfish. A few days without her wouldn’t kill them. “If you really want to go,” he said slowly. “I guess we could swing it.”

Chapter 3

Cathy waited impatiently as the passengers disembarked, finally catching sight of her.

“Shelly,” she called, waving her arms above her head.

“You look great,” breathed Shelly, scrutinizing her sister’s fashionable outfit, sleek hairdo, and expensive jewelry.

“So do you,” Cathy replied. But Shelly felt scruffy in jeans and sneakers.

“I’m so happy you’re really here,” Cathy chattered excitedly. “We are going to have so much fun! I can’t wait for you to see my place!”

She followed her sister through the bustling airport, wide-eyed, and watched as she expertly hailed a taxi. Shelly stared out the window as they passed through the city, while Cathy prattled on about the places they’d be visiting.

They stopped in front of an impressive brick-faced building. “Okay, here we are,” she announced.

The doorman rushed forward to help with her bags, greeting them as ‘Miss Wilson and Mrs. St. John.’ Once inside, she gasped. The ultra-modern luxury apartment was a stark contrast to Shelly’s rambling ranch house. Glass and chrome predominated. Soft white velour couches were accented with fluffy pillows of mint green, peach and pale pink. Contemporary art filled the walls and

shelves. Thick white carpet stretched wall-to-wall. “This place is awesome,” she murmured.

“Thanks.” She motioned her to the couch and disappeared into the kitchen. Returning with two tall glasses of iced tea, she sat beside her. “So what’s with the rush-rush visit? You’re not having problems with Alex, are you?”

“No. But I might if he finds out I lied to him about this visit.”

“Lied how?”

“Well, for one thing I told him you gave me the plane tickets to get here,” she admitted. “And, second, I didn’t mention Capone.”

“Andy Capone?”

“Yeah. Remember him?”

Cathy nodded. Of course she remembered that arrogant son of a bitch. Shelly had been in love with him, had planned to marry him, until he dumped her. Right before their mother died!

“What’s he got to do with it?”

“He has this audition for a record company. He couldn’t find anybody to sing female lead, so he called me. He paid for the whole trip and even sent me \$1000.”

“You’ve been keeping in touch with him?”

“No. I haven’t talked to him since high school.”

“How did he get your number?”

“Joe Collins gave it to him.”

“This is really weird, Shelly. Are you sure it’s legit?”

“He says it is. But, you know, I don't even care. When I heard it was in New York and that he would pay for the whole thing, I couldn't resist. So I took some vacation days from work and here I am.”

“Shelly. I would have paid your plane fare. You didn't have to agree to some hare-brained scheme of Capone's. Or lie to Alex.”

“I know. But it's kind of an adventure this way. And I wouldn't have felt right about asking you to pay.”

Cathy shook her head. Shelly was one most generous people she knew. Why did she find it so hard to accept the generosity of others? “Well anyway, you're here until Sunday?”

“Yeah. I promised Capone I would practice with him tomorrow morning. The audition is Friday afternoon. I'm flying out Sunday afternoon.”

“Great! I thought we could order in some Chinese food tonight and just gab all night. Tomorrow I have to work in the morning, but I'm getting off early so we can have lunch somewhere nice.”

Shelly nodded dreamily. “That sounds great. Cathy, you remember how we used to dream about living here?”

She nodded. It had been all they talked about, New York City, Los Angeles, even Paris. They would be famous and powerful, live in penthouse apartments, eat in the best restaurants and hang out with celebrities.

The food arrived and Cathy uncorked a bottle of champagne. They gossiped and laughed with the friendly intimacy only sisters can achieve. “Do you remember that

night we got thrown out of The Paradise Club?” Shelly giggled.

“Yeah, Capone hit that really big guy with a pool cue. You poured a drink on his girlfriend. You’re lucky she was too drunk to catch you.”

“How about the time the cops found you guys skinny dipping at the beach?”

“At least we were smart enough to stay in the water, instead of getting arrested, like you!”

How wild and carefree they’d been then. Shelly’s membership in an amateur rock band gave them access to bars and nightclubs at an early age. Their mother’s night job gave them opportunity to stay out as late as they liked. They developed a taste for cheap vodka and experimented widely with drugs. They rarely made it to school, having partied until late in the morning, and spent most of their days at the beach. But both girls managed to maintain passing grades.

Shelly was in her senior year, Cathy her junior, when they received the sobering news. Their mother was diagnosed with breast cancer.

“Do you remember the day she told us?” Shelly asked softly, as if reading her sister’s thoughts.

Cathy nodded. “Of course. It was the day you and Capone got engaged. You didn’t even get to tell her about it. When she told us she had cancer it was like nothing else mattered.”

Missed workdays and medical bills created an enormous financial drain on the single mother. Both girls had taken part-time jobs after school to help out. Within

months, she'd been too sick to work at all. They switched to night classes and worked full time during the day.

"She was dead less than eight months later," Cathy continued.

"Seven months, twelve days. Such a short time..." Shelly mused. In those seven months, Cathy had applied for and been awarded a full scholarship to The New York Institute of Art. Resentful of the limited time she was able to devote to the band, Capone had replaced Shelly, both as singing partner, and lover.

She hadn't been wild, or carefree, since.

She blinked at the figure framed by the doorway.

"Shelly, you haven't changed a bit!" he exclaimed.

She nodded, and tried to stop staring. The transformation of Andrew Capone was amazing. The thick mop of curly black hair that had hung to his waist was neatly trimmed and moussed into place. Gone was the scraggly mustache and goatee she remembered; his clean-shaven lips were wide and sensual. Heavily muscled arms and chest replaced his formerly scrawny physique.

The boy she'd known wore black jeans, sneakers and T-shirt. This Capone dressed in pressed black slacks, Italian loafers and an expensive jacket. Had he always had that air of confidence? Or those incredible black eyes?

"Well, come on." He broke the silence. "We'd better get going."

She followed behind him, expecting to be led off to a shiny black sports car and was surprised to find a waiting cab.

“It's not too far to the studio,” he explained. “But with this traffic, it'll take about twenty minutes.” She nodded, finding herself uncharacteristically tongue-tied.

Sensing her discomfort, he tried to draw her into conversation. “So how old are your kids, Shelly?”

“Jason's fifteen and Jeremy is thirteen,” she answered.

“Wow, teenagers! What grade are they in?”

“Jeremy 's in seventh, Jason's in ninth. He goes to Park High.”

“No shit! Park High, huh?” He fell into a silent reverie, remembering the days he and the woman sitting beside him had attended Park High.

Life had been so much simpler then. His dreams had been just that. He would be rich and famous, marry Shelly and have a whole slew of kids. They would rock and roll at night and would be devoted parents by day. So far the dream had resulted in a string of affairs with women who meant nothing to him, singing in shitty little clubs and still pursuing his big break.

He studied her as she looked out the window at the streets of New York. She was still some looker. Auburn hair, with streaks of electric red, fell about her shoulders, thick as a lion's mane. Her skin, though fair, was tanned honey gold and her green eyes dazzled. Although tiny, she was well muscled as though she worked out regularly.

‘Pretty hot,’ he thought. ‘If only her voice is as well preserved as her body.’

“So, Shelly.” She turned to look at him. “You really haven’t been singing at all?”

“No, not really. I sing when I’m cleaning. That’s about all.”

“How do you sound?”

“I don’t know. The vacuum kind of drowns me out,” she giggled.

The cab slowed and stopped in front of a shabby brick building. He ushered her inside. “I rent studio time here to practice. A lot of singers do.” He unlocked the door.

She smiled nervously and followed him down the silent hallway. “I guess nobody else is here.”

“There’s other people here,” he replied. “The rooms are all soundproofed.” He opened the door to an enormous room with acoustic tiles on the walls and ceiling. Deep pile carpeting covered the floor. A professional looking sound booth dominated the back corner. A large raised platform, equipped with amplifiers and microphones, served as a stage.

“Pretty cool, huh?” he asked.

After checking the equipment, he approached her. “Okay, Shelly. Do you remember any of the songs we used to sing?”

“I remember them all.”

“Good. How about we start with *Break my Heart?*”

At his cue, she began. Seeing the look on his face, she faltered.

“Shelly, don’t you remember abdominal breathing? And why are you so high?”

“Sorry,” she said nervously. “It’s been a long time.”

He hoped he hadn’t put too much faith in Shelly as a replacement. She was certainly rusty. “Let’s go over some basics,” he instructed, patiently.

Two hours later, he was feeling more confident. Her voice had changed over the years but she had retained most of her former range.

Even so, the moment he saw off Shelly’s cab, he left another message for Kim with her mother, begging her to return for the audition.

Cathy was waiting for her at her apartment. “How did it go?”

“Okay. I think.”

“It’s almost two o’clock, I think we can just make our reservation.”

After they were seated, she watched indulgently as Shelly craned her neck, searching for celebrities. “I don’t see anybody. Aren’t all the famous people supposed to be eating here?” she asked disappointedly. Cathy pointed out that the head of a large fashion house was seated at the next table and the CEO of the nation’s largest computer company was sitting two tables over. She nudged her

gently and gestured toward the lobby. "You see that man? That's Brandon Knight. He's the VP of RJF Records."

"RJF Records?" Shelly repeated. "I think that's where I'm supposed to go with Capone."

"Oh Shelly. I don't think so. RJF is kind of out of Capone's league."

"Well, I might be wrong. But that's what I thought he said."

"Or maybe Capone got it wrong. I'm dying to know, what's he like now?"

"Different."

"Does he still dress like Adam Cartwright?"

She smiled. "He still dresses in black, but he traded the jeans for designer suits. He looks like he stepped out of a magazine ad."

Cathy shrugged. "Everybody in New York looks like that."

After lunch, they shopped. Shelly was amazed at the variety, and also the prices. "Oh my God!" she exclaimed over and over. "I could get this same thing at K-Mart for one quarter the price." Cathy shushed her good-naturedly.

She waited until she knew Alex would be there before she called home. Everybody was doing fine. Still, she felt guilty about lying to them.

They had a late supper at a cozy Italian place down the street. Shelly barely touched the delicious food. "What's wrong?" Cathy asked after they'd returned home

and settled down in the living room. “And don’t tell me ‘nothing’; you’re quiet as a mouse.”

“You know with all the excitement this week, getting ready to go and thinking about seeing you and worrying about Alex and the boys, I haven’t thought much about the actual audition. But now I can’t think of anything else. I’m sitting here wondering why in the world I thought I could go through with it.”

“It’s natural to be nervous, Shelly. I’m sure even the best in the business get butterflies before they perform. But it’s different for you. This isn’t your career. Just this one shot and it’s over.”

“That’s true, but I don’t want them to laugh at me.”

“Are you as good as you used to be?”

“To tell you the truth, I think I sound better than I used to, but Capone has all this fancy equipment now.”

“What are you going to wear?”

Shelly showed her the outfit she’d picked to wear for the audition. “A business suit?” squawked Cathy. “You can’t wear a business suit!”

“It’s not a business suit,” she protested. “It’s a dressy pant suit.”

“But it’s not something you wear to an audition! For Christ’s sake, Shelly, I thought you didn’t want to be laughed at.” She stopped, seeing the hurt look on her face. “I’m sorry. I just meant...well you know; where’s the leather and chains?”

She laughed. “You’re right. What was I thinking? This would look pretty lame next to ‘Adam Cartwright’.”

“Come on. Let's go see if I have anything that would work. Okay?” she asked, not wanting to hurt her feelings any further.

Together they ransacked her enormous closet for something suitable. Shelly had to admit; Cathy had more ‘rock star’ attire than she did. “You wear this?” she asked in amazement, holding up a pink vinyl brassiere with gold sequined tassels. Cathy smiled. “Wait until you see what they’re wearing in the clubs! I might just wear it tomorrow night.”

Between them, they decided on black leather miniskirt and thigh high leather boots. The outfit was completed by a gold lame halter-top that exposed her tanned midriff, and a short black denim jacket. Cathy rummaged through a small bureau converted to jewelry box and emerged with huge gold hoop earrings and a fine gold belly chain. “Here!” she called triumphantly. “The crowning touch.”

Capone was holding a last minute jam session. Erik was the one to bring it up. “Where's Kim?”

“It didn't happen,” he informed them. “We’re going with the new chick.”

“How come she's not here tonight?”

“We practiced today. She was hot! And Erik... you know her.”

Erik raised his eyebrows quizzically.

“Shelly.”

“Shelly? From high school?” Remembering her enormous talent, he brightened.

Curt remained unconvinced. Capone had pulled some pretty bogus shit in the past.

Tom Meyers was in his office late, as usual. He had just finished viewing *The Capones'* demo tape. They were good. The lead singer, handsome and cocky Andy Capone, had a sexy and brazen delivery that was sure to drive women crazy. The female lead was pretty and had a raw earthy voice. The combination of soulful ballad and heavy metal was a unique sound he hadn't heard in any other group. A little fine-tuning and they might become something.

As head of the New Artists Division at RJF, Tom was an up and coming star himself. Four of his groups had albums on the Charts this week, two of the in the Top Ten, making RJF the hottest label in town and Tom Meyers it's Golden Child. If he could just find a group that would stay on the charts week after week, song after song, his future would be secure.

He drew in his breath when she opened the door. “You look great,” he smiled. The gold lame and earrings brought out the fiery glints in her hair, which cascaded in an untamed mane over her shoulders. Her make-up was dramatic; her full lips framed in shocking red.

She blushed at his appraisal. “Do you think it's too much?” she asked nervously.

“I think it's just enough,” he assured her. “Now come on, the guys are waiting for us.”

Her eyes widened when she saw the ‘guys’ from the band. Why hadn't she thought there must be a band? Shit. She'd pictured her and Capone singing alone; like yesterday.

She followed him into the back of a black stretch limo he'd rented for the audition and was hurriedly introduced to ‘the guys’. She recognized Erik and smiled warmly. Seeing him there made her feel slightly more comfortable. She nodded “hello” to Curt and John. They were all similarly dressed and, like Capone, favored black. Silently, she thanked Cathy for choosing her outfit.

They were ushered into a well-equipped sound room by RJF's receptionist and greeted by Tom Meyers and Lorna Miller, the group's agent. She glanced at Shelly and pulled Capone aside.

“Capone? Who is that? Where's Kim?”

“Well actually, she couldn't make it and Shelly was nice enough to stand in for her.”

“Couldn't make it?” Lorna fairly shrieked. “What do mean she couldn't make it? Don't you realize how important this audition is?”

By now Tom Meyers had stepped over to see what the commotion was about. He looked to Lorna for an explanation.

Lorna was tall and muscular with a rigid posture and stern face. She glared at Capone and replied. “The

female lead was unable to make it. Capone brought a replacement.”

Tom looked at him incredulously. “The female lead is an integral part of the group, Mr. Capone. I’m not sure we would be interested in someone different.”

“I know this is very short notice, but I’m afraid I only found out recently that she couldn’t make it. I spent a lot of time finding a replacement that had a comparable voice and flew her in from Florida.”

“You should have let us know, Capone!” Lorna exclaimed.

“I know,” he responded with feigned chagrin. In truth, he had been afraid to tell them in advance for fear that the audition would be canceled. “But if you’ll just give us a chance. I think you’ll be real pleased...” But Tom had tromped to the table of his colleagues and was explaining the situation.

“Can you believe this guy?” he fumed.

They nodded sympathetically. One of the production assistants murmured. “She’s got something, though...” He searched for the word. “Sparkle.”

They turned to study her. Shelly smiled nervously and fiddled with the now ridiculous seeming belly chain. Tom found himself relenting. If she could sing as well as Capone wanted him to believe...

“Okay, Mr. Capone. Let’s hear what you got. But this is *not* a good way to start our relationship.”

He breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you, Mr. Meyers,” he said, and hurried off to perform an equipment check. *I hope Shelly delivers*, he thought. *If she fucks up*,

it'll be one fuck up too many. And the look Lorna had given him told him he would also have to be finding a new agent.

Everyone moved into place and Tom inserted a reel-to-reel into the recorder and reset the video camera. Like a trooper, Shelly got into her assigned spot and adjusted the height of her microphone.

“Start at the count of three,” Tom instructed.

He stepped into the sound room and raised his right hand, lifting one, two, three fingers. They broke into *Midnight Magic*. It was one of the first songs he'd written and he'd picked it because Shelly sang only back up and it would give her a chance to overcome her nervousness. He waited anxiously as the instrumentals ended and her first chorus started.

She sounded good. No. She sounded great! He gave her the thumbs up. Next was *Best of All*, a duet they'd sung together hundreds of times. She never broke her stride through the next four songs. And then, the audition was over. To her amazement, instead of being relieved, she was actually disappointed.

Tom Meyers walked up, grinning. “Well Capone, I'm glad I took the time to listen. And congratulations, Shelly. You made an excellent replacement.” He extended his hand. “Thank you for coming.” He shook each of their hands and ushered them through the lobby and outside.

Out on the sidewalk, they looked at each other in confusion. “That's it?” Erik asked.

“It will take a few days for them to get back to me,” Lorna explained. “*If* they do. Capone, you ever pull a trick like this again, you’ll be looking for a new agent. RJF isn’t the kind of company you fuck around with.”

He apologized again. “The truth is, Kim kind of walked out on me,” he explained. “But I’ve talked to her and I’m sure I can get her to come back, especially if we get a contract with RJF. And Shelly sounds so much like Kim...”

Only then did Lorna fully acknowledge her. “Yes, dear, you were very good. Who’s your agent?”

Shelly smiled. “I don’t have one.”

“You do now,” she replied.

“No really, I don’t,” Shelly protested. “I only came here to help Capone out.”

“Well, please don’t sign with anyone without considering me,” she insisted, thrusting a business card into her hand.

Shelly stuck it into her pocket. Lorna was not the kind of person you argued with. Tall and imposing, she had the look of a stern schoolteacher. She pictured her negotiating with studio executives and the performers. ‘Now see here, young man; you will pay the price we’re asking and you will do it with a smile on your face.’ ‘Now young lady, you will take this business card, and you will take it now.’

Capone watched the exchange thoughtfully. If Lorna was trying to recruit Shelly, maybe she felt they had a chance with RJF.

Once in the limo, Erik questioned Capone. “So what do you think? That Tom Meyers guy didn't really say much. Are we in or not?”

“You heard what Lorna said. It takes a while.” But he, too, was disappointed. Every other audition, they'd either been hired (or not) on the spot. Not knowing was going to drive him crazy.

Curt opened the bar and extracted a bottle of Vodka and several small tumblers. “I'll tell you what. No matter what happens, how many bands get a chance to audition for RJF? We did! And we kicked ass!” He filled each glass halfway. “Let's get smashed.”

“Here. Here.” Erik and John raised their glasses and clinked them together loudly. Shelly took a small sip and grimaced as it went down.

Capone insisted in walking her up to the apartment and waited until she had unlocked the door to hug her lightly. “Shelly, it's been so good to see you again. You saved my life today.”

Chapter 4

Shelly kicked off the high heels and massaged her toes. What a day! How scared she'd been! Especially after Lorna and Tom had bitched Capone out for bringing her. But she was surprised at how quickly she'd gotten over her fear. By the time they were halfway through Midnight Magic, she forgot the fact that she was a nobody and began to feel like a star... She looked down to see that goose bumps had sprouted along her arms and shivered slightly. Was it afterglow of the performance? Or the two shots of Vodka she'd had in the limo? Either way, it felt good.

Cathy came home to find her sleeping on the sofa with a wide smile on her face.

She was awakened by the phone ringing, and heard her sister answer. "Hi, Alex."

She never felt comfortable lying to him and was relieved when he didn't press her for details of the last two days.

"I can't wait for you to get home," he proclaimed. "I'll be chomping at the bit at that airport, Sunday night."

"Oh honey, you don't have to pick me up. I can take the airport transport."

"No way. I'll be there. And the boys. They're standing right here."

"Hi, Mom." Jason's voice came over the receiver. "How's Aunt Cathy?"

“She's fine. She sends you her love. How's it been going there?”

“It's okay. Dad's been taking us out to eat every night.”

“I'm sure you love that.”

“Yeah, and he said tomorrow night we could go to Fergie's.” Fergie's was the local pizza parlor with the added attraction of a large video arcade. It had always been the boys' favorite place, although they were outgrowing it now; but Shelly usually took them. Alex thought the pizza was terrible and hated the music they played. She thought it was very sweet of him to take them there while she was gone.

“Wow. Well, have fun and play Space Attack for me.”

“Okay Mom. Love you.”

“I love you, too. Now put Jeremy on.” She went through a similar conversation with her youngest son and then spoke to Alex again.

“Going to Fergie's, huh?” she asked.

“Yeah, anything to get out of this house. It seems so empty without you here.”

“I'll be home sooner than you think.”

“I know. I'll make it. You have a great time with Cathy. I love you, Shelly,”

“I love you, too.”

“He misses you, huh, Shelly?” Cathy asked, having heard her side of the conversation.

“Yeah, I’m sure it’s hard for him having to do everything.”

“The kids probably miss you, too.”

“They do. But it’s like an adventure to them, having Dad all to themselves. He’s been taking them out to eat and stuff.”

“He’s a good guy.”

Shelly smiled. “I know.” Alex St. John had appeared in her life right after Cathy left for New York. Strong and sincere, he promised to take care of her.

“If only he had a brother.”

They laughed. Alex had not one, but two, brothers. Brian, the oldest, had been happily married for years. David, the youngest and most handsome, remained the *very* eligible bachelor. Over the years, he’d dated scores of beautiful women. Cathy had been interested, of course. But Shelly had discouraged her. David was definitely not a one-woman man. Until Valerie...

“What’s he doing lately, anyway?” Cathy asked.

“I told you he’s settled down. Getting married. To that Valerie bitch.”

“How could I forget? You really don’t like her? Or is it because she’s coming between you and your sister-in-law?”

“Both probably,” Shelly admitted. “It’s just that Monica has been my closest friend for so long... And now it seems like, every time we try to get together, Valerie is tagging along. Alex thinks I’m being jealous.”

“Well, you know David. She probably won't be around that long.”

“I don't know,” she replied doubtfully. “She's the only one he's proposed to. The only one he moved in with...”

As if their ears were ringing, Monica and Valerie's conversation turned to her. “Where's Shelly tonight?”

“You didn't know? She's in New York.”

“New York? Why'd they go to New York?”

“Not *they*,” Monica replied. “*She*. Shelly went alone.”

Valerie's mouth dropped open. “Alex let her go alone?”

“She's visiting her sister.”

“How'd she finagle that?”

“I'm not sure. She called me a couple of days ago and asked me to give Alex and hand with the boys if he needed it. That she was taking off for New York. It was kind of suspicious, really.”

“How long did she go for?”

“She left Wednesday and she won't be home until Sunday night.”

“Where'd she get the money?”

“I don't know.”

“David told me they're having some money problems. I'm surprised Alex would put Shelly's travel plans above paying the bills...” She trailed off as David and Brian entered the room.

While Monica and Valerie were dissecting Shelly's trip to New York, Tom Meyers was also thinking about her. Thinking very hard. He'd watched the tape at least a dozen times since the audition that afternoon. But he'd been convinced the first time.

Capone was also deep in thought. They'd been good. He knew it. He'd felt it. At first he'd been upset that Tom Meyers had not offered a deal on the spot. But the more he thought about it, the more he realized that Tom Meyers was just a cog in the wheel of RJF. And probably didn't have the authority to make the ultimate decision.

Why the fuck didn't Kim call? He had to be sure that she would be ready, just in case RJF offered them a contract. He dialed the number of her mother in New Jersey.

To his surprise, the answering machine didn't pick up. Kim answered on the sixth ring.

"Hey. I thought you'd be interested in how the audition went."

"How did it go? Did you get a contract?"

"You know I can't sign without a permanent female lead."

"How'd your little friend do?"

“She held up her end. But I’m holding out for you.
Can I count on you, Baby?”

“If you get an offer, I’d be crazy to turn it down.”

He smiled, relieved. She was finally making some sense.

Chapter 5

Shelly never considered herself particularly naïve. Until that night... They stood in line at the Glow Club, hoping to catch the fancy of the doorman and gain admittance to the world famous dance club. Shelly had reluctantly agreed to wear her audition outfit and been horrified when Cathy actually wore the pink vinyl and tassel thing. What a sheltered life she'd led in Sunnydale! She looked around her, wide-eyed. Next to her stood a buxom blonde wearing a top similar to Cathy's; without the gold tassels. Her huge brown nipples protruded, each one pierced with a gold hoop. A heavily bearded man in a wedding gown accompanied her. A woman walked by in a see-thru plastic dress, another in a painted on bikini. The doorman caught her eye and nodded. Cathy's jaw dropped. "Oh my God! We're in!"

She had never danced so much in her life. And with as many outrageous partners! She raved to Cathy in the cab. "I don't think I've ever had so much fun. The place is like a dream with all kinds of characters. Let's go again tomorrow!"

"Tomorrow night we're going to Extremes. It makes the Glow Club look like a sock hop," she promised.

"You sure adapted fast," she commented as they dressed.

Shelly spun around laughing. Never in her wildest dreams would she have pictured herself, or anyone, going out in a skimpy blue polka dot bikini, topped with see-thru blue vinyl raincoat. “When in Rome,” she shrugged, strapping on spike-heeled sandals.

Once again, they were granted entrance within minutes of joining the crowd outside the club. Cathy stared at her in wonderment. “You must have the look, Shelly. I’ve stood outside all night without getting in.”

Like the night before, free drinks and dance partners appeared continuously for the beautiful sisters.

Chapter 6

True to his word, Alex was waiting for her at the airport, along with the boys. They yelled and ran as soon as they saw her, Jason reaching her first and hugging her excitedly; Alex and Jeremy quick to join in. Competing for her attention on the ride home, their voices grew louder and louder as each tried to talk over the other. Shelly smiled happily.

They decided to stop for dinner on the way home. “We kind of cleaned out the refrigerator while you were gone,” Alex admitted sheepishly,

“I bet you did,” she replied. It always surprised her to see how much they could eat. They went through milk at the rate of a gallon a day and it was nothing to see a box of cereal disappear in a single breakfast. They were growing so fast! At thirteen, Jeremy was already 3” taller than her. And at 5’9”, fifteen-year-old Jason was a full 7” taller. Both would soon be as tall as Alex.

They were like him in so many other ways. Their deep tans, piercing blue eyes, and strong, square jaw line. Their broad shoulders, narrow waists, and long, well shaped legs.

She had doted on them from the day they were born and was fiercely protective of them. She took parenting seriously and had read scores of books from Dr. Spock, like *How to Talk to Your Teen About Sex*, to find out the

best ways to deal with parental issues. It had paid off. They were good kids.

The house was a mess, of course. She really hadn't expected otherwise. Still, it was good to be home, and so nice to sleep in her own bed. She snuggled next to Alex's naked back. They made love hurriedly; each starved for the other and unable to hold off their orgasms. And slept better than they had in days.

She realized there was no way she would get the house straightened up before it was time to leave for work and wished she'd gotten up earlier. She briefly considered, and dismissed, the temptation to call in sick. She was actually looking forward to getting back to work.

Although her position as receptionist at Florida Land and Homes was only part-time, the job was important to her. It gave her a sense of purpose, and identity, as well as adding to Alex's income. Plus she was anxious to see how things were going with her friend Angie, whose marital problems had prompted an affair with one of the salesmen in the office.

She entered the building with a light step, greeting everyone with a sunny smile, and was quickly filled in on the deals that had gone through, properties that had been listed, and important new clients. Shelly took all the incoming calls and liked to keep up with who was who. She prided herself in being able to remember which agent the client was dealing with and was on a friendly 'chit chat' basis with all of the firm's clients. Her easygoing

personality and soothing voice had calmed down many steamed customers and kept them from firing their agents.

Just before nine, Angie strolled in, looking chic and cool in a sleeveless blue silk blouse and matching skirt. Seeing Shelly, she smiled and hurried toward her. “Welcome back,” she cried, hugging her lightly. “I missed you. We all did. That temp they hired was awful.” She rolled her eyes dramatically.

“I’m glad to...” She was cut off by the ringing phone and reached across an empty desk to answer. “Oh hello, Mr. Barninger. Of course I remember you. You bought the house on Gulf Street.” She indicated to Angie that she would be tied up for a while by holding up her hand and opening and closing it rapidly, symbolizing a person ‘yacking’.

Angie nodded in understanding. Shelly pantomimed eating with an imaginary fork and exaggerated chewing. Angie formed the okay sign with her thumb and forefinger.

She filled her in during lunch, describing the outlandish clubs and hustle and bustle of the city. “People seem a lot younger there. More alive.” she finished.

“Of course,” Angie replied sarcastically. “When people in New York start getting old, they come here.”

“That’s true,” she laughed, thankful for the steady stream of ‘snowbirds’ that kept Florida Land and Homes in business. And Shelly and Angie in a job.

“What I can’t figure out is how you could afford a trip to New York. Especially on our wages.”

Angie, former stripper and current adulteress, had told Shelly some pretty shocking things in the past and she was about to get a payback. “Actually, the trip was paid for. I went to audition for a rock group,” she said casually.

“Yeah, right!” Angie replied derisively. “And I had breakfast with Madonna.”

“As crazy as it sounds, it's the truth.” Shelly summarized the events leading up to the audition while Angie listened in disbelief.

“And you think I have a past? How come you never told me about this before?”

“Unlike you,” she smiled at her friend, “I didn't want anybody to know how wild I used to be.”

“So what happened? Did you get the job?”

“I didn't go for a job. I just went to fill-in for the audition,” she explained.

“Weren't you scared?”

“To death! But afterwards, I realized it had been fun.”

“What did Alex have to say about this?”

“He doesn't know.”

Angie's mouth dropped open.

“I told him my sister paid for the trip,” Shelly continued.

“You lied?” Angie couldn't believe it.

“It's just one little lie,” she protested.

“That's how it starts,” Angie warned.

They walked quickly back to the office. Shelly didn't want to be late from lunch on her first day back.

That evening Monica called. “How's it going? It's been so long since I've seen you, I thought I'd stop by.”

“Great. Come on over.”

“Okay, I'll see you in about twenty minutes then.”

“Okay. See ya.” She hung the phone up thoughtfully. There was a time when she would have never gone to New York without Monica knowing the reason behind the trip. A time, not so long ago, when they knew everything about each other. Sixteen years as sister-in-laws had brought them very close. If only Valerie hadn't come into the picture.

As usual, Monica was brimming with the little dramas that had been occurring in her life, and Shelly laughed over and over at her caustic descriptions of people and events. Somehow the conversation turned to Valerie. Seeing the expression on Shelly's face, Monica stopped. “Why can't we all be friends?” she asked. “Why don't you like her?”

“I did like her,” Shelly protested. “Until she made me feel like the third wheel around you two.”

“She's trying so hard to fit in,” Monica defended. “She's gone out of her way to make friends.”

“With you, maybe. She doesn't seem too interested in my friendship.”

Monica thought she was wrong but didn't want to argue. “You have to tell me all about your trip to New York.” She changed the subject.

Shelly provided detailed descriptions of the Glow Club and Extremes. As well as the shops they'd browsed

and Cathy's glamorous apartment. "It's the wildest, most wonderful place in the world," she concluded.

"Sounds kinda crappy," Monica dismissed. "Did you know Irene bitched Alex out for letting you go to New York alone?"

"He didn't say anything about it. How do you know?"

"Because she called me, too. She was so pissed at Alex that she was almost spitting! She just couldn't believe you were traipsing all over the country without him."

Shelly giggled, imagining her domineering mother-in-law reading Alex the riot act.

Thursday afternoon, she got home from work to find Alex's truck already parked outside. Getting out of the car, she noticed his legs sticking out from under it. "Alex?"

He slid out and lay on his back, squinting up at her.

"You're home early."

"I know. Something's wrong with the truck. I'm trying to figure out what it is. If I don't get it fixed quick, I won't be able to work tomorrow." His construction business required many tools, some of which were large and heavy, or air powered, requiring a bulky generator. Without his truck he couldn't carry them. Without his tools, he couldn't work.

"Okay. I'll let you get back to it," she replied, sensing his concern. "Should I call you in for dinner?"

“Just keep it warm.”

“Okay.”

“Thanks, Babe,” he called, sliding back under the truck.

He came in after nine, looking grim. “I can't figure out what's wrong with the fucking thing!” He slammed his work gloves on the table in frustration. “I'll have to call a mechanic in the morning.”

“It could be just something simple,” she said in an attempt to cheer him.

“Let's hope.” But he knew if it were something simple he'd have found it. He just hoped it wasn't going to be too expensive, especially after losing a day and a half's work. They couldn't afford it. Things had been so slow for so long. And now that he'd landed a big job, several months of work, his truck broke down. It seemed like the minute they started to get ahead, something happened to set them right back again.

Friday he spent worrying. The tow truck didn't show up until after noon and the mechanic didn't even open the hood until four o'clock. He called several times but could get no definite answers or even an estimate. The shop closed for the weekend, without identifying the problem. He couldn't believe how unprofessional they were. When he had a job to finish, he stayed as long as it took to get it done. How could they just leave for the weekend without having fixed his truck?

Shelly worked a half day Saturday and stopped at Monica's on the way home. Brian and the kids were home so Shelly didn't have her alone to gossip, but they had a

nice visit. She tried not to wince as Valerie's car pulled into the driveway as she left.

Alex was nervous and edgy. He moved about the room, tinkering with this and that but never really doing anything. She tried to talk to him but he was too distracted and restless. It continued all evening and she could see that he needed some kind of diversion.

"Alex, let's do something tomorrow," she said impulsively.

"Like what?"

"Have a picnic. At the beach. Or at the river."

"Shelly, we can't afford any extras right now."

"Come on. We have to eat, anyway. We'll get some fried chicken and some cheap salads. We can rent two canoes at Mel's for twenty dollars. You need to get your mind off this truck thing. You're going to get an ulcer."

He shrugged his shoulders. What difference was another thirty or forty dollars going to make?

They ate a big breakfast and stopped at the grocery store for the makings of a picnic lunch. After they'd assembled cold fried chicken, macaroni and potato salad, Italian bread, cheese, pickles and assorted sodas, they parked on the mouth of the Weeki Wachee River and rented two canoes.

Fed by natural springs, the Weeki Wachee was chilled to seventy-six degrees, year round. The crystal clear water afforded a clear view of fish swimming around the reeds and assorted undergrowth and it was a natural environment for manatee and otter.

They'd been coming here for years. When the boys were small, Shelly and Alex each manned a canoe with one of the boys riding with them. As they got older, the boys started paddling while their parent rode along. Now they rode together, leading the way.

It was a beautiful day; Shelly leaned back, lifting her face into the sun. The canoe moved almost noiselessly with only a soft swooshing sound as the paddle pushed against the current. Birds chattered in the trees on the bank, against the sound of a far off boat engine. The sun warmed her bare arms and legs. As she trailed her fingers through the cool water, she felt calmer and more at peace than she had all week. With things so hectic at work and Alex agonizing about the truck...

A shock of cold water broke the spell and she sat up quickly, trying to locate the source of the spray. Alex steadfastly paddled against the strong current. The boys were just visible ahead, about to round a bend in the river. She leaned back again, trying to recapture the serene feeling, and closed her eyes. Again, she felt a cold jolt of water, and this time more than the first. She sat up and looked more closely at Alex who continued rowing along. "Alex? Do you feel water?"

"Water?"

"Yeah. Look at how wet I am." He turned around, grinning.

"You shit!" she cried.

"Who me?" he asked with exaggerated innocence. "I didn't do anything."

"Are you sure?" she asked uncertainly.

“A hundred percent!” he answered, dipping his paddle into the water and scooping out a slosh of water that he carelessly threw over his shoulder and directly onto her.

“You jerk!” She advanced on him menacingly.

“Watch it,” he said as she stepped toward him, unbalancing the tipsy canoe. It lurched toward the right and she leaned left to correct it. Alex had the same idea and also leaned heavily to the left. The canoe tipped, spilling them into the river.

“Now look what you did!” she exclaimed furiously.

“Me? You're the one who tipped us over,” he defended himself.

“If you hadn't been acting like an immature jerk, it wouldn't have happened.” She floated beside him and punched him in the chest. He ducked away, laughing. She swam after him, unmerciful, and punched him in the arm. He shook off the blow easily and dunked her head under the water.

She came up spluttering and swinging. He deflected her blows and, grabbing her arms, lifted her out of the water.

When the boys came back to see what was holding them up, they found their parents kissing, in the middle of the river, their canoe fifty yards downstream.

Chapter 7

“Well? What do you think?”

“Not bad,” Brandon Knight replied thoughtfully.

“They're freaking fantastic!” shrilled Sam Forbes.
“Where did you find them?”

“They found us,” Tom Meyers replied. “Their agent sent me a demo tape of about fifteen of his songs. They auditioned last Friday.”

“You got any video?” asked Brandon.

“You read my mind, Boss. Got it right here.” He crossed the office and inserted the tape into a VCR that was wired to stereo and played on a large screen TV recessed into the same wall. A minute of snow filled the screen followed by the sound of the band warming up. The first shot was of Capone looking dark and seductive in his black jeans and jacket.

An image of Shelly filled the screen. Sam and Brandon sat forward in their seats. The camera loved her, picking up glints of red from her hair so vibrant that it seemed to crackle around her. Her brilliant green eyes seemed enormous. Her small, upturned nose was too delicate for her full, sensuous mouth. She started singing.

“My God,” Sam breathed. “You've done it again!”

Brandon nodded his agreement. “She's got it. She's definitely got it.”

“And he's not so bad either,” commented Sam.

“So are we in agreement?” Tom asked, unnecessarily.

Capone was leafing through the newest edition of *Rolling Stone* when the call came. “Capone? It's Lorna Miller.”

“Yes.”

“Good news! I got a call from RJF today. I have a meeting Wednesday to discuss your future with them.”

He felt his knees buckle and sat down weakly on the sofa bed. He expelled his pent up breath and gasped in another.

“Capone, are you there?”

He heard himself agreeing to come by her office Wednesday afternoon but felt like he was drugged. His tongue was thick and he had trouble forming the words as he talked. He couldn't swallow. He hung up the phone in a daze; not even remembering if he'd said goodbye. He felt dizzy and realized he'd been holding his breath again. The exhale came out as an exuberant whoop and was followed by an impromptu dance around the small apartment.

Chapter 8

She knew it wasn't good as soon as she got home. For one thing, the truck was not there. She found Alex poring over their bank statement and monthly bills.

“What's up?” she asked with concern.

“Problems,” he replied wearily. “Big problems. It's gonna cost over \$2000 to fix the truck. Plus the mechanic's booked up and can't get to it until Thursday afternoon. It might not even be ready on Friday. That's this week's pay blown away, not to mention what we lost last week. It's gonna wipe us out. I had to borrow \$2500 from David.” They very rarely discussed finances. Alex handled the bank account, paid the bills and provided Shelly with money for necessities. But she knew it had to be bad if he'd asked David for money. They still owed him \$500 from the last time he'd had to borrow and Shelly knew it bothered him immensely. “Will we be okay?” she asked softly.

“I think so. But things will be tight for a while.”

“What about the credit cards?”

“They're pretty much maxed out, Shelly.”

They exchanged a solemn look. She knew Alex tried to keep their credit card spending to a minimum so they would have something to fall back on in an emergency. But this last year hadn't been so great. From the fatal breakdown of their old refrigerator (they'd put the new one on their Sears card) to the medical bills their

insurance didn't cover when Jeremy broke his arm playing football (Visa card).

"I guess it's eggs this week," she said half-jokingly. She referred to the small flock of chickens they kept. The six hens laid at least four eggs a day; many times cheese omelets had saved the day when money ran short at the end of the week.

He smiled miserably.

Although they were both preoccupied with worry, they put on a cheerful front for the boys' sake. Alex believed that children should not be burdened by their parents' financial problems. But they weren't babies anymore and were old enough to sense the tension in the air and sharp enough to know it had something to do with money.

In fact, he hated to worry any of them with what he considered his responsibility, providing for his family. It drove him crazy to be home doing nothing while Shelly was out working. He tried to take his mind off his worries by throwing himself into household projects. First, he concentrated on the garage and, by the time Shelly got home Monday night, it had been completely rearranged and organized; the concrete floor scrubbed and hosed, a huge pile of trash stacked out for the garbage men. Tuesday, he got out the chain saw, trimmed and pruned the dozens of trees on their heavily wooded acre, and burned the debris.

Shelly hated to see him so depressed but remarked, jokingly, that it would be great to be rich so he could stay home all the time. "Our house would be a showplace."

He thought they'd have to be pretty rich for him to feel comfortable.

Capone was a half an hour early for his appointment with Lorna and stopped down the block from her office to buy a newspaper. Leaning against the rough block wall, he scanned the headlines impatiently. Ten minutes later, he tossed the crumpled paper into the trash and headed toward her office. Her secretary, Mary, saw him pacing back and forth in front of the building and ushered him inside. She knew the result of Lorna's meeting with RJF and now treated him with deference.

Lorna called him right in and greeted him effusively. Lorna Miller was a formidable woman. Six feet tall and built like a brick shithouse; arms lanky and muscular, shoulders square and broad without the benefit of shoulder pads. Her hair was cut very short, dyed platinum blonde and slicked severely back. Her features were sharp, crystal-blue eyes piercing.

"Your little gamble paid off, Capone," she began. "My meeting with RJF went very well. In fact, I gave oral approval to a contract. I have the written copy here and I want to go over it with you now. I think you'll find the terms acceptable."

Capone could feel his heart beating as she continued. "They've offered a full three year recording contract for the entire group, with release of a demo tape within six months and an album as soon as possible. Standard royalties on CD and tape sales, standard concert

and promotion fees. A \$10,000 advance payment for each band member and an additional \$20,000 incentive for you and Shelly...”

His mind reeled. \$30,000 advance payment! A three-year contract! A demo out in six months! Holy shit! He was about to piss his pants.

“Lorna,” he said hesitatingly. “That sounds great, but there is one little problem. Shelly was just a fill-in. Remember?”

“Well, Capone, that ‘fill-in’ is probably what got you this contract.”

“Man!” he licked his lips nervously. “Shelly is a no-go. She only came here as a favor to me. And the understanding that it was a one-time thing.”

“You just leave Shelly to me. I plan to visit her and present RJF’s offer.”

“She won’t do it,” he muttered.

“You said she’s a housewife somewhere in Florida? What housewife couldn’t use a little \$30,000 nest egg?”

He hadn’t thought about it that way. And it was hard to refuse Lorna. His spirits rose a little as he gave her Shelly’s number and signed his portion of the contract. “Call her in the evening,” he instructed. “She works during the day.”

“Yes. I remember you,” she replied. “Capone’s agent. You were at the audition”.

“That’s right. And I’d like to be your agent, too.”
Lorna mentioned RJF’s offer.

Shelly thought it was some kind of rip-off; at first believing that Lorna was asking her for \$30,000. Even after realizing it was the other way around, she still thought it couldn’t be real.

“I want to come and see you personally...” Lorna was saying.

“No. You can’t,” Shelly stated firmly. She needed Lorna showing up like she needed a hole in the head.

Lorna was pleasant, but persistent. She couldn’t believe Shelly would pass up an opportunity like this and threw out dozens of reasons why she should at least consider the offer.

She could hear Alex coming upstairs and quickly extricated herself from the call.

“Thank you, Miss Miller, for calling, but I’m really not interested.” She hung up as Alex came into the bedroom.

His face was drawn as he grimly explained that, even after the \$2500 they’d borrowed from David, they would have only \$123 in their checking account after he paid the mechanic. They had \$187 left on the Visa card. The phone bill was due that week, but he’d already paid the mortgage and electric bill.

“So we live without a phone for a while if we have to. I get paid Friday. I’ll use a bunch of coupons at the grocery store and work out something with Jason’s orthodontist for this month’s payment...” She smiled comfortingly. “We’ll make it.”

He nodded. “I did get some good news. The garage called, the parts are here and the truck will probably be done by Thursday. Which means I can get back to work. I’ll work extra hours everyday and weekends. We’ll pull out of this hole and get David paid off, too.”

Complaining of a headache, he went to bed early, hoping that sleep would give him some respite from the feeling of panic that had plagued him since the truck had broke down.

When he saw Shelly off to work in the morning, he was a little more optimistic. The truck would be ready that day. He would be back to work. When the phone rang, he expected it to be the mechanic, but it was someone for Shelly. He gave her the number at Florida Land and Homes.

She recognized the voice but couldn’t place it for a moment. Lorna began her spiel. “Shelly, this is Lorna Miller. I really think you should let me come there and talk to you. This offer from RJF is a once in a lifetime chance. You’re passing up the opportunity for fame. And fortune! The \$30,000 is a drop in the bucket compared to what you’ll make in royalties.”

“Why do they want me?”

“Shelly, Tom Meyers is the best in the business. He’s rarely wrong about the artists he signs. If he thinks you got it, you got it!”

Other calls were coming in and Shelly couldn’t get Lorna off the line. Angie was taking the overflow calls but had given Shelly several pointed looks to show she didn’t appreciate it. Finally, she said honestly, “Look, I’m at

work and I have to answer the phones. I'm going to get in trouble if I tie up the line with a personal call."

"Okay. I'm sorry, Shelly. I'll call you later at home."

"Okay," she answered, impatient to hang up.

She apologized to Angie for the infraction at lunch, explaining only that her and Alex were having some financial problems because of his truck. She wasn't about to drop this bombshell.

At home, she noticed Alex's truck was not in the driveway. He must still be out on the job, probably making up for lost time. But he was sitting on the living room sofa, staring at the blank TV screen. The look on his face scared her.

"Alex, what's wrong?" She rushed over to him.

He shook his head from side to side and ran his hand nervously through his sun-bleached curls. "The mechanic called," he said listlessly. "There's more damage than they thought. It will be at least another \$1000 and won't be done for a couple more days." His lips trembled and his shoulders heaved, silent tears streamed down his face. Her heart skipped wildly. She had seen her husband cry only once, during the birth of their first son.

"And that's not the worst of it," he continued, drawing a ragged breath. "Sutton Homes called today. They replaced me on the Oak Terrace Job and tomorrow's the deadline for the Cedar Hills job." He covered his face with his hands.

It was money they'd counted on. He'd already received a large draw on the Cedar Hills job. Would they have to pay it back?

She knelt down before him and gently removed his hands from his face, wiping the hot tears from his cheeks with her thumbs. "I have something to talk to you about," she whispered.

What now? He braced himself. More bad news?
"You better come upstairs."

He followed her woodenly up the steps, terrified at what she might have to tell him.

Resolutely, she began. "First, I need to apologize for lying to you..."

His heart beat wildly. Had she found someone else? Someone who could take care of her financially?

"Cathy didn't pay for my trip to New York," she continued. "Someone else did."

The look of panic in his eyes did not make it any easier. "I better start at the beginning... There's something about me I haven't told you." She fiddled nervously with her wedding ring, searching for an explanation. Alex held his breath.

"I'm a singer. Or I was... It seems like a lifetime ago that I thought I could make a career out of it." He opened his mouth to speak, but she raised her hand to silence him.

"Then I got this call. From this guy in my old band, asking me to fill in for an audition. When I heard it was in New York, I wanted to go so bad... That's why I lied to you about Cathy paying for the ticket."

“But you were with Cathy,” he interrupted. He’d called her there.

“But I also did the audition,” she replied.

He digested the information. “So what made you tell me now?”

Shelly told him about the call from Lorna Miller the night before, and then about the call at work. “Seeing you so upset breaks my heart,” she concluded. “And this could solve our financial problems...”

He tried to sort it out in his head. “Shelly, I know you mean well. But even if this somehow worked out, I don’t think it could solve our financial problems.”

“There’s a cash advance...”

“Shelly,” he sighed. “At this point it would have to be a hell of a big advance to bail us out!”

“Alex,” she said, taking his face in her hands and looking directly into his eyes. “The advance is \$30,000.”

Lorna watched the audition tape again. This was torture! She’d been representing *The Capones* for nearly a decade. The band was good, but with the addition of Shelly St. John, it was fantastic. She had to sign her. She checked her watch. After seven. She wondered if Shelly would be home from work yet. I’ll wait another fifteen minutes, she thought resolutely. At 7:10, she dialed the Florida number. Shelly answered on the second ring.

After a friendly greeting, Lorna questioned delicately. “Have you thought at all about RJF’s offer?”

“I haven’t been able to think about anything else,” she answered truthfully. For the past hour, she and Alex had discussed this wild turn of events in their lives. The only thing they’d been able to come up with was a willingness to hear Lorna out.

“Have you made any decisions?” Lorna probed.

“To be honest, we haven’t. My husband and I are finding it pretty hard to believe.”

“Believe it, Shelly. RJF does not make offers like this without a lot of confidence in the artist. They feel you have star potential.”

“Lot’s of people have so-called star potential. I’ll bet there’s a line of them a block long waiting to get into RJF.”

“Exactly. And you know how many of them get in for an audition? And how many of those get a recording contract?”

“What would I have to do for this \$30,000?”

She sensed her wavering and felt her pulse quicken. “Shelly, as a newcomer to this business, I’m sure you have a lot of questions. I’d like to discuss the conditions of the contract with you and also the services of my agency. I could be in Florida this weekend.” She’d fly to the North Pole to sign her.

“She wants to come here this weekend and talk to us,” she whispered to Alex, her hand over the telephone.

He shook his head. It was starting to sink in. This was serious. “Well, I guess it doesn’t hurt to talk to her.”

Lorna hung up, smiling, and immediately buzzed Mary. "Get me a flight to Tampa Saturday and have a rental car waiting at the airport."

The secretary buzzed back within minutes. "I have a flight out at 8am and one at 11:30 Miss Miller."

"Book the eight am," she replied. She wanted to get there as early as possible. She wanted Shelly signed, sealed and delivered.

She landed at Tampa Airport shortly after eleven o'clock and found her rental car without difficulty. Armed with Shelly's directions, she headed directly for Sunnydale.

"Here it is," she said to herself, as she pulled into the winding gravel driveway. She surveyed her surroundings. The two-story house sat one hundred feet off the street and was shaded by lush, well-maintained Oaks. Flowering bushes bordered a rustic brick walk. Several large pots overflowed with large multicolored blooms of petunias and pansies. The huge wraparound porch sported potted Palms and comfortable rocking chairs. It was the type of house that every little girl dreamed of. A house to raise children in; complete with the large black dog wagging his tail encouragingly at her from the fenced back yard. She rang the bell.

Seeing Shelly dressed in a drab gray pantsuit, minimal make-up, with her hair pulled back into a casual ponytail, it was hard to believe the woman who answered

the door was the same one that had cavorted across the stage in leather and spike heels.

She led her through a country kitchen and indicated a chair at the dining table. Straight backed and made from a heavy, well polished wood, the chair had been feminized with plump floral patterned cushions that coordinated with the tablecloth. The rest of the house, from what Lorna could see, was very much like that chair; sturdy and utilitarian, but cozy and comfortable.

“I thought we could sit here. In case we needed a table...”

“That’s fine, Shelly,” Lorna assured her. “You have a beautiful home,” she said, hoping to put her a little more at ease.

“Thanks.” She looked around self-consciously. Lorna was probably accustomed to much more opulent surroundings. What did she really think about the house? Though she’d spent the better part of yesterday cleaning, there were cobwebs clinging to the ceiling and dirt smudges in the corners that she’d missed when she mopped the floor. Her glance fell to the half-completed shelving unit Alex was installing in the living room and the broken tiles in the kitchen counter. She probably thinks we really need that \$30,000. And she’d be right!

Lorna looked up as a tall, handsome man entered the kitchen. “This is my husband, Alex.” Shelly introduced him.

He shook her hand easily. “Nice to meet you,” he said, and flashed her a brilliant smile. He moved beside Shelly, silently conveying his support.

Lorna began to doubt her bargaining power. She'd come here thinking that nobody would pass up RJF's offer. But sitting here in this comfortable old house, looking out into the lush garden where a Blue Jay stood in the birdbath cawing loudly, meeting the gorgeous husband and seeing the tenderness in his eyes as he looked at his wife, made her wonder.

She looked at each of them meaningfully. "I know you have a lot of questions and I'm hoping to be able to answer them to your satisfaction. I would like to begin by explaining why I'm here." They watched her expectantly.

"I want to work for you. I am a talent agent. My job is to negotiate your contract and look out for your interests when dealing with contractual obligations. Most record companies prefer to deal with an agent over dealing directly with the artist. I'm paid a percentage of your earnings; so, of course, it's in my best interests as well as yours to make the best deal possible. If you don't get paid, I don't get paid. Are you with me so far?" They nodded.

"My agency represents several other artists under different labels. I am currently representing two other artists under RJF and have found them to be fair and upfront in their dealings. They've indicated that they are ready and willing to sign a recording contract with *The Capones*. I am representing Andy Capone and the other group members and they've agreed to the terms of the contract in full. RJF has made it clear that they are not interested in the group if you are not a part of it."

“Lorna,” Alex broke in. “Is it normal for a major record company to sign a contract with somebody like Shelly? Somebody with so little experience?”

“I can only tell you that nothing is normal in the record business. I know artists that have worked their entire lives waiting for a chance. And then something like this happens.”

“But Shelly hasn’t even sung professionally. Except for some fooling around in high school.”

“Shelly is damn good even without having professional experience. Or RJF wouldn’t want her. Haven’t you seen the video?”

“Video?”

“The audition was taped; both audio and video. I brought a copy with me. Why don’t you watch it and then you can form your own opinion of why they want Shelly so bad.”

“I’d love to see it,” Alex enthused.

Lorna rose. “It’s out in my car. I’ll get it and be right back.” Alex walked her to the door.

“Have you seen the video, Shelly?”

“Just a couple of minutes of it,” she replied. She wasn’t sure she wanted him to see it.

Lorna handed him the tape and he slid it into the living room VCR. The harsh chords of an electric guitar filled the room and then were muted by the smoother sounds of the keyboard. The camera panned to a black clad male with smoldering black eyes and a defiant slouch. He held a microphone in his left hand as he strutted across the stage.

Alex gasped involuntarily at the first glimpse of Shelly. She sidled sensuously onstage. They lifted twin microphones to their lips in unison and exploded into the first song.

Lorna watched his reaction to the ten-minute video and asked, “Now do you see why RJF wants Shelly so badly?”

He nodded slowly. “We better hear what’s in the contract.”

They returned to the dining room table. Lorna explained that RJF had offered a three-year commitment.

“What do they expect for the \$30,000?” questioned Alex.

“The \$30,000 is an advance payment. Sort of like a sign-on bonus. It doesn’t cover any specific services; it’s an incentive to sign. If the contract is not signed, the \$30,000 will not be paid.”

“So the \$30,000 is for a three year commitment. We’re talking about \$10,000 a year.” It was less than what she was making now.

“Alex. The \$30,000 is above what she’ll be making from the sales of her CD’s and promotional fees,” Lorna explained. “The typical cut for the group is \$1.25 for each CD or cassette sold. A CD could sell upwards of ten million copies. It doesn’t take a mathematician to figure out that the \$30,000 is just a drop in the bucket compared to her future earnings.”

He whistled softly and looked at Shelly with amazement.

She asked nervously, “What kind of time commitment are we talking about?”

“Shelly, making records is a full-time job. You’ll need to be in New York at least five days a week.”

Their eyes locked. Five days a week! Seeing their expressions, Lorna tried to soften the blow. “You could commute for a while, Shelly. I think RJF would agree to that. But if your career takes off, it could get to be too much.”

“You’d have to keep a place in New York,” Alex said. “Or stay in a motel five days a week. \$30,000 won’t last too long at that rate.”

“The studio knows your situation,” Lorna countered. “They’ve offered use of an apartment for as long as Shelly needs it. Free of charge.”

Alex realized they desperately needed to talk and asked if they could have some time alone. They headed out to the garden.

“Well? What do you think?” He sat beside her on the bench.

“I don’t know,” she moaned. “The kind of money she’s talking about is unbelievable!”

“How come you never told me you could sing like that?” he asked softly. He thought he knew everything about his wife.

“I don’t know. We never talked much about our pasts...” Alex had never seemed particularly interested in her life before she met him.

“Well, you definitely have a lot of talent. I can see why they want you.”

“So you’re saying I should do this?”

“No. I’m just saying that you have a wonderful voice. Now you’ve been offered the chance to do what other people only dream about. Plus get rich in the process. I don’t want to hold you back. If you don’t want to do it, we’ll go back in and tell Lorna that we’re not interested.”

“Is that what you want me to do?”

“I can’t make the decision for you.”

She wondered why not. He’d always made the important decisions

“Of course I’d be relieved if we forgot about the whole thing,” he continued. “But I’d also be relieved if we got \$30,000 in our bank account.”

He paused for a moment, thinking. “And don’t forget, Lorna talked about millions!”

“Could you and the boys survive without me if I went to New York?”

“I don’t know,” he answered honestly. “But for that kind of money, we could sure try.”

She remembered how much she missed them last time she’d been in New York, how lost she felt without Alex’s comforting presence, how glad she’d been to get home. But she also remembered the exhilaration of performing, the excitement of the clubs, the thrill of the city.

“I feel like I can’t say no,” she admitted. “Because of the money.”

“Shelly.” He took her hand. “I’m behind you no matter what you decide. But I do think we might be foolish to pass this up.”

She nodded. “I’m scared shitless!”

“Me too,” he agreed, leaning over and kissed her lightly. “But, no matter what, we’re in this together.”

Lorna watched them walking, hand-in-hand, along the winding path to the house and tried to read their expressions. She believed that they had come to a decision. But which one? They avoided her eye as they came in, a bad sign.

They sat down and Shelly began. “I’m sorry to keep you waiting so long. And I want to be totally honest with you. I don’t know if I’m cut out to be a rock star. But my husband and I have decided that we can’t pass this up. We also want you as my agent.”

Lorna sighed with relief. “I know it’s been a big decision for you, but I think you made the right one. I really believe in you, Shelly.” She turned to Alex. “And I know you do, too.”

He nodded. “So what’s next?”

“I’ll need Shelly to sign my contract, giving me authority to negotiate with RJF in her behalf. It would speed things up if you signed today. We also need to set up a meeting with RJF to formalize the deal.” She looked at her watch. “And I’ve really got to get going if I’m going to make my flight home.”

“Of course,” Shelly answered. Lorna placed the stack of papers in front of her and passed copies down to Alex. She briefly explained each document and Shelly signed them all without further questions. “And Shelly,” she said on her way out. “You might want to give notice at work. You’ll be an RJF employee as of next week.”

She sank weakly down on the sofa and Alex plopped down beside her.

“Okay. Now how are we gonna tell the boys?”

But, after they’d gotten over their initial shock, the boys were accepting; still young enough to believe that things like this happened all the time. They declared their ability to survive without her and even made up a list of her regular chores to split between them.

“Rock stars make a lot of money, don’t they?” questioned Jeremy.

“Of course they do, stupid,” snorted Jason.

Shelly didn’t want to mention the numbers Lorna had quoted, but felt the boys should know that money was the major motivating factor in their decision. “If we sell a lot of CD’s, I’ll make a lot of money. Even if we don’t, the record company is giving me an advance that is more than I make in a year at Florida Land and Homes.”

“Wow!” Jeremy exclaimed. “We’re gonna be rich!”

“I hope so,” she replied. “Are you sure you guys will be all right when I’m in New York?”

“Of course, Mom,” said Jason. “But you’ll be all alone. Who’ll protect you?”

“I’ll be living in a really safe place,” she assured him. “And I’ll be home every weekend.”

That night in bed, Alex reached for her hand and placed it on his bulging cock. “Feel that?” he whispered. “I was thinking about you in that video and look what happened.”

She smiled and wrapped her fingers around it, squeezing slightly.

Later, lying sated and secure in his arms, she couldn’t help thinking that soon she’d be sleeping in New York. Alone!

Chapter 9

She insisted on going to work on Monday. She owed Mr. Stern that. It was bad enough that she would be giving so little notice. She didn't give him the details, just that a really good offer had come along and she couldn't pass it up. After determining he couldn't convince her to stay, he offered his best wishes.

Angie, on the other hand, was furious. "What's this I hear about you quitting?" she demanded. They were on their way to lunch, where Shelly had planned to explain the whole unbelievable situation. But the office grapevine had been efficient, as usual, and in the two hours since she'd given her notice, the news had spread. It was precisely the reason she'd spoken to Mr. Stern first. She didn't want him to hear it from someone else.

"I have a lot to talk to you about," she said. "Let's order some lunch and I'll tell you the whole story."

They sat at a table near the back of the diner to allow them some privacy. "What I'm going to tell you is kind of unbelievable, but I want you to know that it's the truth."

Angie nodded, intrigued.

"You remember I told you about auditioning with a rock group while I was in New York?" Again, Angie nodded.

"Well I got a call early this week. They want me to sign a contract. I signed up with an agent."

“No way.” Angie smiled at the joke she’d almost been caught by. “You set this up just to trick me.”

“Would I quit my job just to trick you?”

Angie pondered that. She knew that Shelly had given notice to Mr. Stern. The whole office knew! And he was not the type to go along with any practical jokes. “You’re serious?”

“Yes.” She nodded to emphasize. Seeing that Angie believed her, she continued with the details of her meeting with Lorna.

“Is your family moving to New York?”

“No. I guess I’m going to stay in New York during the week. The record company is giving me an apartment to use. I’ll come home on the weekends.”

“How are you going to handle that?”

“I don’t know,” she answered truthfully.

Back at the office, she swore Angie to silence. “I don’t want anybody at the office to know about this. In case it doesn’t work out.”

Angie promised to keep her secret. “Who would believe me anyway?” she quipped.

A similar conversation took place that evening, between her and Cathy. The next call was to Monica. Alex’s parents probably wouldn’t take it too well. She needed Monica on her side to help smooth things along. “Can we come over? I need to talk to you guys.” It was not something she could explain over the phone.

Brian met them at the door, explaining that David was there. “Good,” Alex replied. “He needs to hear this too.”

They settled in the living room. Shelly looked at their concerned expressions and turned to Alex. “You start, Honey.” She touched his arm encouragingly. She’d had to tell the story so many times already.

Alex briefly outlined the circumstances of her trip to New York. It sounded crazy even to her. Shelly watched the others exchange a skeptical look. By the time he got to the part about Lorna Miller’s visit, they were openly scornful.

“What kind of bullshit story is that?” Monica burst out.

“No bullshit,” Alex replied. Shelly nodded vigorously.

He addressed his brothers. “Come on, guys. You know I’ve always been straight with you.”

They nodded. Monica was not so easily convinced and questioned Shelly. “What is the name of this record company? Do they have any records that I’ve heard of? Are you sure this is on the level?”

“How much are they paying you?” Brian questioned.

“Thirty thousand,” Alex answered for her.

“Thirty thousand a year?” Monica probed.

“No, up front.”

Monica’s mouth dropped open. “Holy shit!”

The two brothers reacted with exaggerated shock. David gripped his chest in the recognized ‘heart attack’ stance, and Brian swayed on his feet as if about to faint. Alex laughed and held up his hand to silence them.

“What do you think of this?” he fairly shouted. “This agent chick said if things work out, it could be *millions!*”

Nobody said a word for several moments. Finally Brian questioned, “Can she sing?”

“She can and she's excellent,” Alex bragged. “I'm telling you, guys, I saw this video tape of the audition and she rocked!” His mind drifted to Shelly's mesmerizing image on the video. He vowed to ask Lorna Miller if she could get him a copy.

Lorna made the arrangements for their meeting with RJF. It was their first plane trip together. Alex couldn't conceal his pleasure at being shown to first class seats. Although he had no idea what coach even looked like, he had seen enough TV shows to know that first class was for ‘important’ people. Ditto for the chauffeured limo that met them at the airport.

But neither prepared them for the opulence of the Royale Hotel. Alex stared out the window in stunned silence as the limo slid noiselessly into the circular drive and stopped directly in front of the heavy glass doors of the lobby. He was suddenly embarrassed by their luggage. The scuffed suitcases looked okay at home, but shoddy in this elegant environment. To their credit, neither the doorman nor the chauffeur appeared to notice.

The polished marble echoed their footsteps, and rose in massive columns supporting the glass dome ceiling. Ornate fountains spilled blue tinted water, and

reflected the light from dozens of crystal chandeliers. Shiny, broad-leafed plants stood atop bronze pedestals, and elegant sitting areas were defined by handmade carpet and white leather couches and easy chairs. They eyed each other apprehensively. What must a place like this cost?

Stepping up to the gleaming expanse of marble and bronze, they identified themselves to the desk clerk, who informed them that their room had been paid in full and unlimited use of hotel services had been authorized.

A porter materialized to carry up their luggage. “Room number?” he inquired.

“Five-o-two,” Alex answered, handing him the key.

“Right this way,” he indicated a bank of elevators. They reached the fifth floor and followed the porter. He stopped at 502 and opened the door. Stepping back, he allowed Shelly and Alex to enter before him. “Is everything to your liking?” he questioned as he set down their bags.

Shelly caught Alex’s eye and they smiled broadly at each other.

“Fine,” Alex replied.

“Beautiful,” Shelly murmured.

“Well, just let us know if you need anything. The instructions for room service are beside the phone.” He made no move to leave.

It dawned on Alex that he was probably expecting a tip. He wondered how much to give and looked at Shelly questioningly. She shrugged. No help there. He reached into his wallet and withdrew \$10, handed it to the man and thanked him for his help.

He accepted the bill and thanked him without inflection. After he'd closed the door, Shelly commented on the tip. "Ten dollars? Ten dollars for carrying three lousy suitcases?"

"I didn't know how much to give him," he retorted. "I never had anybody carry suitcases for me before. Now I'm wondering if we should have given the chauffeur a tip, too."

"I would have done it for ten dollars," she muttered.

"I'd have done it for five," he laughed.

They sat stiffly on the elegant damask sofa and surveyed the opulence of the suite. "Did that guy say our meeting was at four o'clock?" she asked.

"Yeah. And he'll be back to pick us up at three."

She looked at her watch. "It's one-thirty. What do you want to do until then?"

They decided to order from room service. Something neither of them had ever done before. The knock at the door followed by "room service" caused them to laugh delightedly.

Lorna was already waiting in the limo. "Hi," she greeted enthusiastically. "You look great! How are you?"

"We're fine," Shelly replied. "You look great, too." While Shelly's look was conservative, Lorna's shouted *'power'*. The flaming red, form-fitting dress had large gold buttons running down the center and a hemline that ended well above the knee. Chunky heeled red leather shoes and huge gold hoop earrings completed the ensemble. It was a 'don't fuck with me' look; different

from the soft, unassuming outfit she'd worn to visit Shelly. Suddenly Alex felt far more comfortable with Lorna's bargaining ability.

"How do you like the Royale?"

"It's fantastic," Shelly answered with a smile. "Thank you so much. And having the limo meet us at the airport... I felt like a movie star."

"Get used to it, Shelly," Lorna laughed. "You *are* going to be a star."

Alex smiled, too. But the comment jarred him. Was this what their life was going to be like. Fancy hotels? And limousines?

Tom Meyers greeted them at the door and introduced them to the others: Brent Young, head of the promotion department; Sam Forbes, who would act as producer for their albums; Robert Chase, senior manager of marketing; and Andrea Zarconi, from the legal department. The negotiations went very smoothly. Alex thought he'd had more trouble buying a car. Lorna had worked out the specific terms and there were no surprises.

A three-year contract with production of the first album to begin as soon as possible and another to follow, using songs that Capone had already sold them the rights to. They would expect her back in New York in two weeks. She would receive thirty thousand dollars today, at contract signing, and another twenty thousand at completion of album #1. Standard royalties of \$1.25 for each unit sold with 40% to Shelly, 40% to Capone and 20% to the other band members. Shelly nodded agreement to each provision.

Sam Forbes outlined a few ideas for their album and Brent Young reviewed the promotion he'd planned for its release, personal appearances and a sixteen-city concert tour. Although Alex and Shelly had talked about the fact that rock bands played concerts in different cities and had prepared themselves for this possibility, the specifics involved had never been mentioned. He listened intently. Sixteen cities, that wasn't so bad.

But Brent went on to explain that if the album was well received and concert attendance high, more dates and cities would be added to the line-up. Shelly asked if travel could be kept to a minimum and Lorna explained that promotion was a good thing, and part of the package she had negotiated.

"Shelly, without aggressive promotion, your album could be dead in the water. RJF has agreed to extensive marketing with over two thousand radio stations, personal appearances, concerts, and magazine coverage... There are over a thousand CD's released every month. Promotion is a must."

Shelly nodded.

Sam chimed in, "This is a good promotional schedule, Shelly. It means we have a lot of faith in your potential. It costs a lot of money to mount this kind of marketing campaign."

Shelly looked questioningly at Alex, who shrugged and nodded. What good was it making a record if nobody knew about it?

The formality of signing the contract began with the attorney questioning her understanding of each point;

after which she indicated where Shelly should sign and then scrawled her name as a witness. A check was passed to Lorna and one to Shelly. Shelly's was twenty-four thousand dollars. She realized that Lorna's fee had already been subtracted. She passed the check to Alex, who folded it and stuck it in his pocket.

"Well, Shelly," Tom concluded. "That about wraps it up. Except one thing." He slid a set of keys across the table. "To your apartment," he continued. "And here's the directions. If you get a chance, stop over there tonight. Let me know if there's anything you'd like changed."

He rose and the others followed suit. It was obvious that the meeting was adjourned. They followed Lorna to the door, shaking hands with everyone again as they left.

Tom stopped Shelly. "I know you're nervous about this, Shelly, but everything's going to be fine. RJF takes care of its artists. You have my word on that."

She thanked him with a smile. "Well, I guess I'll see you again on the twentieth. Do I just come here?"

"We'll be in touch with you on your schedule before then. You just take the next couple weeks and relax."

She blew his mind with her response. "Oh, I'll be finishing up my notice at work."

She answered his questioning look. "I don't want to leave them in a lurch."

“Oh well, in that case...” What could he say? He had to admire her loyalty, even if he didn’t totally understand it. Shaking his head, he stepped into his office.

Shelly continued down the hall, in search of Alex. She found him deep in conversation with Capone. “And I’ll be around to keep an eye on her,” he was saying.

“I appreciate it,” Alex thanked him.

“We better get rolling,” Lorna broke in, ushering them down the hall. “I have an appointment this afternoon.”

“Nice meeting you, Alex,” Capone shook his hand firmly. “See you in a couple weeks, Shelly.” He headed toward Tom Meyers’ office.

“Can I take you out tonight?” Lorna offered when they were seated in the limo.

Shelly shook her head. “We’re meeting my sister for dinner.”

“Well, the limo is at your disposal for the evening. I’m sure you want to stop by your apartment?”

Shelly nodded gratefully. “Definitely!”

She hoped it wouldn’t be too shabby, or dirty, or in a terrible neighborhood. Shelly twisted her hands nervously as they headed toward the address Tom Meyers had provided.

Alex was thinking much the same thing. RJF seemed like a pretty big operation, but what could you expect for a free apartment? There was no way he was

going to let Shelly stay in some dump with gangs roaming the street and drug dealers on every corner.

They were both relieved when the limo stopped in front of a large brownstone building. The street was busy and people walked briskly along the sidewalk. But there did not seem to be a criminal element. The building was in good repair. They looked around critically. The entrance hall was clean and well maintained with adequate lighting; apartment number 102 was two doors down on the left. Alex withdrew the keys from his pocket and handed them to Shelly.

“You go in first and tell me what you think,” she said, suddenly terrified that she would be staying here for days at a time *alone*. She prayed there was a strong lock on the door.

He opened the door and fumbled for a light switch. He finally located it and took a quick look around. “Come check it out,” he called.

She stepped into the room and did a double take. It was lovely. The spacious living room was decorated in cream and navy blue. The soft blue couch and love seat were grouped before a huge gray stone fireplace. Shelly looked around, enthralled.

She touched the fireplace mantel, thinking how nice pictures of her two boys and her favorite picture of Alex would look, and made her way into the bedroom through a small hall off the small but efficient kitchen. It was also done in shades of blue, but with beige and mauve contrasts. A double-mirrored chest stood against one wall

and twin night stands flanked the fully made king size bed, complete with huge fluffy pillows.

Across the hall was a small bathroom. Modern and clean, it was decorated in the same fashion as the rest of the apartment, in varying shades of blue. She opened the linen closet to find a full set of towels, washcloths and bed linens.

“My God,” she said to Alex after their tour. “I didn’t think it would be this nice.”

“Me neither,” he said with relief. “It really suits you. And here, look at this.” He opened a small door off the living room. She followed him outside to a ten-foot square patch of land formed by the exterior walls of the other apartments. A scraggly rose bush and a patch of ivy showed the efforts of a past gardener.

“Oh! It’s perfect,” she exclaimed. “Something to remind me of home.”

He nodded distractedly. “Shelly, I was thinking. Let’s not go back that fancy hotel tonight. Let’s stay right here! We can meet Cathy for dinner somewhere close. Afterward, get some wine...”

She smiled. “You got it.” He was already on his way outside to dismiss the driver.

Chapter 10

Their flight was delayed over three hours, so it was close to eight by the time they got home. A note from Jeremy asked them to meet them at Monica and Brian's around eight.

Although exhausted, they smiled brightly at the call of '*surprise!*' Monica had planned a celebration of her new career, food, drinks, and the whole St. John clan.

Her father-in-law, Nick, was as strong and imposing as the day she met him, a giant of a man with the large, hard hands of a seasoned bricklayer. He was a strong disciplinarian with his sons, but a pussycat with his grandchildren, an untamable bucking bronco when they were toddlers and a reliable pitcher in their little league years.

Mother-in-law, Irene, had spent her whole life doggedly budgeting the meager income of her bricklayer husband to clothe and feed her three sons and also save for the future. She thought a woman's place was in the home and had never forgiven Shelly for taking a job. Her daughter-in-law's half-hearted housekeeping never failed to elicit an ill-concealed look of disapproval of what she considered 'pigsty'. Irene gardened only for vegetables she could harvest, and thought Shelly's elaborate flower garden was frivolous. She was much closer to her oldest son's wife. Monica kept a beautiful home and was a

marvelous cook, although Irene found her language abhorrent. Even divorcee Valerie was better wife material.

Valerie. She was almost a St. John, if she could really get David to the altar. Shelly watched as she bustled about, assisting Monica. “You’ll have her all to yourself now,” she muttered under her breath, as Alex grabbed her arm and propelled her into the living room.

Brian was fiddling with the VCR and looked up when they entered. Flicking on the TV, he announced, “Okay guys. You saw it here first. The newest rock sensation. Our own Shelly.”

She watched in horror as the audition tape flickered onto the screen. Capone leering suggestively into the camera, followed by Shelly strutting across the stage.

One look at her mother-in-law’s face showed what she thought of Shelly’s performance. But the others appeared entranced. When the video ended, Monica exclaimed, “Holy fucking shit!” causing Irene to shudder.

David was rewinding the tape, intent on watching it at least once more. Again the images of Shelly and Capone filled the screen. Alex moved next to Shelly.

“How could you?” she whispered. “In front of your mother and father?”

“Don’t worry about it. She’ll get over it”.

“Where did you get that tape?”

“Lorna. I asked her for it.”

“Why?”

“Shelly, my brothers acted like I was making this whole thing up. I wanted them to see it was for real. On that tape, you’re a rock star. No question about it.”

The tape had ended and David moved to rewind it again but was stopped by his father, who rolled his eyes toward Irene, sitting stiffly upright on the couch, her arms folded tightly across her chest, glaring at Shelly.

Alex caught the exchange and moved over to her. “Hey Mom,” he said softly, kneeling in front of her and reaching for her hand. “Wasn’t she great?”

She withdrew it sharply. “Great?” she snapped. “What kind of man lets his wife parade around like a slut?”

His voice turned cold. “Look Mom, Shelly’s doing this for our family! She has the potential to set us up for life. And I assure you, she doesn’t have to sleep with anybody to do it.”

“Only time will tell,” his mother replied thinly.

“Irene,” Nick called sharply. “That’s enough!”

Alex clenched his jaw tightly but held his tongue in check.

“That was really uncalled for, Mom!” David exclaimed.

“Why?” she demanded. “We all know what kind of people those rock stars are. With drugs running rampant, everybody having sex with everybody else. And God knows what else!”

“Do you really think Shelly’s that kind of person?” David asked, incredulous.

Irene looked down and refused to answer, afraid to say yes and unwilling to say no.

Alex watched her, praying for her to take back what she’d said. But she just sat there, her eyes glued to

the floor. Finally, he declared woodenly, "Party's over. Sorry, everybody." And strode out of the room.

Shelly looked around, embarrassed, and turned to follow him.

"How could she say that?" Alex fumed, outside. "In front of everybody?"

"You know how she is," Shelly replied. "It was probably a shock seeing the video. She overreacted, as usual."

"She had no right to talk about you like that."

"Alex, remember the time Jeremy broke his leg skating? She practically took out an ad in the newspaper, naming me worst mother of the year for not watching him close enough."

"This time she went out too far."

"Just don't judge her too harshly. She thinks I should be home baking pies and cleaning. Not living in New York, like a slut."

He smiled humorously.

"What possessed you to play it in front of her, anyway?"

"Obviously a mistake," he admitted. "I didn't realize the response it would get."

"Well, I mean your Mom has probably never seen a music video before. I really can't see her watching MTV."

"Look, I'm sorry for playing the video tonight, Shelly. But my Mom is wrong."

"She'll get over it, I'm sure. But don't demand an apology from her. That'll just keep things going. I think it would be better to just forget the whole thing."

“Man, your Mom was in rare form tonight,” Monica commented after they’d left.

“Yeah. What a quick way to end an enjoyable evening,” Brian agreed.

“I felt bad for Shelly. She looked like she wished a hole would open up and swallow her into the floor.”

“My mom has a way of making you wish you were someplace else,” David complained. “I can’t believe she went off on Shelly like that. She is so completely off base.”

“She’s probably just worried that Shelly will change once she gets involved with that crowd of people. And she’ll be alone in New York so much...” Valerie defended her future mother-in-law.

“So what did you think of the video?” Monica demanded.

“Did you know she could sing like that?”

“Hey, did they take it?” Brian checked the VCR and found the tape still inside. They watched it again.

“Sixteen years!” Monica marveled. “More than sixteen years they’ve been together. Did you ever imagine that shy little Shelly could be hiding something like this?”

The scene with his mother kept Alex from sleeping. At six a.m. he decided to get up. By seven

o'clock, he'd roused the boys and was headed to his parents'.

She was frying pancakes and automatically began making more batter when they entered. He sat down at the kitchen table and addressed her. "That was some pretty mean stuff you said about Shelly last night."

"I'm sorry for saying it out loud, but it doesn't change my mind. Shelly looked like a prostitute on that tape. I would think you'd be ashamed."

"Mom, that's the way they dress now."

"Where? Not here. Maybe in New York. So why do you let her go?"

"It's in the contract! She has to go. And she didn't want to go alone, but we thought it would be better that way. At least until we know how this is going to work out."

"So if it works out, you'll be going to New York, too?"

"Maybe."

"So now I have *that* to look forward to," she sniffed. "I keep thinking this wouldn't have happened if you'd married that nice Julie Stewart."

He smiled in spite of himself. His mother never stopped beating a dead horse. He'd dated Julie all through high school and probably would have married her, if he hadn't had a job in Crystal Beach and had lunch in the Beach Café, if a beautiful redhead named Shelly Wilson hadn't waited him on.

“I mean, what kind of woman runs off and leaves her husband and children?” She tore his thoughts away from that fateful day.

“Shelly is not running off and leaving us. She’s doing this for the benefit of our family.”

“For the money, you mean. You could get it some other way. Sell that big house and move into something smaller. Sell one of the cars.”

“Ma. We don’t want to live that way. Counting every penny. We want to do things. Enjoy ourselves.”

“How much enjoyment are you gonna get with your wife hundreds of miles away and you taking care of the house and two children?”

“Shelly and I have agreed on this. And the boys are all for it. You are just going to have to accept it, Ma. And you owe her an apology for the things you said last night.”

His expression told her that he meant it and she nodded. “I can accept it,” she said slowly, “but I don’t have to like it.”

“That’s right. You don’t have to like it. Just keep it to yourself. And don’t forget about the apology.” He added, less sternly, “Now where’s Dad? I need to talk to him about my lawn mower motor.” As he left the kitchen, he leaned over to kiss his mother’s cheek.

She hugged him fiercely and whispered, “I only care about what’s best for you, Alex. You know that.”

He hugged her back. “I know, Ma.”

His father was more pragmatic in his views. “A person’s got to do what a person’s got to do to make it in

this world, son,” he stated evenly. “It’s always been that way for me.”

Shelly woke to find Alex and the boys gone and a note explaining where they were. Padding around in her robe and slippers, she fixed a light breakfast, knowing they’d be well fed by Irene.

She was just finishing her toast when the phone rang. Monica. “Shelly, if you’re going to be living in New York, you’re going to need some new clothes. How about we hit the mall?”

“Sounds good. When?”

“How soon can you be ready?”

“Twenty minutes,” she replied, already heading upstairs toward the shower, stripping off her clothes as she walked.

“I’ll be there,” Monica promised.

She hurriedly showered, dressed and left a note for Alex, promising not to be too long or to spend too much money.

Monica arrived twenty minutes late, as usual. And, as usual, had several excuses. Shelly laughed good-naturedly at her description of the ‘million things’ she had to do.

They targeted the trendier shops. Trying on one outrageous outfit after another. “Can you believe anybody would wear this?” Monica exclaimed, holding up a clear vinyl dress.

“That looks kind of like what I wore to Extremes,” Shelly replied casually. “Except mine was a raincoat.”

“What?” her mouth dropped open. “You’re kidding, right?”

She smiled mischievously. “I wore a bathing suit underneath.”

She stared at her in wonderment. “You’ve changed, Shelly. I don’t know what it is, but it’s more than the clothes. I watched that video a dozen times. It doesn’t even seem like you.”

“You have the tape?”

“You guys left in such a hurry you forgot it. Don’t worry, I’ll keep it away from Irene,” she added playfully.

They agreed on two outfits, a form fitting black leotard with slinky red silk overcoat and a pink denim micro mini dress, and had lunch at Chick-Fil-A, spreading mayonnaise across the sandwiches. “I hope you’ll still be able to fit in those clothes,” Monica joked. “It doesn’t matter for me.”

Shelly eyed her quizzically.

“I’m pregnant.” It would be her fourth child. Shelly knew they were barely making ends meet as it was.

“Are you happy about it?” she asked gently.

“Of course,” Monica replied, smiling wearily. “What’s one more mouth to feed? But this time I’m going to be smart, like you. I’m having my tubes tied right after delivery.”

She pushed aside the remains of their lunch and chewed on her straw thoughtfully. “What about you, Shelly? What are you going to if this whole thing doesn’t work out?”

“I guess I’ll come back home and try to get my old job back. Mr. Stern said he’d always have something for me.”

“And what are you going to do if it does work out?”

She thought it over. It was a much harder question. “I guess we’ll just have to cross that bridge if it comes,” she answered finally.

Chapter 11

She was released from her two weeks notice when Mr. Stern hired her replacement. Even so, the days flew past. All too soon, she found herself on a plane bound for New York. There was an RJF driver waiting at the gate. And Cathy.

They rode in silence to Shelly's apartment. Cathy could sense her sister was preoccupied and in no mood for chitchat. However, once inside the apartment, she could no longer hold her tongue. She moved from the living room to the bedroom and around the small kitchen, peering into drawers and cupboards. "The place is fully stocked," she proclaimed. "Dishes, pots and pans, silverware, utensils, the whole nine yards."

She discovered the tiny garden and squealed with delight. "You have your own garden!"

Shelly followed her outside. "Isn't it cute?"

"It's wonderful. And look, someone's just weeded and everything."

"Alex did that when we spent the night here. He wanted to get some things planted but we didn't have the time."

"Shelly, do you have any idea how lucky you are to have this apartment? In this location?"

"Is it that good? I thought it was a pretty nice area. Alex thinks the rent is about a \$1000 a month. Do you think it could be that high?"

Cathy snorted. “Try five or six times that!”

“No way!”

“Shelly, this is prime real estate. You’re close to everything! It’s not too late. Let’s take a walk. Check out the neighborhood.”

At home, she did all her shopping in one giant grocery store. The deli, bakery, florist, pharmacy, film developing, etc, was inside the store. Here, each store had its own specialty. And even though it was close to 10p.m., everything was still open. She splurged on thick crusty bagels, homemade cream cheese and smoked lox at the deli, fresh fruit and vegetables at the farmer’s market, and stocked up on shampoo, toilet paper, postcards and stamps at the drug store.

They returned to the apartment, arms loaded. After helping her unpack, Cathy said her good byes. “Let me know how it goes tomorrow. And call me when you have some free time. I’m dying for a return visit to the Glow Club.”

She put on a brave front for Alex when he called, assuring him that she wasn’t afraid or lonely. She thought she’d have trouble sleeping in the strange bed, but fell asleep quickly and awoke early the next morning. After a delicious breakfast of bagels and lox, she showered, dressed, and hailed a cab to the studio.

She was ushered into a large room, furnished with a round table surrounded by upholstered chairs, in one of

which lounged Capone. He rose to greet her and asked huskily, "All set, Shelly?"

"Yes," she murmured, "but I'm really nervous."

"Me too." But she sensed he'd said it for her benefit.

The door opened, echoed loudly in the silent room, but it was nothing compared to the bustle that followed. Tom Meyers entered, followed by several other people, some of which Shelly recognized from her earlier meeting.

"Okay. We all know why were here," he began.

"We do?" Shelly wondered.

"We've signed Shelly and Capone, along with the members of their band, to a three year contract. We'll begin production of their first album as soon as possible. I'd like to introduce everyone who hasn't met them." He started with the chair to his right. "You've met Sam Forbes. He'll be producing your first album. Both of you will have plenty of contact with him. You also met Brent. He'll be handling promotion and marketing of the album and the band itself." He nodded to an exotic dark skinned woman. "This is Victoria Mason, the choreographer, and Jessie Ewing is wardrobe and make-up."

He paused after the introductions. "I've set up personal meetings with each of you to go over your agendas. As you know, Lorna Miller is representing both Shelly and Capone, so any major decisions will have to be passed by her. Are there any questions?"

Shelly had a dozen but didn't know where to start. Tom addressed her personally. "Shelly, I'm sure you have plenty of questions, but I think most of them will be

answered during your meetings with everyone today. You'll be meeting with Sam first. He'll explain exactly what he wants and will probably tell you everything you need to know. I'll be personally overseeing this project. If there's anything you can't find out from the team, just call me."

She smiled gratefully. She felt she could trust him.

"Capone," he continued. "I've set you up with Brent first. He has a few ideas to run by you. Okay?"

Capone nodded vigorously.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen, I'll leave you to your business then." He rose and left the room.

Sam took Shelly by the arm. "My office is just down the hall," he explained, leading her through the maze of hallways. "Here we are." He turned into a commercially decorated office with a few obviously personal additions; a large dart board hanging on the side wall with a set of lethal looking darts on a shelf next to it, and a full size basketball hoop above the doorway, dangerously close to the small window next to the door.

He took a chair behind the cluttered desk and motioned Shelly to a chair facing him. Lounging back, he asked casually, "So what makes you think you can make it as a rock star?"

She searched for an answer and finally stammered, "I don't know."

"Well I know what makes me think you can make it," he said, leaning forward. "You got the talent. You need to get that through your head, because, to be honest

with you, you don't come across as all that confident. That's something we need to work on."

He studied her across the desk. "I saw a little bit of your potential on the video. And with work we can maximize that potential. To achieve that you'll need some professional coaching."

She remained silent. "Now don't get me wrong," he cautioned. "If you didn't have what it takes, you wouldn't be here. And while we feel that you have an exceptional voice, it lacks professional quality. I understand that, unlike Capone, you've had no formal voice training, and I've set you up with lessons from Veronice Vermillion. She's the best in the business. Just for some fine-tuning, you see. And dancing. There is a certain amount required both on stage and in video. You'll be training for that. You'll also have a personal dresser, Jessie, who'll help you choose your professional wardrobe."

He could see that she was getting a little overwhelmed and switched to a softer tone. "For the next couple of months, we'll concentrate on that fine tuning. When both of us decide your ready, we'll start on the album and demo tape. And, just so you know, Capone is going through the same training. The band will also be trained about the particular cues they'll need to recognize and what type of instruments work best for them." He smiled. "So don't feel like we're picking on you, Shelly. It's all par for the course."

"It does sound like a lot," she admitted.

“It’s really not bad,” he said reassuringly. “If you ever feel like it’s getting to be too much, please let me know and I’m sure we’ll be able to work it out.”

“Do you think we have a chance?” she asked softly.

“Shelly,” he began, “let me put it this way. I’m not bragging, but I want you to know that I have first choice working with any band that comes in. Or I can pass on them all. When I saw your video, I practically begged to produce. Does that give you any idea of what I think?”

She nodded slowly. “I’ve set up the production schedule to allow you frequent visits home. We’ll be working in two-week blocks with a week free in between, at least for the first few months. Will that be okay?”

Again, she nodded. “You’re going to meet with Brent Young next. He’s a nice guy. You’ll like him. He’s handling marketing and promotion, and will explain what he has lined up for you as far as personal appearances go. Do you have any questions for me?”

She said that she didn’t and allowed herself to be ushered from the office back into the hall. He introduced her to Brent again. Before leaving, he instructed, “If you think of anything you’d like to ask or talk to me about, feel free. We’ll be having meetings pretty regularly.”

Brent was young and very good looking. He moved quickly and energetically; and spoke much the same. Her meeting with him was short and to the point. He explained that Lorna had negotiated an extensive marketing allowance with their contracts and that she was lucky to have her for an agent. “She works our balls off here,” was the exact wording. He outlined his preliminary

plans, but added that his work would really begin as the album was nearing completion. He advised her to learn as much as she could in the next few weeks from her coaches; ‘the basic stuff is usually the most important’.

Afterward she met with Victoria, the choreographer, who reinforced the need for basic dance lessons, and provided the name and address of the instructor she worked with exclusively.

Jessie from wardrobe was the most interesting of the bunch. She was very large (at least 300 pounds), black, and garbed in a huge African print kaftan and matching turban. “Girlfriend, we are gonna create you a whole new image,” she exclaimed, eyeing the silk skirt and blouse she was wearing. “You will be the *queen* of rock and roll,” she promised.

She whipped out a cloth tape measurer and wrapped it around Shelly’s waist. “Twenty-six. Good.” Then she measured her bust. “Thirty-four. Okay.” She continued in this fashion until she had every measurement, including ankles and wrists, while prattling on about the well-known stylists and designers they’d be working with.

Shelly liked the outgoing woman and when Jessie suggested they break for lunch, she readily agreed. They went to a small deli near the studio and had thick roast beef sandwiches and the best coleslaw Shelly had ever tasted.

“This is my favorite place to eat lunch,” she explained. “Next time we’ll have the minestrone soup. It’s to die for! Now tell me about yourself, Girl. You’re the talk of the studio, you know. Everybody wants to

know about Tom Meyers' latest find. The unknown housewife from Florida."

Shelly described her life in Florida and how she came to audition for RJF.

"Girl, that's some story, all right. You say your boys are teenagers? You don't look old enough to have teenagers." She studied Shelly's face. "And going out in the sun, too! That's something you got to cut out. The sun will do a number on your skin that no amount of make-up can cover up!"

They walked slowly back to the studio after lunch, with Jessie dominating much of the conversation. Shelly was again ushered into that large room they'd met at this morning. A young woman sat waiting at the large table. Jessie left with a quick "Later girlfriend."

"Oh hi. You must be Shelly. Did you have a nice lunch? I'm Theresa, Mr. Meyers' secretary." She stuck out her hand to Shelly. "I have your itinerary for the rest of the week. Stop by Friday afternoon and I'll have next week mapped out for you. There are directions, just in case, but any cabbie will know the addresses." She handed Shelly a blue folder with a calendar in the front pocket and typewritten instructions in the back.

"I've written my direct line number on the front. If you have any problems, you can get right in touch with me."

Shelly flipped through the pages and nodded. "I noticed that today is blank?" She pointed to the calendar.

“You’re done for today. Have a nice afternoon and get some rest. You’ll see that the rest of the week is pretty busy.”

Theresa had been right, Shelly thought as she flopped wearily on the couch and replayed the day in her mind. Her first stop had been Thorpe School of Dance where she met the distinguished Richard Thorpe. He put her through the paces and had been pleased to discover she already knew a lot of the steps. She described the long ago ballroom dancing lessons she’d taken with Alex.

“Very good,” he replied. “A lot of the steps we use in our routines are taken from the classical dances. Mr. Capone has also had some formal dance training. This puts us somewhat ahead.” He outlined his plans to coach her and Capone, independently at first, and then later together.

Then it was on to former opera singer, Veronica Vermillion, who would be acting as her voice trainer. The afternoon was spent ‘breathing’. “You will never sing if you do not breathe properly,” Veronica dictated.

Thursday she met with Mr. Bernard, the flamboyant hairdresser and make-up artist, and self proclaimed ‘miracle worker’. Unlike Jessie, he claimed that Shelly had ‘ruined’ her face in the sun. He masked, cleansed, toned, and creamed her before he was satisfied with his repair.

It was the same with her hair. “You have glorious hair, Shelly! Why in the world would you go into the

ocean and chlorinated pools without protecting it?” he admonished. After several deep-conditioning treatments, he felt able to style.

“Don’t cut too much off,” Shelly begged. “My husband loves my hair.”

“Nonsense!” he proclaimed. “Mr. Bernard will create a hair style that is perfect for you. I guarantee complete satisfaction.”

He kept her at the salon more than six hours, never allowing her to look in the mirror as he worked. She was afraid of what she would see when he finally did allow her view his work.

“You see!” he exclaimed, at her stunned expression. “Mr. Bernard is never wrong!”

She stared at the image in the mirror. “Mr. Bernard... Thank you,” was all she could say. He smiled smugly.

The next week flew by with dance lessons, voice lessons, wardrobe fittings, follow-ups with Mr. Bernard, and several meetings with Sam Forbes. Phone calls from Alex, Monica, and even Angie, who was seeking relationship advice, as well as visits from Cathy, kept her from getting too lonely. Before she knew it, she was taking a taxi to LaGuardia for a week home.

She arrived in Tampa at midnight Friday. Although she had slept on the plane, she was exhausted. Waiting at the gate was Alex, who smiled broadly and waved. She hurled herself into his open arms and was swept off the ground by his exuberant embrace.

“Shelly,” he breathed into her hair as he stood holding her tightly for several minutes. Stepping back, he did a double take. “Your hair!” he exclaimed. “You got it cut.”

“You like it?” she asked nervously.

“I love it,” he replied firmly.

She smiled with relief. She also loved it. Mr. Bernard had provided her with several bottles of necessities: shampoo, conditioner, hairspray, gel, mousse, and instructed her to use a little of each item to get the desired results. “And only use this brand,” he cautioned. “I’ll know immediately if you are using the cheap stuff.”

The result was manageable hair, for the first time in her life. It fell in thick spirals so numerous that it was hard to tell where one ended and the next began. With the sun-dried, frizzy ends cut off, her hair was healthy and shined, as well as being several shades darker.

She fell asleep almost as soon as they hit the road, propped against his shoulder. After a few minutes, she stretched and curled up in the seat, using his leg as a headrest. He smiled down at his brave and beautiful wife. Of course she’d be tired after all she’d been through the last couple of weeks.

Going off to New York alone. Leaving everything she knew... It was something he wasn’t sure he could do if the shoe was on the other foot. It was pretty scary. And, indeed, he’d woken up in the middle of the night several times since she’d gone with an inexplicable sense of foreboding; fighting the impulse to call and make sure she

was okay. One night he did call, waking her from a deep sleep and eliciting only a garbled, half-asleep response.

But she was home now and Alex knew he'd be sleeping much better with her beside him. His breath quickened at the thought. He doubted that they'd gone two weeks without making love since they'd been married. He missed not only the physical release, but also the feeling of closeness, each intent on pleasing the other.

To his amazement he found he had a hard on. "God, man, get a grip," he chided himself. He concentrated on the road but Shelly's head on his leg, hair fanning out across his lap, was driving him crazy. Unable to withstand the constrictive denim, he unzipped his jeans, allowing his engorged penis to spring free. He groaned inwardly at the sensation of cool air against hot flesh. Unfortunately Shelly chose that moment to awaken and laughed out loud at his predicament.

"Hey! A little sensitivity, please, I'm sexually frustrated."

"I'm sorry," she whispered, brushing her silky hair against his bare flesh, something she knew drove him crazy.

"Don't," he cautioned. "I'll wrap this car around a tree if I get any more distracted." He jammed his foot on the accelerator and spun gravel pulling into their drive. Giggling like teenagers, they stripped and jumped into the back seat.

They slept better than they had in weeks, snuggled in each other's arms. The boys were anxious to see their mother, but waited until ten-thirty before deliberately making enough noise to wake them.

"I missed you so much," she cried, hugging them. "Now tell me everything that's going on."

Although they'd talked on the phone almost every day, some things couldn't be discussed long distance. Jason pulled her aside. He'd met a girl.

She studied her fifteen-year old son. He was so like his father, blonde and tanned with a quick easy smile. Of course girls his age were interested in him, they always had been. But now he was starting to be interested back. She would have to talk to him again about sex and what it meant, as well as all the possible consequences.

"What's her name and when can I meet her?" she questioned.

"Her name is Christy and I thought I could bring her by tomorrow night."

"Great. I'll make us a big dinner."

"Thanks, Mom," he replied gratefully. He knew she would welcome Christy into the house and make her feel comfortable. She was just like that. "Mom?" he continued. "I haven't said anything to Dad yet."

"How come?"

"I just wanted to talk to you first," he answered.

She was touched. "Thanks," she replied, her voice cracking.

They went out for breakfast, letting the boys choose the restaurant. Predictably, they ended up at Nellie's, home

of the all-you-can-eat buffet. They talked and laughed while wolfing down vast amounts of pancakes, grits, hash browns, sausage, and everything else on the thirty-two item buffet, and left stuffed and in good spirits.

Then it was off to the grocery store. Alex was hopeless buying groceries and the boys weren't much better. She'd checked the refrigerator and pantry to find several bottles of Gatorade and Sunny Delight, three cans of salted peanuts, wilted lettuce, two boxes of sugary cereal (no milk), and a block of cheese.

She stocked up on nutritional foods: fruits and vegetables, pasta, several cuts of meat. Alex and the boys unloaded.

That evening, they visited Monica and Brian. Shelly was grilled unmercifully about RJF, New York, and how she'd been spending her time. They were so disappointed with her description of her various lessons, she was tempted to make up something more interesting just to placate them. David and Valerie stopped by with a bottle of tequila, and they ended up making margaritas, drinking and talking late into the night.

Sunday, she prepared her special crunchy fried chicken and brought out the good dishes and silverware. She wanted to make her first meeting with Christy special.

He introduced her proudly. Blonde and deeply tanned, with the same piercing blue eyes and long limbs, she could have been his sister. She was a very pretty girl, polite and friendly to Alex and Shelly. It was how she treated Jason that alarmed Shelly; touching his hand or arm possessively, brushing against him when they passed,

eyeing him flirtatiously across the table while they ate. She would definitely have to schedule that talk.

“Tonight,” she thought to herself, watching them cross the yard as Jason walked her home. He wrapped his hand around her waist, hooking his thumb through her belt loop.

The next morning, with Alex at work and the boys at school, Shelly found herself alone in the house. She was amazed at the mess three men could make and set about busily straightening things out.

By three p.m., she'd washed and dried ten loads of laundry, which were waiting on the living room couch to be folded. She'd dusted and vacuumed all of the upstairs rooms, done a mountain of dishes, and had a roast thawing for dinner. She sat down to watch Oprah and fell asleep instantly.

It was more of the same the next day as she concentrated her efforts downstairs. By Wednesday, things were pretty well squared away; everybody had clean clothes to wear and clean dishes to eat off of. Alex apologized for letting it get so bad. “I'll keep up better next time,” he promised.

She spent Thursday and Friday day in the kitchen. Pre-cooking and freezing a variety of foods; giving Alex the ability to produce a full meal out of the microwave.

Saturday was somber. She'd be leaving again the next day. They put on a cheerful front and spent the day at the beach. The next morning he dropped her off at the airport and took the boys to visit his parents, hoping to postpone returning to the empty house.

LORI NAUMANN
PRIORITIES

Chapter 12

The next few months were a whirlwind. Shelly was in New York two weeks and home one. The daily lessons had become weekly refresher courses, since the start of rehearsals. Endless rehearsals! Alone, with Capone, and as a group. She was becoming more comfortable with the studio and New York, eating out or cooking for one, and sleeping alone.

Alex and the boys also got into a routine. Somewhat! Although they tried to keep up, the house was usually a wreck when Shelly came home and she spent the majority of her time cleaning and washing. They began to talk about hiring a housekeeper.

He mentioned it to Monica and Brian on one of his many evening visits to their home. Monica saw that Alex was lonely with Shelly gone so much and made it a point to make him feel welcome. Alex appreciated it and took her up on her hospitality three or four nights a week, to work with Brian on an old truck he was restoring or just sitting around shooting the breeze. It gave him and the boys somewhere to go when they were missing Shelly.

Although Alex had to give his sons credit. They were adjusting to it a lot better than he was. Jason was wrapped up in his girlfriend and Jeremy was always with his friends. They just went on as if nothing had changed, while Alex felt as if he was in a different world. The late night terrors (where he pictured Shelly in all kinds of

threatening situations) had ended, but he still slept fitfully. He ached with an emptiness that was not eased by a week long ‘visit’ from her. And he was always horny! Two weeks was a long time without sex and, by the time Shelly got home, he was so sex starved that he almost raped her on the spot. He took a lot of cold showers and had become quite adept at masturbation.

“A housekeeper, huh?” Monica broke in. “How many days a week?”

“I don't know,” Alex answered. “I just know that Shelly can't spend all her ‘rest’ time working around the house.”

“How much pay?”

“I really don't know. We haven't talked it out that far.”

“Well find out. I might know somebody,” she replied.

When Shelly called later that night, he forgot to mention it. And when Monica called the next evening, he didn't know what she was referring to when she questioned him.

“The housekeeper, Alex! You said you were thinking about hiring a housekeeper and I have the perfect person.”

“Who?” he questioned.

“Valerie.”

“Valerie?”

“She's been thinking about getting a part-time job. But she needs to be home after school for the kids. This would be perfect for her.”

“You think so?” he asked doubtfully.

“Yes,” she replied enthusiastically. “You’ve been to her house. You’ve seen how nice she keeps it.”

“Do you think she’d be interested?”

“I know so. She’s sitting right here next to me. Do you want to talk to her?” She handed Valerie the phone.

“Alex?”

“Hi, Valerie. I guess Monica’s already filled you in. Do you want the job?”

“I’d love it,” she replied earnestly.

“How much do you charge?”

“How about ten dollars an hour?”

He did some quick calculations in his head. \$10 an hour, say four hours a day, five days a week. \$200! Not much less than Shelly made at Florida Land and Homes, after taxes. But it wasn’t fair for Shelly to be working so hard when she was home.

“It’s a deal,” he replied. “How soon can you start?”

“How about Monday?”

That would give her five days of cleaning before Shelly got home. Hopefully enough time to get it into shape. “Monday’s great.”

“Okay. I’ll come over as soon as I get my boys off to school. How will I get in?”

“I’ll leave a key under the first plant on the porch, the one in the blue pot. I’ll have a copy made, so just take it with you.”

“Okay,” she said. “And thanks, Alex.”

“No,” he replied cheerfully. “Thank you. You may have just solved all my problems.”

He hung up smiling. This had just fallen into his lap. And Monica was right; Valerie would be a great housekeeper. She kept her house spotless, with everything in its place. It would take a big load off Shelly.

He just hoped she wouldn't be mad that it was Valerie. Shelly seemed to have gotten over her resentment of the friendship between her and Monica. Or maybe she was just too busy to worry about things like that. Anyway, what better way to bury the hatchet than have her clean up after your slob husband and two piggy sons? In any case, he decided to wait until she came home to a clean house to mention it.

Monica smiled at Valerie with satisfaction. "See, I told you it would work out," she exclaimed.

Valerie smiled, too. "I'm glad you talked me into it," she admitted. "This will work out really good. And David won't want to say anything about it since I'm helping out his brother."

Monica nodded. Valerie had confided her fears about David's hesitation over setting a wedding date. She was afraid he was getting cold feet. And Monica had witnessed enough of David's break-ups to know she had something to worry about.

Over the next few days, Alex congratulated himself frequently on his decision to hire her. The first day, he'd noticed a tremendous difference. They'd come home to a sparkling kitchen. All the dishes were washed and put away. Even the refrigerator magnets had been rearranged.

Today was Thursday and the whole house gleamed. Valerie was phenomenal. She'd also been doing little extras; like baking cookies just before she left and packing them right up so they would still be warm when they got home.

Friday morning she found an envelope addressed to her on the kitchen table and ripped it open to find nine twenty-dollar bills. "An extra \$20 for the excellent job you're doing," his note said. She thought again what a nice guy he was.

Shelly was glad he had hired a housekeeper, but wondered why it had to be Valerie. But after looking around, she was glad he had chosen her. 'She puts me to shame' she thought wryly as she inspected each room. The entire house was dusted, mopped, polished and vacuumed. Even the windows sparkled.

"Let's go to the river for the weekend," he pleaded. "The boys can rent a boat and me and you can hang out at the pool."

She was exhausted from what had been a crazy week at the studio and then the flight home, but the boyish, excited look on his face convinced her. "Okay."

He whooped enthusiastically, bringing the boys in at a run. "Hey guys, get some stuff together. We're going to the river."

They packed in record time and reached Crystal River late in the afternoon. After renting a cottage on the bank, they dropped off their luggage and went off in search of food; eating fried catfish at a river front diner. Stopping for bait on the way back, they also stocked up on

necessities at a small grocery store. Beer, of course, soda for the boys, snacks for the next day, bread to feed the ducks and minnows.

They sat out on the dock late into the night, while the boys fished. Shelly leaned against his chest and fell asleep. He watched his oldest son reel in a good sized catfish and remove it expertly from the hook as his youngest attempted to free his line from a snag. He dipped his head and rubbed his face in the soft coils of Shelly's hair, inhaling the fresh scent of her shampoo and pulled her tighter to his chest. The things that he cared most about were right here on this dock. Where he could watch over them and keep them safe. Until Shelly went back to New York...

She got up early and fixed a big breakfast, enjoying the opportunity to wait on her husband and sons. She was just putting things away when Valerie arrived.

"I'll take care of that, Shelly. I'm used to the boys leaving everything out."

"I'm sure," Shelly replied knowingly. "Doesn't it make you mad to leave everything so nice and come back the next day to find it trashed?"

"I don't mind cleaning," Valerie admitted. "I like the feeling of taking something messy and making it nice. And, plus, it makes me feel like I'm earning my pay."

"Oh, you're doing that for sure!" Shelly exclaimed. "Valerie, why don't you join me for breakfast?" she asked impulsively, hoping to forge some type of friendship.

“I have a lot of stuff to do,” she protested.

“Come on. It won’t take more than a few minutes.” She set out an extra plate.

As they ate, Valerie couldn’t help but ask, “How’s it going in New York?”

Shelly briefly described her life in New York: the daily rehearsals, weekly planning sessions, dance and voice lessons.

“I never realized it was that complicated.”

Shelly agreed. “Neither did I. And we haven’t even begun recording.”

“What about that dreamy guy on the video? Do you ever see him?”

“Capone? I see him every day. It’s his band. Or rather, we’re partners,” she corrected herself. Valerie correctly guessed that there was some history between them, but didn’t dare ask her about it.

“He goes out of his way to make me feel comfortable in New York,” Shelly continued. “He’s taken me and my sister out to dinner a whole bunch of times. David even came with us once.”

“David?” Valerie questioned. “My David?”

“Yeah, the last time he was out to New York.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Valerie replied smoothly.

“Why didn’t you tell me that you visited Shelly in New York?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. “I didn’t think it was important.”

“You didn’t think I’d be interested?”

“What’s so interesting? I was in New York, so I went to see her.”

“It just seems like you tried to hide it from me. When Shelly mentioned that you’d gone to dinner together, she assumed I knew all about it. I felt like a total idiot.”

“I was only there twice.”

“Twice? You visited her twice and never thought to mention it to me?”

“What’s the big deal? I never tell you about my trips to Tennessee or Arkansas.”

“Had you ever been to New York? Before Shelly went there?”

“Yeah. Plenty of times,” he lied.

“Does Alex know you’ve been visiting her?”

“Don’t you think he’d be happy that someone is checking on her?”

“I don’t know. Next time, why don’t you just let us know? Then we wouldn’t have to wonder.”

“Okay. I’m letting you know now. Jack was very happy with the way I handled the Farraday account. I’m sure he’ll be sending me to New York quite regularly. And when I’m there, I’ll visit Shelly.”

He turned on the TV and increased the volume, indicating the conversation was over, unwilling to argue. It seemed like she could turn anything into a fight. Sometimes he obliged her. Mostly he ignored her.

Chapter 13

Pre-production had begun, the rehearsals intensified. Through extensive market research and preference polls, eleven songs had been chosen for the album.

They'd targeted two groups for polling: ages eighteen to twenty-five and twenty-six to thirty-five, presenting snips of songs and their titles, and measuring them on a scale of one to ten. The top eleven represented a mixture of Capones' best work for their first, and most important, album.

One meeting became heated when Brent delivered the findings of another study. "We presented the band as both *The Capones* and *Capone*," he explained. "Both fell very low on the preference scale. We also presented several other names, which placed much higher on the scale." He paused and looked directly at Capone. "The findings indicate we have no choice but to change the name of the group."

"Fuck that!" he exploded, rising from his chair. "Nobody ever said anything about changing the name! I won't allow it!"

Brent moved to answer but Tom Meyers cut him off. "You better re-read your contract, Capone," he said firmly. "RJF has complete control over the decision."

It was the wrong tactic. Capone stormed out of the room without another word.

Shelly looked at Brent imploringly. “Are you sure this is necessary?” she asked. “Can’t you see why he’d be upset?”

“Yes,” Brent replied. “I can see why he’d be upset. But this is very important. You don’t read a book unless the title gets your attention. It’s the same principal. Our target groups thought that *The Capones* sounded like something their parents listened to. That definitely won’t be your audience.”

“What will the new name be?”

“The highest approval rating was for *Upper Echelon*. We’ve decided to go with that.”

Upper Echelon. I did have a certain ring to it. Erik and Curt exchanged glances and nodded their approval.

“And RJF has complete control over the name?” she questioned.

“It’s in the contract.”

“Let me talk to Capone,” she said. “He probably just needs time to get used to it.” She found him in the sound room, the first place she checked. He loved the complexity of RJF’s equipment. To him, it was an indicator of his success.

“Capone?” she called. He looked at her morosely. “I talked to Brent. He’s got a lot of good reasons for changing the name, or they wouldn’t be doing it. We have to trust them to do the right thing. Isn’t that why you signed with RJF? Because of their track record?”

“But the name of the band... *The Capones* wasn’t good enough?”

“Brent said that people thought it was old fashioned. That they would think our music was old fashioned.”

“It’s my name, damn it! So what if it’s old fashioned?”

“We want to do everything we can to get people to listen to our music and buy our albums. We know the music is good. If the name isn’t so good, why not change it? You changed the name before. Remember the *Freebirds*?”

He smiled dourly. “Yeah, but that was a long time ago.”

“We have to do what RJF says. Apparently, it’s in the contract.”

“Yeah. Tom made that real clear.”

“So we really have no choice. We better make the best of it,” she coaxed. “Anyway the new name is pretty cool. *Upper Echelon*.”

“That’s what they want to use?”

“Yeah. It was real high in the approval rating or whatever. I kind of like it.”

He remained silent. “Come on, Capone,” she continued. “You said that you would do anything to be on top. Don’t let something like this throw you off. Go back in there with a smile on your face and tell them you *love* the new name.”

He mulled it over in his mind. “Okay,” he said finally.

When they returned, Capone indeed had a smile on his face. “*Upper Echelon* is cool,” he borrowed Shelly’s term. “Let’s go for it.”

The others were amazed with his change of attitude and credited Shelly for her bargaining ability. The meeting continued.

“You’ll be happy to hear that all the song titles placed high on the approval scale, Capone,” Brent continued with his presentation. “*Shout Softly* placed the highest and we’ve decided to go with that for the album title.”

Capone nodded, somewhat mollified.

It was decided that they would begin recording in six weeks with a planned completion date four months later.

Sam went on about the logistics of the taping schedule. “It will mean a lot of time in the studio,” he began. “Under a tight production schedule. We’ll be working six days on, one day off. Up to twelve hours a day.” He looked at Shelly meaningfully. “In one month increments. I’m sorry, Shelly, but we’re going to have to begin a one month on – one week off schedule.”

She nodded. She’d known all along that more time would be required as taping began. And even more once they began to tour. She would have to get Alex and the boys to visit her here.

Sam voiced her thoughts by adding, “We’ll be happy to fly your family out as often as you’d like for visits.”

Capone didn't question the extra consideration given to Shelly. He had once before. Shelly was given two weeks on and one week off, while Capone was expected to report five days a week, and complained to Sam about the time they lost while Shelly was away.

His objections had been quickly overruled. "This comes from Tom Meyers himself," Sam replied. "Shelly's to be given a certain amount of free time to be with her family." He told Capone to 'get over it'. "Why so many concessions for Shelly?" he'd persisted. "In case you don't know," Sam informed him, "Shelly is the one that sealed the deal with RJF. Tom was interested enough in the group to set up an audition, but Shelly clinched it."

Capone shook his head, remembering the conversation. Shelly was the one that got them the contract. Shelly -- the girl he'd dumped! He'd made a mistake. The minute she walked back into his life, he knew. He'd thought about her often over the years, always picturing her as she'd been then, in high school.

It had only been a preview to what she would become.

She held herself with a natural grace. In Richard Thorpe's dance classes, she picked up even the most complicated routines easily and waited patiently for him to get them right. She was friendly with everyone, from the boy at the deli who delivered their sandwiches (and always gave her an extra pickle since she'd said she liked them), to the mousy bookkeeper she often had lunch with.

The guys in the band adored her, visiting on a regular basis for advice on wives and girlfriends, or a home cooked meal in her tiny kitchen.

The public would love her too, he thought confidently. Women would love her for her personality and vitality, and men for her beauty. “Wait until you see her in a body stocking and high heels,” he said silently. It was an outfit she would appear in for their first music video.

She broke the news to Alex on her next visit home. “A month at a time?” he asked with a frown.

“For four to six months. Until we’ve finished taping.”

“And only a week in between?”

“Right. And after working six twelve-hour days a week, I don’t know how much I’ll feel like traveling. I was thinking... Maybe you and the boys could come to New York once a month.”

“What about work? And school?”

“The boys could get their work beforehand. They’re such good students; I don’t think it’ll be a problem. You could use a vacation from work.”

“And what about here? Who’ll take care of the dog and feed the chickens?”

“Valerie could still come every day.”

He nodded. He knew he couldn’t expect her to continue doing all the flying. The time had come for him

and the boys to spend a little time in New York. "I'll work on the arrangements," he told her.

Production wasn't much different from rehearsals. They started with *Shout Softly*. Sam had picked it to be released as a demo to the various radio stations they were marketing. It was one of Capone's early creations, haunting lyrics told the tale of a young man chasing a dream and his tragic suicide once he'd achieved it. He'd written it out of despair one night, drunk and stoned out of his mind, by the booze and Heroin supplied by the bartender at the seedy club he'd played that night. "At least this guy made it before he bought the farm," he'd thought bitterly at the time.

Capone knew success would be sweet. He'd tasted little pieces of it for the past few months. Working with the top people in the business. Using state of the art equipment. The deferential way the staff at RJF treated him.

When they broke for a long weekend, there were three songs in the bag and they'd begun taping the video. Shelly's family arrived for an eight day stay. They met her at the studio.

Shelly proudly introduced them. The women in the office eyed Alex admiringly while exclaiming over her handsome sons. The band sized him up, gauging his worthiness of their beloved Shelly.

Capone greeted Alex warmly, vigorously shaking his hand. “Good to see you again, man.” Alex returned the greeting, an odd look on his face.

He pulled her into the bedroom, closing the door behind them. “Shelly, I want to know, what’s going on between you and Capone?” His voice, though angry, was barely a whisper; the boys were in the living room and he didn’t want them hear.

“What do you mean?”

“Something! Something is going on. I felt it.”

“Felt what?” she stalled for time.

“When I shook his hand...” Alex couldn’t explain it. “It was like he was challenging me.”

She sat down on the bed, nervously biting the end of a long, newly manicured fingernail.

“Are you having an affair with him?” he demanded, his voice rising.

“No!” she quickly assured him. “Alex, remember I told you about my first love? The guy who hurt me so bad?”

His eyes narrowed. “Him? It was him?”

She nodded.

“So why did you lie to me?”

“I didn’t...”

He cut her off. “You lied by not telling me. Why?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Maybe because it’s past history. Maybe because I didn’t want you making a mountain out of a molehill.”

“Shelly, only twice have I caught you lying to me. And both times it involved this guy.”

“Alex, I’m sorry. Can’t we just get past it? You’re only here eight days...”

“Yeah,” he agreed. But Shelly knew the damage was done. She also knew she should have told him about her past with Capone, and she had planned to, when the right opportunity came up.

Although he put aside his anger at Shelly, the next eight days convinced him he hated New York. It was too dirty, too loud, and too busy for him. He couldn’t imagine sitting in the endless traffic, or being taxied about by the wild cab drivers who spoke no English, every time he wanted to go somewhere.

Nor could he imagine paying the prices. Each time they went out for dinner, they spent enough to eat home for a week.

Though the apartment was fine for one person, it was a nightmare for four. Even the boys were irritable and argumentative. Shelly was actually glad when it was time for them to go.

Valerie was still there when they got home and sensed their gloominess. She guessed it stemmed from having to leave Shelly. In an attempt to cheer them, she

reached into the refrigerator and withdrew a double chocolate cake, chattering gaily.

“I made you guys this cake for after dinner, but it looks like you could use a piece now.” She passed them each a plate and fork and cut into the cake.

The chocolate worked like magic on the two boys, who were soon shoving each other playfully at the table. After their second piece, even Alex was in a better frame of mind.

Jason spoke up first, voicing the true reason for their concern. “Dad,” he began. “Remember you said we might have to move to New York, if Mom got real famous and successful? Is that going to happen?”

“I’m not sure, son,” Alex answered truthfully. “Why do you ask?”

“Because we *hate* New York!” Jeremy exclaimed. “We don’t want to move there.” Jason nodded in agreement.

Alex, who couldn’t agree more, questioned them. “Why do you hate New York?”

“It’s crowded and filthy and there are bums laying around on the sidewalks, and drug addicts hanging around.”

“I saw somebody eat out of a garbage can,” Jeremy chimed in.

He didn’t know how to respond but finally answered truthfully. “I don’t like it that much, either. But your Mom moved out there for the good of the family and we might have to do the same. Besides, we were right in the city. I’m sure it’s different when you get out into the

country a little more. I heard there are some really big farms if you go upstate some.”

The boys were unconvinced. “But what about snow and stuff,” they questioned.

“What about it? If we had a big property, there are bound to be some pretty good sized hills for sledding and maybe even a pond for ice skating.” The boys remained silent.

“And don’t forget, we’d only be moving to New York if your Mom is real successful. If that happened, we’d have enough money to buy something really nice.”

“I still think we’d hate it,” Jason muttered.

“I hope Mom doesn’t get successful,” Jeremy stated soberly.

Valerie had tried to remain unobtrusive, but now tried to help Alex out. “I had a friend that moved to upstate New York,” she volunteered. “Her and her husband have a dairy farm. They live in a really small town, like Sunnysdale, where everybody knows each other. It’s nothing like New York City.”

“Is there a lot of snow?” Jeremy questioned.

“As a matter of fact, there is. My friend says it’s so beautiful in the winter. She lives in a big farmhouse with a fireplace practically in every room; even the bedrooms. When it’s cold and snowy outside, they sit in front of the fireplace, roasting marshmallows.”

The boys exchanged thoughtful glances. “And sometimes,” she continued, “it snows so much at night that they close the schools.”

Now there was a positive thought. Maybe it was worth some consideration. They went upstairs to unpack, they said, but the sounds of a computer baseball game came drifting down into the kitchen.

"Thanks for taking my side," Alex told her. "To tell the truth, I'm going to need a little convincing myself. What you said about your friend's place made it a little more appealing."

"It's hard for kids that age to leave their friends and move somewhere new."

"Especially their *girl* friends. I had to make Jason all kinds of promises to get him to leave Christy for a week. But I know we're being selfish. It's been hard on Shelly, too."

"And hard on you, too," she said gently.

"Damn hard," he admitted. "Just not having her around to talk to is rough. Sometimes, I forget she's not here. I rush home from work to tell her something. Halfway home I remember, and by the time I'm able to call her, it just doesn't seem that important anymore."

"At least some things have gotten better," he continued. "Before you started it was really a nightmare. We had take-out out every night, never had any clean clothes. We even ran out of *paper* plates. The house was a disaster. Shelly spent every minute she was home putting it back in order."

Valerie had quickly become indispensable to them. Within the first few weeks, she'd scoured the house from top to bottom. She now performed only light daily

cleaning; each room was cleaned thoroughly on a weekly basis.

This left her time for the extras they'd grown accustomed to. On Friday she did their grocery shopping; buying according to a menu. She had them fill in their diner requests for the week. Each day she pre-made their selection and left it in the oven, warming. She was a wonderful cook and could make almost anything. She hadn't yet been stumped by a request, and, although they wouldn't admit it, had even improved on some of Shelly's recipes. And, she had revived most of their neglected plants. She used the time they were in New York to wax the hardwood floors and spray the house with pesticide. "You might find some dead bugs," she warned. Alex marveled that she thought of everything.

He saw her again that evening, at Monica's. "Where's David?" he questioned.

"Out of town."

"He must be doing well at work," Alex remarked, "to be doing so much traveling." Valerie simply nodded.

Their next visit to New York was for five days. Shelly planned fun family outings. Cathy took the boys out, so she and Alex could be alone. They went out of their way to give each other 'space' in the small apartment.

The boys masked their distaste for the city and kept up a cheerful front for her sake, as they had promised their father they would. Alex made a special effort to seem interested in the things she showed them.

Even so, after they'd left, Shelly wondered if they had always been so whiney.

She flew home the next month. And made it in time for Monica's labor. They got the call from Brian late on her second day home. "I'm on my way to the hospital."

Without question, Alex and Shelly, and even the boys, had headed to the hospital. As with all the St. John births, it was a family event; attended by all. Irene and Nick were already there, in the waiting room. David, Valerie, and the two boys arrived shortly after. They took turns in the delivery room, encouraging Monica and calming Brian.

Valerie was amazed. Although the call had come after midnight, they'd gotten up, dressed and to the hospital within minutes. It was wonderful to be a part of such a supportive family. Shelly had even made it home from New York. Smiling, she snuggled as close against David as the hard metal chairs allowed.

"I wish it was you in there," she heard Alex say to Shelly, who responded with a loud snort.

"Not me! I'm hardly in the position to deal with a baby now. Even if I could have one."

"I know," he conceded, sighing. "I just remember..."

She smiled at him tenderly. The birth of their sons had sealed their relationship. And she knew he wanted

more children. He loved his boys, but would have given anything to have a daughter, a small version of Shelly.

Shelly, however, was more pragmatic. They were barely making their bills with two children. It would be insane to have any more! It was one of the few times she'd ignored his objections, and had insisted on having a tubal ligation after Jeremy was born.

Nick hurried back to the waiting room. "The baby's just about here," he explained. Irene stayed with Monica and Brian; he'd high tailed it out of there. When his sons were born, nobody went into the delivery room. The expectant father waited right here in the waiting room to hear of the birth. A short time later Brian appeared. "It's a girl!" he shouted happily.

Chapter 14

They were two weeks ahead of schedule and Tom was very pleased. He congratulated the team members during their end of the week meeting. Addressing Shelly and Capone, “You two are phenomenal! Your first album and you’re handling it like a couple of pros. We’re two weeks and a lot of dough ahead.”

They’d completed eight of the eleven songs. *Shout Softly* was in final editing and would be released as a demo by the end of the month. They were well into production of the video.

“What I’ve seen so far is pretty hot!”

Capone broke in “Will MTV be showing it?”

“How’s it look, Brent?”

“I’ve spoken with their program director and he says, ‘As always he’s interested in quality products from new artists at RJF’. He did agree to view the video.”

“Well, there’s your answer, Capone,” Tom replied. “And, just to sweeten the pot,” he continued, “if production continues at this pace, I’ve arranged a two week break for all of you. In the Bahamas! On top of the bonuses already specified in your contract.”

There were murmured exclamations all around. Capone high-fived Shelly, who returned it halfheartedly. There was no way she could join them in the Bahamas. She didn’t see enough of her family as it was.

Tom drew her aside and asked to come to his office. He guided her to the chair facing his desk and settled in behind it. “Shelly,” he began. “I called you in here because I wanted to talk with you privately.” She nodded nervously.

“Sam and I have spent considerable time reviewing the album edits and previews of your video. I want you to know how pleased we are with your work so far. You’ve worked really hard with Veronica; it shows in your voice. You’ve also been a real trooper about coming to New York; being separated from your family, and have never hesitated to do anything that we’ve asked of you. “To reward that dedication, I want to extend the Bahamas offer to your family as well,” he beamed.

“My whole family?”

“Your husband and two sons. All expenses paid.”

“I’m not sure my husband can take that much time off work.”

“Shelly,” he said gently. “Your husband makes what? Less than \$50,000 a year?”

She nodded. “More like twenty,” she added silently.

“I’m expecting album sales of at least ten million. And *that’s* a conservative estimate. That’s close to five million, your share. Wouldn’t it be easier for you if your husband quit his job and took care of business at home?”

She studied his face. “You’re serious?” she questioned softly.

“Very,” he replied. “And Shelly. You need to know something else. Once we release the test album and

video, your life is going to change. If Upper Echelon is received anywhere near as well as we anticipate, and we're usually right about these things, your life will never be the same. I want you to realize what instant fame can mean to your personal life. You'll have no privacy at all. Neither will your family."

"Brent said he'd keep my family out of the spotlight as much as possible."

"And he will. But that's no guarantee. You've seen the tabloids. They have no mercy. I just want you to be prepared."

She thanked him for his advice.

"So you'll take us up on the Bahamas offer?"

"I'll talk to my husband," she promised.

She relayed the conversation to Alex, over the phone, that evening. "Do you want to go?"

"Two weeks in the Bahamas? All expenses paid? What do you think?"

"What about work?"

No matter what Tom Meyers said, he was hesitant to just give up his business. "I'll sub contract out some of the jobs," he replied. "I'm not gonna quit."

Chapter 15

It was like she was watching another person on the screen. She'd seen bits and pieces of the video, and, of course, posed for numerous shots. They'd worked with Jessie Ewing, Victoria Mason, and cameraman Mel Olsen, who videoed many of their recording sessions. He'd also scheduled sessions with Shelly and Capone; alone and together, placing them in many different settings and literally dozens of outfits. The snippets of tape had seemed like a hodgepodge of unrelated shots. The work of a masterful editor had turned it into something more recognizable.

It opened with a long shot of the band during a rehearsal session. They were dressed casually in jeans and T-shirts; having worked for hours, they were damp with sweat. It faded to a shot of Shelly and Capone lying on the beach watching the sunrise. It had actually been a sand 'blanket' on a hard plywood floor against a backdrop of waves and morning sky. A close up of Capone in a skin-tight black T-shirt followed. Then a shot of Shelly exiting the back of a black stretch limousine, one delicate leg at a time, her skirt hiking up to expose a shapely thigh, a scene with Erik, Curt, and John guzzling whiskey after a taping session. Capone alone, looking pensive. An ethereal shot of Shelly in a wispy chiffon skirt and blouse, her feet bare.

They watched transfixed until the video ended and silence replaced the blaring music. Sam broke the ice. “So what do you think?” he demanded.

Shelly smiled mutely but Capone exclaimed, “Fucking A! It’s awesome!”

Tom smiled indulgently. “You know what, Capone? I couldn’t agree more. I previewed the tape earlier and gave it my seal of approval. We’re offering it to MTV first. If they don’t pick it up, we’ll submit it to VH1 and some of the other markets.”

Brent added. “The audio portion came directly from the test record. We’ve had two thousand demos made for preliminary marketing.”

Capone whistled. “Two thousand? Why so many?”

Brent explained. “There are over 3700 rock stations in the United States. We’re planning to work at least a thousand of them the first week. Another thousand demos will be sent out the following week. It’s an extensive marketing effort. But it’s not much more than Lorna demanded when she negotiated your contracts.”

“Are you okay, Shelly?” Tom asked.

She nodded weakly. “Just a little overwhelmed, I guess,” she murmured. The truth was, the video stunned her. Did she really look that good? Or had the tape had been doctored?

By the end of that week, the video was submitted to MTV. The demo tapes were in and the retail department got busy ‘working radio’. RJF had several full time employees whose jobs centered around visiting the

program directors in their region; often bringing gifts such as autographed pictures of the band, CD's from their other successful groups and, of course, breakfast for the all-important morning DJ's. These gifts were frequently used as prizes for the station's listeners.

Good relations with the program directors were essential. They created the station's play list; a rotation of the songs played by the DJ's. With the station receiving over fifty new records a week and only one or two added to each week's play list, competition between the marketers was fierce. The program directors at the bigger stations received tens of thousands of dollars worth of free meals, booze and tickets to various sporting events each year.

After marketing the demo to nine hundred, ninety-seven stations, the retail department held its collective breath as they awaited the results.

The first call came from Wes Johnson at WKTK in Lexington, Kentucky. Brent took the call himself. "I got a chance to listen to the demo tape you dropped by last week," he drawled. "I'm calling to let you know we'll be adding it to next week's play list."

He exhaled slowly. "So you liked it then?"

"I think ya'll got yourself a winner."

Brent thanked him profusely and slammed down the receiver. "*Shout Softly* is a go with KTK," he proclaimed excitedly.

Next was WFLZ in Tampa, Florida. "This is one of our local chicks?" questioned the program director.

"Sure is, Shelly St. John, born and raised Floridian. The band leader, Capone, grew up in Florida, too."

“We’ll be adding it to next week’s play list,” he promised. “The song is killer!”

“FLZ loved it,” Brent exclaimed gleefully. “The word was ‘killer’. I’m going to call Tom.” He reached for the phone excitedly.

Tom leaned contentedly back in his chair. He’d been right from the start. They were hot! *Shout Softly* would make it happen. He knew that if the demo were well received by the program directors, it would be played over and over.

The demand for an album would reach its peak right around the planned release date. He had no doubts about it making the Top Ten. Now if only MTV picked up the video! He was deep in thought when the intercom buzzed again.

“You’re not going to believe this!” Brent’s breathless voice came over the receiver. “Sixty more stations have called in the last half an hour. They’re raving about *Shout Softly*.”

“Sixty stations?” Tom repeated. “In half an hour? That’s gotta be some kind of a record.”

“It’s a fucking madhouse down here... What?” he shouted to someone in the back round. Tom heard a muffled conversation. “Tom?” he almost shouted. “They just hung up with MTV!”

By the end of the week, 942 stations had committed to adding *Shout Softly* to their play lists. Thirty of them were already playing it.

Audience reaction was phenomenal. From the time it hit the airwaves, *Shout Softly* rose in popularity. It was

soon being requested on a regular basis. People wanted to know more about Upper Echelon and Shelly and Capone. Interview requests rolled in.

Brent held a meeting to discuss which interviews would be granted, as usual Capone insisted on attending. They narrowed the list to eight well-known reporters and moved on to interview content.

“They’ll be looking for human interest,” Brent reminded them. “What about Shelly being a newcomer to the business?”

“Or Capone’s early days?” suggested an assistant.

“How about first loves – reunited after two decades apart, for the sake of great music?” Capone offered.

The room grew deadly silent.

“Please tell me you’re serious,” Brent pleaded.

The article featured pictures from their high school yearbook. *Shouting Even Then?* captioned a photo of *The Capones* playing a high school dance, while another featured them dancing cheek-to-cheek at the junior prom. It described their ‘fateful reunion’ and new hit record.

Alex had to explain Shelly’s past relationship with Capone after the pictures appeared in their local paper. His mother was horrified and began referring to Shelly as ‘that woman’. The boys were unfazed and began a scrapbook of clippings.

They showed them to everyone. It had been almost a year since Shelly had signed with RJF. Some of their friends hadn’t really believed about her going to New

York. There had been speculation that she and Alex had separated and that Jason and Jeremy had concocted this wild story to cover it up. Finally, they had some proof to back up their claim.

Alex wished he could work up the same enthusiasm. The stories only reminded him of Shelly's lies.

Valerie passed the paper to Monica. "I knew there was something about this Capone guy that Shelly wasn't telling."

Monica scanned the article. "I can't believe she never told me! We tell each other everything."

"Apparently there's quite a few things she didn't tell you," Valerie needed. "Or Alex!"

Monica nodded dejectedly.

Chapter 16

Shelly's life had been turned upside down. She'd moved from the apartment to the Plaza Hotel. The constant mob of reporters surrounding her apartment building had made it necessary. Capone suggested the Plaza. He was staying there and had had minimal problems with the press. Hotel security was tight; they were used to dealing with a well-known clientele.

He'd gone as far as to hire a bodyguard after being mobbed by drunken fans at a club one night. Shelly had resisted going to that extreme, but began to think seriously about it when she found she couldn't even go to see her sister without being followed. She remembered Tom's warning about her life changing and realized it had been the understatement of all time.

"I heard *Shout Softly* three times today and I only listened to the radio when I was in my truck!" Alex exclaimed one day on the phone. "And every time they play it they say your name and how you're from the area."

"I wish they would stop saying that. I don't want the reporters to start snooping around down there."

"Why?"

"You don't understand what a nightmare it is, Alex," she said morosely. "I can't go anywhere or do anything without being mobbed by fans or reporters."

Today I hired a bodyguard so I can get to the studio and back.”

“You’re kidding!” he replied, unable to imagine it. “You actually need a bodyguard?”

She could hear the concern in his voice. “They don’t want to hurt me, Alex,” she assured him. “They want to stick microphones in my face. Shout out questions. Take my picture...”

“You’re kidding!”

“It’s driving me a little crazy,” she admitted. “But I guess it’s the price of fame. How are the boys taking it? With my picture in the paper all the time?”

“Are you kidding? They’re eating it up. They’re the most popular kids at school.”

She smiled, relieved. “That’s what they tell me, too. But I still worry. Are they home?”

“No. They went to the mall with Valerie.”

Valerie often included them on outings with her boys. He’d come to depend on her more and more now that Shelly was gone for longer periods. She had taken Jeremy to quite a few of his orthodontic appointments when Alex hadn’t been able to get off work. And when he’d been home from school with the flu, she’d been a godsend, coming over early and staying late. She cooked dinner five nights a week and was now putting in thirty hours a week, five hours a day, including Saturday when she brought Adam and Rich with her.

The four boys became very close friends. Once, after spending the night at Valerie’s, Jeremy mentioned that David had not been home. He’d hadn’t thought much

about it until he saw Valerie at Monica's the next week. David was again out of town.

He brought it up to Shelly now. "You don't think he's screwing around on her, do you?" he asked.

"Well, I know he came out to New York for business last week, because he came to see me. It was so crazy here though, I didn't really get to talk to him."

"Well maybe he's on the level then." He hoped so. He'd also gotten to know Valerie pretty well. She was easy going and funny, very pretty, an excellent cook, and an even better housekeeper. David would be stupid to let her go. She was nothing like those *fruitcakes* he'd hooked up with in the past.

"Probably is," Shelly didn't dwell on it. She had enough on her mind.

Tom threw an extravagant party the day they wrapped up the album. All that was left was final editing. They'd begun filming *Embrace*, their second music video. MTV had already promised airtime.

The video was scorching! Featuring endless scenes of Shelly in provocative poses, Capone bare-chested, flexing his well developed muscles and smirking into the camera, and ended with a sexy dirty dancing scene.

Two thousand stations were playing *Shout Softly* and others were clamoring for a copy of the demo. Both MTV and VH1 gave the video regular airtime and it was a Top Ten Single the past two weeks. The accomplishment was unprecedented at RJF. Tom was the man of the hour,

Upper Echelon becoming a recognized name. Brandon Knight came down to personally congratulate them and offer his best wishes.

After the final scene of *Embrace* had been taped, they hooted and whooped in exuberance. That was it! It had been decided that the album would be released while they group was away. The video would be released to MTV at the same time. All that was left on their agenda was the Bahamas! Shelly flew home the next morning to get ready for the trip.

Alex had planned his own party, and, with Valerie's help, had put together a pretty good spread. A large banner above the front door read "Welcome Home" in huge red letters. The dining room table was laden with assorted luncheon meats, cheeses, fresh bakery rolls and numerous condiments. There were bowls of potato salad, macaroni salad, coleslaw and a platter of sliced pickles. Her sons were quickly demolishing a large bowl of dip surrounded by a variety of chips mounded around it.

Monica and Brian, and David and Valerie were there, with their respective broods. Alex had even invited Angie, who brought her girls, but not James. They sat in the garden, sipping rum spiked punch and wolfing down enormous submarine sandwiches.

When *Shout Softly* came on the radio, all eyes turned to Shelly. She focused on the familiar lines and, at Monica's insistence, sang along with her parts. They listened enraptured to her descriptions of her life since the song and video came out. And were good-naturedly envious about their upcoming trip to the Bahamas.

Shelly pulled Angie aside. “Where’s James?” she questioned.

“Home,” she answered flatly.

“How are things between you?”

“Pretty bad,” she sighed. “One day I stayed home sick from work and was watching the talk shows. There was one about men and women who cheat and it really hit home. This little girl came onstage and sobbed her eyes out because her mother had taken off to live with her boyfriend. A husband came out and talked about how his wife’s affair had devastated him.” She paused and swallowed hard.

“I decided I had to break it off with Bob right away.”

“And did you?”

“Yeah. He got real mad about it. Said he never cared about me anyway and that I was a lousy fuck. That, I could deal with, but the bastard went right to James and told him about the whole thing.”

“Oh no!” Shelly exclaimed. “What did he do?”

“He was devastated, of course. You know his temper; I expected him to beat the crap out of me. But he just turned to stone. Later I heard him crying in the bathroom.”

“When was this?”

“A couple of weeks ago. Nothing’s changed since then. He doesn’t say more than three words to me. He walks around the house like a robot and cries to himself at night. I’ve tried over and over to get him to talk to me but

he says he's not ready. I'm going crazy. Between the guilt and the way he's acting..."

"Well, it's going to take a while... Let's just hope he'll be able to forgive you."

"Do you think he will?" she asked hopefully.

"I don't know," Shelly replied truthfully. "But, if he loves you, he'll try."

Angie nodded mournfully. "He'll never trust me again."

"He might," Shelly replied. "But you are going to have to earn it. And the way you earn it is through your actions. No more affairs!"

She readily agreed. "No more."

The party ended after midnight and Shelly climbed wearily into bed. She knew Alex would want to make love. It had been more than a month since she'd seen him.

She heard him clomping upstairs, slightly wobbly from the punch he'd consumed. Undressing quickly, he slid into bed and reached for her.

He smiled smugly as he as he lathered on suntan oil. He'd made it! His song was on the radio, his video on TV. He was in the freaking Bahamas on an expense paid vacation and waiting on a \$20,000 check.

According to Tom, it would only get better. "Look at the success of *Shout Softly*," he'd pointed out. "Making the Top Ten two weeks after release. I'm betting on the same response with the album."

He settled back contentedly in the lounge chair and adjusted his dark sunglasses. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught two teenage boys wrestling in the pool. Shelly's sons. It was incredible to think she had kids that age. Hell, both boys were bigger than she was! He smiled, imagining Shelly trying to kick their asses, as his mother had kicked his when he pissed her off.

But he guessed Shelly had Alex for things like that. Any thoughts he had of winning her back had disappeared. Watching her with her family had driven them away. She was so comfortable in her role as wife and mother, whether splashing playfully with her sons in the surf or, on a deserted pier with Alex, exchanging a gentle kiss. He found he couldn't keep his eyes off her. Alex had caught him staring several times.

He became even more solicitous of her. Trying to create the perfect holiday for his family, he went out of his way to suggest fun and interesting ways to spend their time. They'd gone water skiing, deep-sea fishing and had done tons of hiking.

Shelly realized what he was trying to do and finally told him. "Alex, I know you're trying to make this a wonderful vacation, but don't try so hard. It's wonderful just being here with you."

He smiled down at her and said softly, "I love you so much, Shelly. I'm really proud and happy for how well it's going for you. But I'm really scared, too. Things are happening so fast now. I know that you're gonna be real famous. I just don't want to lose you..."

“Lose me?” she questioned. “Why would you think that?”

He could see Capone watching them from the beach. “I don’t know. I just have this bad feeling.”

The next morning they packed their bags glumly and left the island. They landed in Fort Lauderdale where Alex and the boys would continue to Tampa and Shelly and the others to Kennedy.

Shelly had the earlier flight. Watching her exit the gate, Alex’s jaw clenched involuntarily, when Capone instinctively took her carry on baggage.

“Good,” he said, plopping down next to her. “They booked us adjoining seats.”

She smiled. Since she’d come to New York, Capone had been almost like a brother to her. He watched out for her, especially now that the media had become such a problem.

“Well, things should be crazy when we get back.”

She looked at him quizzically.

“Our single is number one now. The album went out to the stations and journalists last week. With us out of reach, Brent figured it would build a media frenzy. He thinks they’ll be going crazy for interviews.”

“How come they tell you everything?”

“I ask,” he replied. “This is my future we’re talking about.”

“Shelly,” he continued. “I don’t know if they’ve talked to you, but the shit is about to hit the fan. Tom told

me that *Shout Softly* has broken every record on the books. They don't know what to expect with the album. They're worried about you."

"About me?"

"You've been getting a taste of the press already. But if the album gets the reception that RJF expects, we ain't seen nothing yet. Me and the guys... We've been waiting a long time for this. But it's different for you.

"Shelly, what I'm trying to say is... The band is good and I'd be lying if I said my songs aren't fantastic."

She smiled at his modesty.

"But you are, too. Plus you're freaking beautiful! People are gonna love you. They'll want to meet you. Know all about you. The press will hound you like Madonna. Tom wonders if you can handle that."

She giggled nervously.

"Don't laugh, Shelly," he cautioned. "I'm totally serious."

She could see that he was and sat back thoughtfully. Like Madonna? She had read enough gossip magazines to know that there was always some kind of story about her. Some of them contradicted each other and it was hard to sort out fact from fiction. The photos made one thing obvious. She couldn't make a move without someone taking her picture. What was it like to live like that?

She got her answer when they landed at Kennedy. RJF had leaked their arrival time. The mob of reporters caused her to stop in her tracks. Capone walked right into her, throwing her off balance. He reached out to steady

her, both hands around her waist. Looking over her shoulder, he saw what caused her abrupt stop; as dozens of flashbulbs exploded.

It was that shot that appeared in most major papers the following day. Along with the limited comments they were able to make before Brent Young miraculously appeared with two bodyguards.

Chapter 17

The *Shout Softly* album would be released to the public that Friday. It had been playing on the radio since the Friday before. RJF provided posters to retail outlets with its release date, but continued to receive many calls requesting information on its availability.

Their morning production meeting was ebullient. Sam rushed forward to congratulate them. “MTV says *Embrace* is the most well received video ever,” he fairly shrieked while pumping Capone’s hand enthusiastically.

Shelly now saw their strategy. Release the video and album while they were away. If it failed, they were spared the agony. If it were a hit, the public would just be whetting their appetite when they returned.

Clearly, it was the latter. Brent outlined their immediate schedule, filled with newspaper and magazine interviews and album signing sessions.

Knowing he’d be home early, she left the newspaper on the kitchen table, open to the entertainment section.

Alex studied the picture, the totally unrehearsed look of concern on Capone’s face as he reached out to keep Shelly from stumbling, his hands around her waist. This guy was really getting on his nerves! Valerie smiled at his reaction.

“Hey, you guys!” Jason called from the living room. “Mom’s new video is on!”

Alex watched in horror as scene after scene of Shelly and Capone, half naked, in provocative poses culminated in a dance that looked more like a dry fuck. He looked at Valerie in embarrassment and strode from the room.

“What’s wrong with him?” questioned Jeremy. Jason shrugged

She called home that evening, eager to fill him in on the album’s popularity. And the \$20,000 check she’d gotten that afternoon. “What’d you do today?” she began conversationally.

“Well, I watched a porno movie,” he answered shortly.

“Really?” she asked, surprised. “Which one?”

“I believe it was called *Embrace*.”

“Oh,” she answered flatly.

“Shelly, how do you think the boys feel when they see you just about fucking him? Especially since everybody in the world knows your history with him?”

“It was dancing, Alex,” she protested. “There were dozens of people standing around watching us.”

“Oh! That changes things,” he snorted. “Do you want to talk to the boys?”

She did, but resented him giving her the cold shoulder. “Fine.”

Jeremy came on the line, bubbling about how famous she'd become and how all his friends had heard her album and seen her on TV.

"Did you like the new video?" she questioned delicately.

"Are you kidding? It's awesome! Do you think they'll make a video for *Lackluster*?"

The response to *Lackluster* had been a surprise to RJF. But not to Capone. He'd insisted in including it on the album and, as usual, had been right. *Lackluster* was being played across the country and had become a favorite with the teenage audience; a market RJF never expected to capture.

"I think they're talking about it," she answered, relieved with his reaction to the video. If RJF wasn't thinking about it, she'd make sure to talk to them.

Jason felt the same. He was big man on campus now, thanks to her sudden celebrity. And at sixteen, that was all that counted.

After she'd hung up, she couldn't help wondering why he'd laid the big guilt trip on her. The boys weren't upset; he was. And he was a grown man!

By the time she called the next evening, she'd relented; after wondering how she would feel if it was him dancing with another woman, even if he was being paid thousands of dollars for it. She greeted him cheerfully and, following her lead, he responded with a booming 'hello'.

She'd planned to avoid the subject, but Alex approached it head on. "I wish RJF's taste in video was a little less X rated," he began.

“Alex...” she said pleadingly.

“What I’m trying to say is, I know you had a choreographer for the video; and you were just following their directions. I really had no right to get mad at you.”

“Thanks for understanding,” she breathed with relief. “You should see how they make those videos. They splice this piece here and this piece there. And the whole thing is nothing like the original tapings. It didn’t seem that bad when we were making it.”

“It isn’t that bad now,” he said reassuringly. “They play videos like that every day. I was just upset because it was you. And him!”

“Why?”

“Because I think he wants you.”

“Alex,” she snorted. “Capone has more women than he knows what to do with!”

“But maybe not the one he wants,” he contended.

Although it played frequently, Monica still had not seen the *Embrace* video. The baby gave her little time to devote to watching TV.

“I taped it,” Valerie proclaimed on an afternoon visit. She slipped it into the VCR. “I’m dying to get your reaction.” They watched together in silence.

“Well.” Monica lifted one eyebrow. “I sure wouldn’t mind trading places with her. That Capone is a Babe.”

“Wasn’t it wild?” Valerie demanded. “You should have seen Alex’s face when he saw it!”

“He seemed okay about it the last time I saw him,”
Monica commented

“Well, he’s calmed down a lot. But still, I feel bad for him. Can you imagine how humiliating it must be for his friends to see this?”

Monica laughed. “Somehow I doubt his friends are putting him down over being married to Shelly!”

David was in New York and invited her out to dinner, but changed his mind when he saw the reporters hanging around outside her hotel. They ordered room service.

“Can’t you go anywhere?”

“Not without my bodyguard,” she replied blandly, as if it were a minor inconvenience.

After dinner he wanted to talk. “I hate to be laying this all on you, Shelly,” he apologized. “But I need some advice and I really don’t have anybody else to talk to about it. I mean Monica and Valerie are so close... I can’t talk to her, or Brian. And Alex is hardly impartial.”

“So it’s about Valerie then?”

He nodded. “I know she’s a really great person. And Adam and Rich are terrific. I really love them.” He sighed. “It’s Valerie that I’m not sure I love.”

“David!” she exclaimed. “You’ve been living together for a year and a half. You’re engaged!”

“Engagements are made to be broken,” he replied. “Isn’t that the old saying?”

“I think it’s ‘rules’ are made to be broken,” she corrected. “Although in your case...”

“Hey,” he protested. “I was never engaged before.”

“Well, that should show you something,” she encouraged. “Valerie was the only one you wanted to marry.”

“But I don’t want to marry her any more.”

“Did something happen?”

“Nothing I can put my finger on. She just seems like a different person than the one I proposed to... Like she was on her best behavior before, or something.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. What do you think?”

“David, I can’t make any decisions for you. I can only give my opinion. I think Valerie would make an excellent wife, but marriage is a big commitment. And it isn’t easy. You need to be sure before you take that step. Otherwise it won’t be fair. To you, or her.”

He sat back in silent contemplation as Shelly refilled their glasses.

“Well, you’re the first to know.” He drained the glass. “I’m leaving her.”

“You’re sure?”

“I was sure before I came. But talking to you really helped. Do you hate me?”

“Of course not!”

“I hope Brian and Alex feel the same way.”

“Alex and Brian will always be on your side” she said reassuringly. “But you’re probably going to catch hell from Monica.”

“That’s for sure!” He laughed unconvincingly. “I feel like such a bastard.”

“David, don’t,” she said gently. “It’s better than if you’d gotten married when you felt this way. Staying with her when you don’t love her will only hurt her worse.”

“Thanks, Shelly,” he said, rising. “I knew talking to you would help.” He grinned. “It just takes longer to get to your house now.”

“Are you leaving?”

“Yeah. I have an early day tomorrow.”

“I hope it works out for you,” she said earnestly as she closed the door behind him.

She found it hard to fall asleep, thinking about David’s visit. Valerie would be devastated. The St. Johns would be upset. Irene had been so happy that he was finally settling down. She would surely give him an earful.

Monica would be furious and might side with her pal. Brian, though he usually listened to Monica, would probably remain loyal to his brother. And Alex...

How would Alex react? He’d always been quick to excuse David’s behavior with women. But Valerie had become indispensable to him, and the boys. Jason and Jeremy loved Valerie. Would they resent their uncle for dumping her? What a mess!

He wasted no time setting his plans in motion, telling her as soon as he got home the next night.

Valerie took the news stoically; her face set in a grim mask. She even helped him pack a few things and

watched unemotionally as he walked out the door. It wasn't until he pulled out of the driveway, that she dissolved into helpless sobs and crumpled to the floor.

She consciously composed herself the next morning; her sons never knew anything had happened. She'd tell them later. When she was better able to deal with it herself.

She spent the day moping around in her oldest and most comfortable bathrobe, wondering what had gone wrong. David had insisted that it was nothing she had done. She'd been through break-ups before, but there had always been a definable cause. This time she'd done everything right! She drank cup after cup of coffee, but was unable to eat.

However, when the boys came home from school, they found her showered, dressed and planning dinner. She sat them down that evening and explained what had happened.

"He left?" Adam asked, incredulous.

Valerie nodded. "It had nothing to do with you guys. It was between me and him."

They'd heard it before. But had never expected it to happen with David. He was different; he seemed to genuinely care about them. "That god damn son of a bitch!" Rich exclaimed.

Instead of scolding his choice of words, she silently agreed. He *was* a son of a bitch!

It wasn't until late that night that she realized she'd completely forgotten about Alex. And Jeremy's soccer game!

He looked around the cluttered kitchen, confused. Hadn't Valerie come today? Last night's supper dishes stacked in the sink and this morning's cereal bowls on the table told him she hadn't. So there wouldn't be anything ready for dinner either. He'd have to order something.

The boys came through the back door and headed directly for the refrigerator, pouring large glasses of orange juice and gulping them thirstily. "Valerie never showed up to pick me up after practice," Jeremy remarked. "Luckily I tracked down Jason."

Now he was a little pissed! It was one thing to neglect the cleaning, but to leave Jeremy stranded? What the hell was wrong with her? If she would have just called...

By the time he showered, changed and had some pizza, he'd forgiven her. Valerie had never let them down before. She remembered their schedules a lot better than he did, often reminding him of an appointment he'd forgotten. He began to grow concerned. What if something had happened?

Just as he decided to call, and check on her, the phone rang. It was Valerie.

"I'm so sorry about today. There's no excuse for me forgetting about Jeremy."

"It's not like you. I was starting to worry. What happened?"

She knew he'd find out soon enough. "David moved out last night," she said and, to her horror, burst into tears.

He didn't know what to say and sat, helplessly, listening to her sob.

Finally she continued in a broken voice. "He came home last night and said he'd decided he wasn't ready to get married. I thought he wanted to postpone the wedding, but he wanted to end it all together. He packed some stuff and left." Again, she broke down.

Alex's eyes narrowed as he thought what a bastard David could be. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Just forgive me for today," she pleaded. "I was so upset that I was barely functioning."

"No problem. Anything else?"

"Let me keep my job. I'm going to need it now more than ever."

"There was never any question about that," he assured her. "We couldn't live without you."

Chapter 18

They kicked off a promotional tour. Ten cities in twenty days; beginning in New York with an appearance on Good Morning America, where they would perform *Shout Softly*. In the other nine cities, they would do personal appearances, press conferences and album signings.

Shelly was amazed by the turn out at these events. The sheer numbers astounded her. Ten thousand in Lexington, fifteen in Birmingham. The fans were uncontrollable, screaming hysterically, or shouting their names, going to extraordinary measures in attempts to touch them. It was kind of scary.

Alex met them in Miami for an album signing. He'd been pushed into the background and soon felt out of place. Shelly was so mobbed she didn't even know he was there. He had sat back and watched with disbelief.

Until now, he hadn't realized the magnitude of her fame. Of course, he'd seen her picture in the paper, heard her songs on the radio. He knew her video was on TV regularly. But, he'd been shielded from the reality.

He didn't know that it was RJF's promotion department that was responsible. Shelly had insisted on keeping her family out of the limelight and, so far, they'd done a pretty good job. No overzealous fans invaded his property and no reporters camped out on his doorstep.

Shelly talked about needing a bodyguard to go anywhere, but this was his first real demonstration of what she'd been talking about.

It was a mob scene! He was shocked by their behavior. Screaming 'I love you' to both Shelly and Capone. Climbing all over each other to get the best view. Grabbing at them as they passed. No wonder she needed a bodyguard. These people were crazy.

But he was just as disturbed by Capone's behavior. If a fan came too close to Shelly, he gently drew her away. He acted as the spokesman for both of them, fielding questions from the reporters addressed both to him, and her. But even while attending to the details, he kept a watchful eye on Shelly.

Shelly seemed accustomed to it and looked to him often for assistance in dealing with the press and fans.

"He acts like he's your goddamned husband," he griped during dinner, which they ate in her hotel suite. Remembering how they had once reveled in ordering from room service, Alex thought how tedious it had become. But there was no way he was subjecting himself to those crazy fans by going out in public, bodyguard or no bodyguard.

"That's silly, Alex. He knows I'm happily married!"

"I know. But does he care?"

She changed the subject before it caused another argument. "Isn't it great about David's promotion?"

Alex had found out about the promotion only last night. "How'd you know about that?"

“He told me he was going to get it last time he was in New York.”

“It must have been recently?”

“A week or so ago. Right before he broke up with Valerie. He needed advice so he stopped by.”

His jaw dropped and he looked at her, astonished. “You gave him advice? Why didn’t you tell him to work things out with her?”

“His mind was already made up. He just needed someone impartial to talk to.”

“Impartial? Shelly, Valerie has been busting her ass for months, looking after *your* sons and *your* house. How are you impartial?”

“I didn’t mean impartial, really.” She hated always being on the defensive. “I mean removed. Sort of...”

“You mean prejudiced,” he spat. “You didn’t make the slightest effort to change his mind because of some petty little thing you have against her!”

“That’s not true,” her voice rose.

“If you knew how devastated she was, you would be ashamed of yourself.” He stared at her. “I feel like I barely know you. You don’t just look different,” he had never gotten used to her ‘professional’ appearance, “you are different.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Shelly I know cares about other people’s feelings.”

His words stunned her. “Alex, your brother has dumped more women than I can count. All of them were devastated. How the hell is it my fault this time?”

Had she no gratitude for all Valerie was doing for them? Was she that callous? Without answering, he disappeared into the bedroom, closing the door behind him.

She sat at the table for quite a while, thinking. Why did everything turn into an argument between them? When had he started blaming her for everyone else's problems?

She thought about apologizing to him. But for what? She'd done nothing wrong! So, although they hadn't seen each other in close to a month, Shelly slept on the sofa that night. Alex never emerged from the bedroom.

They exchanged only a perfunctory kiss when he left for his early morning flight.

Though she was still angry, she called a couple days later. And despite her firm intentions, she ended up apologizing to him.

He accepted it as his due and admonished. "Next time, don't try to punish me by not calling for two days."

"Okay," she answered meekly. But, again, she thought he was being a jerk.

Alex wondered if Shelly would be so cavalier if she witnessed the effect David's departure had on Valerie. He was deeply concerned about her. The vivacious, energetic woman he'd known was gone. Sluggish, distracted, pensive, she endured each day.

He offered friendship and she grabbed it like a lifeline, coming over in the evening, bringing her boys with her.

They shared the dinner she'd prepared earlier and watched TV, or played cards, or talked.

A few times they went out to dinner and, once, to a newly released movie. They settled into somewhat of a routine. On the nights she didn't come over, they usually saw each other at Monica's.

Without David, she was helpless when it came to finances, bouncing several checks and getting behind in the bills. He helped her straighten it out and began keeping track of what needed to be paid each month.

Shelly had one visit home before the concert tour. Brent had scheduled twenty-six cities. She wouldn't be home again for more than two months.

They camped in the Ocala National Forest for the weekend. Alone in their tent and free from distractions, they talked, clearing the air between them, and made love. They headed home late Sunday night and slept in Monday.

He decided to serve her breakfast in bed. Encountering Valerie in the kitchen, he grinned broadly.

“Shelly’s home. She has three more days before she leaves on tour.”

“Do you want me to take some time off?”

“No. You can still come. You won’t bother us.”

She did come Tuesday and Wednesday. But not Thursday. Alex had taken the week off work and, with the break up with David still fresh on her mind; their open displays of affection were more than she could take.

Chapter 19

The first concert was incredible! Months of rehearsals had prepared them for the lights and special effects. They had practiced their dance routines over and over. But nothing had prepared Shelly for the sight of forty thousand fans packed into a crowded arena and the heady sound of their applause.

Capone also reacted to the sheer multitude. The result was an unforgettable performance that left them screaming for more. They played encore after encore.

It was the same at their other shows. As word of their powerful performances spread, tickets in every city quickly sold out. Upper Echelon was making magic, their fans eating it up.

Shout Softly had gone double platinum. The team at RJF was on top on the world.

Shelly called from Boston. “Guess what I’m holding in my hand?” she demanded.

“I give up.”

“A check for one and a half million dollars.”

“No way!” he whooped.

By then the boys had come downstairs to check out the commotion. Shelly could hear a muffled version of him explaining the cause of his excitement. Jason got on the line first, verifying the news. And then Jeremy with a list of things he desperately needed (Nike shoes, shirt and

cap). She had the luxury of saying “Anything you want.” She knew the boys wouldn’t go overboard. And if they did – so what?

“Wow,” he shrieked. “Wow! This is awesome!”

She smiled indulgently. “Jeremy, let me talk to Dad again, okay?”

She’d planned the conversation in her mind. Alex had been hoarding her advance money, fearing it would be the extent of her earnings at RJF. Extra expenses such as plane fare, or even Valerie’s salary, were viewed as a personal attack on his financial cushion. He’d also stubbornly continued to work full time. With this kind of money coming in, it was time for him to quit working. And move to New York.

“Alex,” she began. “This check was for the first three million copies of *Shout Softly* sold. We’re at eight million now. Don’t you think it’s time you closed your business?”

“Shelly, I’ve spent five years of pouring my blood, sweat and tears, literally, into building that business up.”

“And you could spend the next twenty busting your ass.”

He sighed. “What would I do?”

“Come to New York.”

She wasted no time phoning a realtor as soon as she was back in New York. Short, plump and energetic, Maggie Olson had been recommended by Brent Young.

She was used to dealing with celebrities and their eccentricities. They met at the studio.

“I don’t want to be in the city,” Shelly explained. “But I really don’t know anything else. We spent some time in Westchester last summer and I liked the area, but it’s so far and I really don’t want to make that kind of commute.”

“Well, I usually deal with property in the city,” the agent replied. “But I have access to all types of listings. What kind of place are you looking for?”

“A small farm would be nice. With a big wall around it!”

“Have you considered upstate?”

“I haven’t considered anything. Except getting some privacy.”

Capone entered the office without knocking. Seeing Shelly with Maggie, he apologized and began backing from the room. “It’s okay, Capone.” Shelly stopped him. Introducing Maggie, she explained, “I’m looking at houses.”

“Here? In New York?”

“Not in the city. Maybe upstate.”

“Mind if I tag along? I was thinking about buying something, too.”

The look on Maggie’s face told her she couldn’t refuse him if she wanted to. It would also be nice to have a man’s opinion. “I’d love it!” she replied.

She asked Maggie to put some information together for her family and provided her with the Florida address.

The agent promised she'd send it out Federal Express the next day.

They went out with her that Saturday, viewing six homes and touring several small towns. Making notes about the areas she was interested and crossing out the ones she didn't. She felt they'd made excellent progress, although none of the particular homes struck her fancy. They made an appointment for the next week.

She broached the subject with Alex that night on the phone. "Did you get a chance to look at the real estate magazines?"

He hedged. "Some. But we've been pretty busy."

"Too busy to look at a couple of magazines?" she asked, annoyed.

"Well, closing the business. Farming out the work and all that... We'll sit down with them tomorrow," he promised, feeling guilty. The truth was, he hadn't even opened the package containing the magazines; hoping to avoid the issue all together.

The next weekend they went out with Maggie again, seeing many possibilities but not that 'perfect' house. A family engagement tied Maggie up the next week, so Capone and Shelly decided to go alone.

"Why don't we check out Jersey?" he asked. "A friend of mine told me about a town called Aurora. Millionaires and celebrities don't get second glance; the place is full of them."

He drove a rented convertible, his hair blowing wildly in the wind, pointing out cows and horses in the pastures they passed, while she consulted the map.

They stopped at a small town diner and had enormous cheeseburgers and deliciously greasy fries. The best part was, nobody recognized them. A Ford dealership across the street caught his eye.

“Let’s just stop there a minute,” he pleaded. “I want to check out that black Mustang.”

She agreed and they headed toward the lot. “You’re buying a car?” she questioned. “Why?”

“So we don’t have to rent one when we come out here.”

“You’re going to buy a car just so you can drive it once a week?”

“Why not? I got money to burn!”

She laughed at his lack of control and then displayed an amazing amount herself. While at the dealership, she decided to buy Jason a car. He’d been driving for quite some time and had been using Shelly’s beat up, old mini van.

“I wonder if he’d like the mustang?” Capone had already decided to purchase one.

“No, Shelly, look at this,” he said, pulling her toward another vehicle. “This is what every sixteen-year-old wants.”

A silver gray 4x4 Bronco with black pin striping. It had chrome wheels, limo tint windows and was equipped with every option. “How much?” she questioned.

“Just under twenty-six thousand.”

“Okay,” she replied gaily, astounding the salesman by requesting the truck be shipped to Florida. He was further amazed when they paid for their purchases, close to \$30,000 apiece, with personal checks. It wasn’t until after they’d left, that he realized who they were.

Alex’s procrastination was driving her crazy! He refused Shelly’s suggestions of flying out for the weekend to look at houses; he was too ‘busy’.

But Shelly was obsessed with finding a home, especially now that she had found Aurora. Maggie had shown them two homes, but both were way out of her league. Going home for a week was almost an inconvenience. What if something came on the market while she was away?

The story broke the day she got home. *What Famous Pair of Rock Stars Are Scouting the Local Real Estate Market Together?* The question was answered with a photo of Shelly and Capone walking the grounds of a large estate.

Alex met her at the door, holding the paper. “So you and Capone are house hunting together?” he asked snidely.

“He’s been helping me check a few things out,” she explained patiently.

“I guess his opinion counts more than mine!” His jaw was set in stone.

“At least he’s willing to look,” she spit out bitterly.

“Because he’s not being *forced to!*”

Her eyes hardened. “What?”

“Maybe we’re not that thrilled about moving to New York!”

She paused. This argument was getting out of hand. She took a deep breath and asked calmly, “What are you saying?”

“The boys are teenagers, you know. Remember how hard that was? I just don’t want to have to uproot them at this time in their lives.”

She couldn’t believe this. “Did you show them the magazines? Do they realize what kind of house we can afford now? Did you tell them about Aurora?”

“We’ve looked through the magazines. I’ve told them about Aurora,” he explained. “They still want to stay here. They grew up in this house. All their friends are here.”

“All my friends were here, too!” she shrieked, any efforts at remaining calm were gone. “If you wanted life to go the same as always, why the hell did you encourage me to sign with RJF?”

It seemed cruel to tell her the real reason, that he’d been lured by the \$30,000 advance. That he never thought she’d make it, that they would never have to cross this bridge.

Instead, he said simply, “I didn’t want to hold you back.”

“Hold me back?” she repeated incredulously. “You were all for this!”

“Let’s just say I didn’t think it would get this far. And I didn’t think I’d be replaced so easily by the Italian stallion.”

Her lips compressed into a thin line and her eyes narrowed dangerously. “How dare you try to put this off on me? Every time there’s a problem with us, you try to blame it on some imagined relationship between me and Capone. I’m sick of it!”

“Quit giving me so much ammunition then, Shelly!” he shouted.

She turned on her heel and left the room.

A tense silence prevailed between them the rest of the afternoon. Shelly was wondering what they could do to get past Alex’s hang-up about Capone. Alex longed to take back what he’d said. Maybe she would understand their reluctance to move if he hadn’t just thrown it in her face, during an argument.

They put on a cheerful front when the boys got home from school. Jason couldn’t wait to take her for a ride in his new truck. It had been delivered last week. Shelly had instructed them to leave it in the driveway with a big red bow and had called Alex to let him know that it was Jason’s, not his.

He had become acquainted with all the buttons and knobs, read the owner’s manual from front to back several times. “It’s got every option in the book,” he proudly exclaimed. They drove to the beach and back. Jason and Shelly in the front seat, Alex and Jeremy in the back.

“How did you know just what to get?” Jason asked on the ride back.

“Capone helped. I was going for a black Mustang...” She stopped, resisting the impulse to clap her hand over her mouth and prayed vainly that Alex hadn’t heard.

Jason and Jeremy weren’t aware of her horrible mistake. “He’s got real good taste,” Jason said admiringly. “Lucky you brought him with you.” Shelly wished she could disappear.

Alex got out of the truck and walked stiffly into the house.

Shelly was almost afraid to go inside.

“How could you, Shelly?” he asked without looking at her. “How could you let him choose my son’s first car?”

“He didn’t choose it,” she said helplessly. “He just gave suggestions about what a sixteen year old boy would like.”

“So now he’s the expert on my son? Is he the expert on my wife too?”

“You know, you’re going to have to get over this thing with Capone. I’m not going to go through this every time I say something, or a story comes out, or we make a new video.” Her voice rose. “I have to work with him!”

He was also shouting. “It’s not the working I’m worried about! It’s what goes on after work!”

“So then why don’t you come to New York where you can keep an eye on me?”

He opened his mouth to respond and then closed it again. After a moment, he said coldly, “I’m not going to argue about this, Shelly.”

“Fine!” she screamed at his back, as he retreated inside.

The next three days were hell. Alex and Shelly didn’t speak to each other at all. The boys could sense the tension and also spoke little. She wanted to make up to him but refused to apologize. He took every little thing with Capone and blew it out of proportion. Any time they spent together made him suspicious.

He spent a lot of time with Valerie. And she never even considered anything was going on. She knew how lonely he must be; knew first hand.

And then refusing to come to New York, what was up with that? She was only a little more than a year into a three-year contract. And they were having major marital problems. Couldn’t he see that?

One afternoon she met Angie for lunch, just to get away from him for a while. She told her about their argument and about Alex’s jealousy of Capone. Angie could understand Alex being jealous of Capone. “I mean look at him, Shelly, no man would trust their wife around him.”

“Then why doesn’t he want to come to New York?”

“You know how he is about his family. You’ve complained to me enough about them!”

She nodded. Of course Alex would be reluctant to leave his brothers, not to mention his mother.

“Talk to him,” Angie urged. Although, through counseling, her marriage was stronger than ever, she

hardly felt qualified to be giving advice to Shelly. “Make some kind of compromise.”

She followed her advice and cornered him in the garage, later that day. “We need to talk,” she stated firmly.

He nodded agreement.

“I’m willing to give you some time with this New York thing. But you have to stop harping on me about Capone.”

“He wants you. I know it.”

“And what if he does? And I’m not saying that’s even the case,” she qualified quickly. “Don’t you trust me at all?”

“I do trust you. It’s just that you’ve never been in this kind of situation.”

“What kind of situation? That Capone might come on to me? Do you think men have never come on to me before? I’ve never even thought about cheating on you! Do you think I’ve been unfaithful?”

“No,” he answered quickly. And more slowly continued, “It’s just... He’s so good looking, so sure of himself. You were in love with him...”

“That was hardly an adult relationship! I was a teenager then, Jason’s age.”

“Seeing him with you makes me very insecure,” he admitted. “I don’t know if I can compete with a rich and famous rock star. One that just happens to be your first love.”

“My God, Alex,” she cried, “you’re twice the man that he is. The best-looking man I’ve ever seen! The best

father. Best lover. Best husband. How can I prove it to you?"

"Show me," he demanded, kissing her roughly. "Show me how much you love me." They made love in a heated tangle on the rough garage floor.

The next few days she avoided possible arguments by not mentioning the subject of them coming to New York, even as she was leaving.

"Are we on this weekend, Shelly?"

She'd made arrangements with Maggie the week before and had decided not to cancel them. She was going to go ahead and buy a house. Maybe having the house, waiting, would convince Alex to make the move.

"Yeah. Maggie is picking us up at ten," she replied.

Saturday was sunny and cool. Shelly felt gay and carefree. She didn't dwell on the fact that her family would probably never live there and concentrated on the drive to Aurora. They both loved the town, each for different reasons. Capone delighted in the fact that it was populated entirely by multimillionaires and the business that catered to them. Shelly loved the rolling hills, exquisite estates and the fact that it was just an hour's commute to the city.

Both liked the security. Residents of Aurora were issued a bright violet ID card, each was individually bar coded. The 'violet card', as they were known, was the only way to bypass the security team. Only those

possessing a blue visitor's card made it by the team. It was a complicated system, but one Aurora residents paid gladly for.

Maggie was sure she'd found the house for Shelly. It was the 'summer cottage' of a Florida real estate developer. She explained that, although it was not technically on the market, the owner had expressed a desire to sell.

They pulled into a gated driveway that wound around to a two story Georgian, white with green trim. Maggie explained that the home had been built only five years ago but had been modeled on a turn of the century home the developer had visited in Pennsylvania. They entered a large and warm living room, dominated by a massive stone fireplace. The light and airy kitchen was huge and spoke of decades of women preparing meals for their families, but sported state of the art appliances. The formal dining room could easily seat twenty and was richly appointed, but Shelly favored the sunny breakfast nook overlooking an English cottage garden.

Shelly knew she would buy the house even before she looked upstairs, but thoroughly inspected each room anyway. The master bedroom suite was magnificent; the closet alone was larger than most bedrooms, the bathroom larger than some houses. A casual seating area separated the master suite from the other four bedrooms. Each one was decorated with the same eye for detail.

Outside a huge screened lanai sheltered a heated in-ground pool and hot tub. The entire thirty-five acre estate was enclosed by an eight-foot concrete wall. "Didn't you

tell me that's what you wanted the first time we met?" Maggie quipped.

"I'll take it," Shelly told her. "How much is it?"

They stopped at Maggie's office where Shelly signed the required contracts. She offered full price, \$2,000,000 including furnishings.

She didn't tell Alex about it until her next visit home. By then, she was only a week away from closing.

"Sounds like a nice place. How much did we pay for it?"

"Two. Including the contents."

"Two?"

"Million," she qualified.

His mouth dropped open. "Two million dollars! Shelly, are you crazy?"

"It was a bargain, Alex," she said firmly. "It's not like we can't afford it. Plus, I'm only putting \$500,000 down."

"I just can't understand you," he muttered. "Buying a million dollar house?"

"I can't understand you," she echoed. "You act like nothing in life has changed. That we're still the same as we always were. I made close to two million this year Alex. I could almost pay *cash* for the house."

He talked to Valerie about it later that week, after Shelly had gone back to New York. "Don't you think that's a lot to pay for a house?" he questioned.

“Yeah. But Shelly’s in a different world from here.”

“It guess so,” he agreed. It was why he didn’t want to go. They liked their *own* world! They’d worked their asses off for this house. It was where he wanted to be.

His family was here, grandparents, aunts and uncles, friends. Jason’s girl friend. Valerie. The people they depended on.

Remembering her days at Florida Land and Homes, where financing a home could take months, especially if government funding was involved, she was amazed at how fast her mortgage was approved. A seven-figure income made all the difference. They closed on the house precisely thirty days after she’d signed the contract. And it was hers! “Let’s celebrate Shell,” exclaimed Capone when she got back to the studio.

“Okay. How?”

“Well take off early and head down to the house. We’ll take a couple bottles of wine and a picnic supper.”

An hour later he showed up at Brent Young’s door. She was meeting with him about their appearance schedule. “Hey Brent, I hate to interrupt, but this is a pretty special day for Shelly. She just closed on her house. She’s an official New Yorker, or New Jersian, anyway. We were planning to take off early and celebrate.”

“By all means,” he replied. “And congratulations, Shelly.”

They made it to the house in record time, thanks to Capone's penchant for speed and the high performance Mustang. They walked around the garden and explored each room of the house, remarking on things they hadn't noticed on their earlier visit.

Capone spread a huge striped blanket on the front lawn and set out the food. He'd ordered from their favorite deli. Huge pastrami on rye sandwiches, cole slaw, pickles, enormous slices of cheesecake, and three bottles of champagne. They sat outside eating and drinking late into the evening. Satiated from the excellent food and slightly woozy from the wine, she didn't want to leave.

"So I guess you're family will be moving in soon." Capone remarked.

"I'm not so sure," she admitted. "Alex and the boys would rather stay in Florida."

Studying her, he thought Alex must be the stupidest guy in the world.

Shelly didn't want the celebration to end and invited him up for a nightcap. Capone readily agreed. She was in the bathroom when the phone rang. He picked it up automatically. His 'hello' was met with dead silence. "Hello. Hello," he repeated. Nothing. "Well fuck you, then!" he shouted into the receiver, his words slightly slurred.

"Who was that?" Shelly returned, now clad in gray sweat pants and T-shirt.

"Wrong number," he mumbled.

Alex slammed down the phone furiously. What the hell was he doing in her hotel room? At this time of night? And drunk by the sound of it!

He stayed by the phone for over an hour, expecting her to call back with an explanation. But the phone remained silent. He finally went to bed. Sleep did not come easy. Visions of her and Capone making love ran endlessly through his mind.

Capone was drunker than she'd thought. She chided herself for letting him drive and thanked God they hadn't gotten in an accident. What would Alex say about that?

Instead of a nightcap, she began brewing a pot of coffee. When she returned to the room with two steaming cups, Capone was snoring lightly on the couch. She covered him with a quilt and went to bed.

He awoke to the jarring ring of the telephone and located it on the coffee table in front of him. Rubbing his eyes groggily, he reached out for it. "What?" he snapped and was rewarded by the caller slamming the receiver down, breaking the connection.

Where was he? He stretched lazily and looked around. Hotel room? Then he remembered. He was still in Shelly's room. They'd gone to her new house. He'd gotten fucked up on champagne. He remembered coming back here, but nothing else.

Shelly padded in barefoot and smiled. “You’re awake? I didn’t expect you to be up so early.” Still damp from her shower, her hair piled into a towel on top of her head, she looked like a young girl. Without make-up, her skin was pale (she’d lost her Bahamas tan) and her eyes seemed huge and luminous.

“Thanks for letting me stay, Shell,” he replied. “I guess I had a little too much to drink. I didn’t act like an ass, did I?”

“No. Not at all,” she assured him. “I never even realized you were drunk until we got back here. And then you fell asleep pretty quick.”

Good! No drunken confessions of love or attempts to get her in the sack. “Well I better get going,” he said. “We have to be at the studio at ten. Are we riding together?”

She nodded that they were. “I’ll meet you in the lobby at nine-thirty.” Checking his watch he saw that it was almost eight. “And Shelly,” he added. “You need to look into changing your phone number. Some fan must have gotten a hold of it. I got two prank phone calls.”

“Really? What did they say?”

“Nothing. They just hung up.”

With a sinking feeling, she realized the calls could have been from Alex. If Capone answered, he might have gotten the wrong idea. She shooed him out the door and called home.

“So you were able to tear yourself away from lover boy long enough to check in with your family.” She was

taken aback at his venomous tone. “Don’t think I’m stupid, Shelly! Why else would he be spending the night?”

“He fell asleep on the couch last night. He had a little too much to drink. I slept in the bedroom. Alone!”

“So why is he showing up at your room at night? Drunk?”

“I closed on the house today. Remember, you signed the papers too? We celebrated with a few glasses of champagne. Capone had a few too many.”

“Why didn’t he go to his own hotel?”

“He’s at the Plaza, too.”

“What?” Another lie! “How wonderfully convenient.” His voice dripped with sarcasm.

“Do you really think I’m sleeping with him?” She was getting tired of the same old argument.

He mulled it over in his mind and answered finally. “The point is I’m not convinced you’re not.”

“I can’t believe you said that!”

“Well, what do you want me to think?” he shouted angrily. “You go out to dinner with him, get drunk with him, ask his advice for every decision. Why wouldn’t I think you’d screw him? What would you think if it was me? If I were spending all my time with another woman?”

“The last time I looked,” she shouted back, “you were!”

“What are you talking about?” he snapped.

“Valerie,” she snapped back.

“I’m going to forget you said that!”

“Explain to me why it’s okay for you to have a platonic relationship with her and not okay for me to have one with Capone?”

“This is getting us nowhere, Shelly,” Alex said shortly. “I have work to do.”

“Yeah, me too,” she echoed his tone and hung up.

The truth was, the conversation jarred him. He *had* been spending a lot of time with Valerie. Like Shelly and Capone, they’d gone out to dinner together, had a few drinks. Like Shelly, he went weeks, sometimes months, without emotional or physical gratification. It was a dangerous mixture. For the first time in his married life, he considered making love to another woman.

Valerie was well aware of his interest. She knew disagreements with Shelly and concern about her relationship with Capone had strained his marriage, that he was confused and vulnerable.

She also knew how to get what she wanted.

“I can’t believe that they’re having marriage problems,” Monica said sadly. “But it must be hard with Shelly being so far away. She almost never comes home anymore.”

“Alex told her he didn’t want to move to New York.”

“You’re kidding. What did she do?”

“Apparently she bought a two million dollar house.”

“Well, I guess she can afford it. She just got like a million and a half dollars.”

“She did? How do you know?”

“Because she sent me five thousand!”

“Why?”

“A belated baby shower present is what she wrote in the note.”

“Do you think she’s sleeping with that Capone guy?”

“No,” Monica answered quickly. “She’d never cheat on Alex.”

“He thinks she is.”

“He said that? Shit, their marriage is in worse shape than I thought. Alex knows Shelly wouldn’t do that to him.” She mulled it over silently. “Maybe he just wants an excuse to screw around,” she said thoughtfully.

“You think so?” Valerie asked innocently.

He called the next night; plagued with guilt both over the way he’d treated Shelly and his inappropriate thoughts about Valerie. “I wanted to apologize for the way I acted,” he began. “I was wrong to accuse you.”

“I understand, Alex,” she began.

He cut her off. “There’s nothing to understand. You were right. You should be able to have dinner or drinks with anybody you want. But I want you to know that I think Capone’s in love with you.”

“Capone has so many women after him you wouldn’t believe it,” she explained. “He’s more interested in being friends.”

“I hope so.”

A knock at the door interrupted their conversation. She knew it would be Cathy. They planned to go clubbing the next few nights, since Shelly was moving on Saturday.

She motioned her to the couch while she finished up with Alex. “Anyway, we’ll talk about this again. And Alex, I’m sorry we’re always fighting about this.”

“What was that all about?” Cathy asked, concerned.

Shelly tried to keep her marriage problems private, even from Cathy, but she quickly filled her in on what had been happening.

“I feel so bad that I wasn’t around to talk to,” she said, referring to the new romance that took up the majority of her spare time. “I didn’t even realize you guys were having problems. Well other than, you live here, he lives in Florida.”

“You were around. I just wasn’t ready to talk. I kept hoping it would clear up.”

“And it hasn’t.”

She shook her head miserably. “Alex has this thing about Capone. He becomes unreasonable just hearing his name. He accused me of sleeping with him.”

“Have you?” Cathy asked gently.

“How could you ask me that?”

“Shelly, you’re human! You spend an inordinate amount of time with the man. A man millions of women would love to get in the sack!”

“I’m married!” She didn’t need this from her sister, too.

“Shelly, I’m sorry,” she hadn’t meant to offend her. “I just meant, Capone is so...” She searched for the word. “Irresistible! If I was in your place I’m sure I’d be tempted. And if I was in Alex’s place, I’m positive I’d be jealous!”

Shelly contemplated her sister’s words. “So what should I do?”

“Well, you could stop palling around with him. I’m sure Alex would be a lot happier.”

Avoiding Capone wasn’t that difficult, once she moved to Aurora. They didn’t share rides back and forth from the studio, or dinner at the hotel, so rarely saw each other outside work. She concentrated on getting settled into the house; and spent the majority of her evenings alone.

Alex, on the other hand, spent few evenings alone. If Valerie didn’t fix dinner at his house, him and the boys ate at hers.

He knew he was playing with fire, desire for her burned within him. Valerie openly fanned the flames.

Chapter 20

Monica was becoming suspicious. “I can’t understand why Alex hasn’t moved now that Shelly’s in the house.”

Valerie shrugged. “I don’t think he wants to leave Sunnydale.”

“There must be a reason...” Failing to elicit a reaction, she asked bluntly, “Is there something going on between you two?”

“No! What would make you ask that?”

“A couple things, actually. Like why he can’t seem to leave Sunnydale; like the amount of time you two spend together...”

“We’re just friends, Monica. Good friends.”

“We’re good friends, too, Valerie. Good enough for me to know when you’re bullshitting me.”

“Okay! You know I think Alex is terrific – the kind of guy I always dreamed about. So if, *if*, Shelly and him are through, I’d be more than willing to take her place.”

“Don’t count on it,” she warned her sternly. “From what Shelly and David have told me about her house, and the town it’s in, I’m betting once he gets there Alex will forget all about Sunnydale.”

Alarmed by Valerie’s look of despair, she continued sharply. “He’s probably going to spend some

time in Aurora during spring break. I wouldn't be surprised if they didn't come back."

"Strike while the iron's hot." Brent echoed Sam's suggestion to begin production of Upper Echelon's second album as soon as possible. "That's the name of the game."

"Let's do it!" Capone was more than ready. He knew how much was riding on this. There was no way he was going to be remembered as a 'one album wonder', never to be heard from again. He intended to crank out his best work, ever.

Shelly smiled at him. She, too, was eager to resume recording. The magic of coming together as 'artists' was the best part of the job. She wondered which of the dozens of songs they'd rehearsed would be chosen for the album.

She only heard one side of his conversation with his brother, but it was clear Alex was planning to spend Easter break in Aurora. David apparently would be in New York that week and must have offered to pick him up from the airport, because Alex promised to get back to him with flight information.

Valerie remembered Monica's warning. She hurriedly finished straightening up the kitchen, bade Alex goodbye, and headed home.

LORI NAUMANN
PRIORITIES

Chapter 21

“I’m making ham, turkey with corn bread dressing, sweet potato casserole, green beans.” Shelly happily rattled off the menu for Easter dinner. “David’s coming and Cathy, of course. Angie, James and their kids...”

Angie and James had decided a drastic change was the only way to save their marriage. They sold their house and most of their belongings, purchasing a farm in Pennsylvania, little more than an hour’s drive from Aurora. Together they were learning the dairy business.

Shelly’s reaction had been bittersweet. She was delighted to have her good friend so close by, yet she resented the fact that her own family refused to make the move. Angie’s daughters were just about the same ages as Jason and Jeremy, yet hardly seemed traumatized by the change of environment. James had never looked happier.

“I talked to David today,” he directed the subject away from Angie and her family. “He said Mom is mad as hell nobody’s coming for Easter dinner.”

“Aren’t Monica and Brian going to be there?”

“I guess they don’t count.”

She laughed. “Your brother’s planning to take them out somewhere special this weekend. He’s hoping that’ll make up for being out of town on Easter. You’ll probably have to redeem yourself, though.”

“I’ll think of something,” he promised.

“Finally! I thought you’d never get off the phone,” Jeremy complained. “I’m starving! Plus we got plans.”

“Oh yeah?” he grinned. “What kind of plans?”

“Girl plans!” Jason teased. Valerie’s house was two blocks from the skating rink, the best place for an adolescent boy to strut his stuff, Adam and Jeremy’s favorite hangout.

“How about you?” Alex questioned his older son.

“Christy set Rich up with one of her friends. We’re going to the movies and stuff. Do you care if I follow you to Valerie’s?”

She hustled them inside. “Dinner’s all ready. I was just setting the table.”

“Wow! This is great, Mom.” Adam shoveled an enormous mouthful of the creamy pasta into his mouth.

“Don’t eat too much,” Jeremy cautioned. “You don’t want to puke at the skating rink!”

“Jeremy,” Alex admonished. “Do you have to be so gross?” Adam snorted loudly.

“Sorry, Dad. But stuffing yourself right before skating can do it, you know?”

He laughed out loud. “Yeah, I guess it can, son.”

Valerie looked around the table at their smiling faces. They were like a big, happy family.

“What’s on for tonight?” he asked, making his way to the recliner chair he’d come to favor. He reached for the remote and flicked on the TV.

Valerie watched from the window as Rich and Jason roared off in the Bronco before following him into

the living room. Wordlessly, she climbed into the chair, straddling his lap.

Alex sat rigidly, holding his breath, waiting for her next move. Slowly, she undid the buttons of her blouse, one by one, as Alex sat woodenly. She dropped the garment to the floor.

He eyed her breasts appreciatively; so much larger than Shelly's, with large dark nipples that stood fully erect. Bending his head, he suckled each one.

"You want to make love to me, don't you?" she whispered. He nodded into her cleavage.

"Come with me," she demanded. He followed her into the bedroom, watching as she finished undressing and lay atop the soft floral comforter, beckoning him to join her. With only a moment's hesitation, he began removing his clothes.

She screamed when she came. The sound, so different from Shelly's gentle whimper, startled him, cutting his own orgasm short.

Suddenly he was desperate to leave her. "Listen Valerie, I have to get out of here. I shouldn't be here, shouldn't have let this happen."

"It happened, Alex. No strings attached."

He nodded and began searching for his hastily discarded clothes. Embarrassed by her open assessment of his nakedness, he turned his back and hastily donned his underwear and jeans. "It can't happen again," he said, slipping his T-shirt over his head.

"I can respect that," she said with forced sincerity.

“Thank you,” he replied, now fully dressed. She nodded.

“Tell Jeremy I got sick or something,” he mumbled before fleeing.

Driving home, his throat felt dry and constricted, his mind raced. All his life, he’d looked upon men who cheated as losers. Now he had joined the ranks.

Steam from the red hot water clogged his nostrils as he lathered furiously, scrubbing the scent of sex from his body. Over and over, he asked himself how he could have let it happen. But, deep down, he knew he’d been hoping it would for weeks.

He’d have to fire her as housekeeper, of course. The temptation of having her in the house would be too great. He wondered if she would show up the next morning, Saturday’s he was never sure. He spent a fitful night, rehearsing what he would say if she did.

As it turned out, she did show up, bright and early. And he needn’t have rehearsed at all.

He contemplated his rapid descent into sin. Cheating on your wife with another woman was bad enough; bringing that woman into the very bed you shared for years was as low as you could get.

Valerie slid a well-practiced tongue along his throbbing, engorged penis. “You like that, Alex?”

“Oh God,” he moaned.

“How about that?”

“Oh Godddd.” His strangulated response was punctuated by the first waves of his powerful orgasm.

Valerie smiled triumphantly.

The scene repeated itself day after day. Alone, at night, Alex vowed to break off all contact with her. In her presence, his resolve was replaced with overwhelming desire.

Chapter 22

“Here’s the dirty dozen,” Sam handed each of them a typewritten sheet of paper.

Shelly scanned the list of the twelve songs that would become their second album. At number ten, she turned to Capone skeptically. “*Shelly’s Song?*”

He shrugged. “That’s Sam’s doing. As far as I’m concerned the song has no commercial value.”

Sam protested. “You have no idea. That song has incredible potential.”

Capone shrugged again. “Whatever.”

Brent took the floor. “I have the gross receipt reports from your concert tour,” he announced. “Plus the most recent sales figures. You broke a few company records.”

Tom slid them each an envelope. Shelly dropped it in her lap, planning to wait until she was alone to open it.

Capone ripped his apart. “Holy God damn shit! Am I reading this right?”

Tom smiled. In the past year, he’d discovered that Capone was more than a pretty face with a good voice. He was a talented composer, and a shrewd businessman. Learning that his contract specified that he provide RJF with his existing song library, he worked with Lorna to negotiate larger percentages on anything new.

Tom admired not only his tenacity, but also the fact that he had the brains to back it up. “You are if it says four and a half mil,” he replied.

Shelly nearly slid from her chair and excitedly tore into her own envelope.

“Want to go shopping?” he quipped, when they were alone. “Kind of blows your mind, doesn’t it?”

She nodded. “You know, when Lorna first came to see me... To get me to sign with RJF, she said I could make like ten million dollars. We thought she was crazy.”

“We’ll top ten million easy,” he stated confidently.

“Hey, I almost forgot to tell you,” he continued. “We’re neighbors. Remember that house with the marble dolphins next to the pool? I bought it.”

Her jaw dropped. “That house was eight million!”

“So?” He shrugged. “I got more than half right here.” He patted his pocket.

She phoned Alex as soon as she got home, bubbling with excitement. “Alex, guess what I got today?” she demanded.

The sound of her voice consumed him with guilt. “I can’t,” he said flatly.

“A paycheck!” she crowed. “A really big paycheck! Four and a half million worth of paycheck!”

“Wow.”

“That’s all you have to say? Wow?”

Feelings of shame and remorse threatened to overwhelm him. “No, Shelly...” He had to pull himself together. “I meant *wow!*”

“I know!” she chortled.

“Shelly, listen, I’ve decided to reschedule my flight.”

Her heart sunk. She’d been counting the days until their visit.

He had to get away from Valerie. “It won’t hurt the boys to miss a few days of school; we’ll fly out tomorrow.”

Shelly smiled happily. He must be just as anxious to be together as she was.

Valerie arrived the next morning to find the three of them hastily packing. “We decided to get off a little early.” He avoided eye contact with her.

She nodded, unfazed by the announcement. She had no doubts; Alex *would* be back to Sunnydale.

Unlike Shelly, Alex and the boys could travel on commercial airlines. The flight to New York was uneventful, three average people on a trip.

Average ended at the entry gates to Aurora. David presented what appeared to be a credit card to the trio of uniformed security guards that emerged from the gatehouse. Two of the guards stayed with the car, while the third ran the card, with its magnetic strip, through an electronic scanner attached to the building.

Running the card was a formality. The guards recognized David and knew all about the much-anticipated visit of Alex and the boys. She'd quickly become a favorite with the team in charge of Aurora security. Day in and day out, they dealt with the behavior of millionaires and celebrities; they were ignored, patronized, shouted at and, on occasion, physically threatened. But never by Shelly St. John.

"Pretty spectacular, huh?" David grinned at their expressions, as they navigated the tree-lined streets. Homes, some the size of shopping malls, peeked out from behind thick hedges and brick walls. "It's not a town really," he explained. "Just a few thousand acres of pure indulgence. There's around seventy houses, some worth ten or twelve million. The smallest lot is thirty acres."

He steered into a wide cobblestone drive and inserted yet another card into the scanner box affixed to a thick iron post. The heavy gates swung open and they continued up the drive. "We're here," he announced unnecessarily. Shelly was already running toward the car.

She proudly took them on a tour of the house. He had to admit, the place was incredible. Never in his wildest dreams would he have pictured himself living in such splendor. "Pick whatever bedroom you like best," she instructed the boys, pointing them down the hall. "Then get your bathing suits on and meet Uncle David in the pool."

She led Alex into the master suite. He blocked all thoughts of Valerie and concentrated on making love to his wife.

She'd been able to arrange a week off to coincide with their visit, but Alex's sudden shift in plans had caused a conflict.

"Jeremy," she called downstairs. "Keep an eye out for my driver, will you?"

"Sure, Mom." The words were no more out of his mouth when a black sedan slid into the drive. "I think he's here now," he continued.

He watched as an enormous man emerged from the passenger seat. "Jason," he called. "Check this out. It's Commander Crusher."

Jason peered out the window. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. Look at that tattoo on his arm." And what arms they were, so muscular that it appeared he'd shoved several whole hams up the sleeves of his shirt. The boys were dedicated wrestling fans. Commander Crusher had been undefeated World Heavyweight Champion, two years running.

"What's he doing here?" Jeremy wondered as 'the Commander' rang the bell.

Shelly came flying downstairs. "Tony, come on in. I'm running a little late." She ushered him inside. "I want you to meet my two sons, Jason and Jeremy. Tony's my bodyguard," she explained.

"Aren't you Commander Crusher?" Jeremy demanded.

He laughed, a deep booming sound. "You remember me, huh?"

"Of course!" he exclaimed. "What about the Crusher Claw?"

“I still do it,” he laughed again. “Whenever somebody gets too close to your Mom.”

Alex clomped down the steps, stopping dead in his tracks at the sight of the giant man. Holy shit! It was Commander Crusher! Suddenly, the thought of Shelly’s commute to the city seemed much less dangerous.

She hated to leave them, but knew better than to request additional time off. Sam had been generous in giving her the week after Easter.

“Hey Shell, how bout a bagel?” They were waiting for last minute stragglers to the production meeting.

She nodded. Capone reached for her favorite, blueberry, and began spreading a thick layer of cream cheese. “Your family’ll be here this weekend, huh?” It was all she had talked about for weeks.

“They’re here now,” she grinned. “They came early.”

Tom cleared his throat, signaling that meeting was about to begin. Shelly and Capone hastily took their seats.

Brent went over the latest sales figures. *Shout Softly* was beginning to show a dip in sales. He explained it was only to be expected after so many weeks on the Charts.

Sam announced his preliminary recording schedule. “Capone’ll do his solo while Shelly’s out.” He held up one finger. “Then it’s *Zero*,” two fingers, “*Legends*,” three fingers, “*Five Letter Epitaph*,” four fingers, “and *Happy Agony*,” five fingers. “That’s five in the bag by July first.”

“July first?” Capone asked. “That’s like two months. You think we’ll get five by then?”

“Ten weeks, to be exact,” Sam replied. “That’s two weeks a song. You heard what Brent said. *Shout Softly* is slipping. Let that be your incentive.”

Remembering the conversation, she was doubly surprised that afternoon when Tom called her away from a rehearsal.

“Shelly, Capone tells me your family is here for a visit.”

She nodded.

“Why aren’t you with them?”

“Well, they came early... I didn’t want to ask for more time off at the last minute...”

“Shelly,” he interrupted gently. “Go home.”

They attended mass at the Aurora Church of God, Easter morning. Cathy and David were at the house when they returned; Angie and her family arrived shortly after. Though the kids had long outgrown Easter egg hunts, Shelly had purchased a hundred plastic eggs and insisted the adults hide them after dinner.

The hunt grew intensely competitive once Jason, Jeremy, and Angie’s two girls realized that each egg contained anywhere from five dollars to twenty. They watched, amused, as the four teenagers raced around, clenching their brightly colored baskets.

The scene filled Alex with a warm glow. Friends and family coming together for the holiday, it wasn’t so different from Sunnydale. He smiled at Shelly, always

looking out for her youngest son, giving furtive signals to Jeremy.

He moved to her side and whispered in her ear. “Cheater!”

She was clearly mortified at having been discovered. Her expression delighted him. His breath caught in his throat. What had possessed him to risk losing her?

She rolled her eyes at Brian while Irene droned on. She’d done nothing but bitch and moan about David and Alex not being there for Easter. Monica wished she would shut up.

“Don’t you think he *needs* to spend some time with Shelly?” she asked thinly.

Brian shot her a warning look. He thought she was overly suspicious of Alex and Valerie’s relationship, and he was not about to let her get his Mom started.

“She should be here,” Irene replied firmly. “Not him there.”

They celebrated Jason’s seventeenth birthday with a sumptuous lunch at Arigato’s, an authentic Japanese steak house. The chef, with his portable grill, prepared the meal right at their table. She couldn’t decide who was more impressed by her celebrity neighbors, Alex or the boys. Having witnessed the mob scenes her presence had caused, Alex was more than a little impressed with Aurora

etiquette. There were several well-known names in the restaurant, yet no one seemed to notice.

A shopping spree down Aurora Avenue followed. Jason had no trouble finding the exclusive brand name clothing he favored. At home, he traveled over thirty miles to the mall to purchase these brands. Ditto for the sports equipment Jeremy was looking for.

Alex understood what had drawn Shelly to Aurora. She loved to shop and had complained bitterly when celebrity robbed her of the ability to do so. Evidently other famous people felt the same way, as the stores in town did millions in sales each month.

He voiced the thoughts that had been on his mind with his sons that evening. Now that they'd been here, would they consider moving to Aurora?

He expected resistance from Jason. But the boy was, in fact, relieved. He, too, felt the sexual tension between his father and Valerie. He also knew his parents had been arguing a lot and had wondered if they were considering divorce.

"I'd move here in a minute," he replied resolutely.

Jeremy, taking a cue from his brother, also responded enthusiastically.

Lying next to her in bed, he apprised her of their plans.

"When?" she asked, gazing at him adoringly.
"After school lets out?"

"Sooner. As soon as we can make the arrangements."

She wasted no time in making those arrangements. The next morning, they visited the Aurora Academy.

Like the town itself, the Academy reflected extreme wealth. The school was the brainchild of Burt Buchanan, millionaire movie star, concerned about the education of his six daughters. Children of celebrities were often home-schooled by high priced tutors. Burt didn't want that for his daughters. He enlisted the other Aurora parents and the Academy was created. The astronomical tuition supported the finest instructors in the world, allowing a diverse curriculum and top-notch education.

The Guidance Counselor, Mary Culbertson, didn't hesitate to open the school during spring break for an interview with the St. Johns. Before she'd taken the position in Aurora, Mary had been disgusted at the educational system and considering a career change.

It was more than the Academy's enormous salary that had kept her in teaching; it was working with students, and parents, that gave a damn. She was on a first name basis with each and every one of the school's ninety pupils and kept close track of their academic progress, steering her privileged charges toward acceptance at the finest universities in the world.

"They can finish out the year right here," Mary assured them. "We can get them enrolled within a matter of days." She turned to Jason. "I see you'll be in your senior year next year. Are you planning to attend college?"

Jason nodded.

“What’s your major?”

He looked at her blankly.

“We’ll need to work closely together if you want to get into a good school,” she advised.

Jason, who’d never even met the Guidance Counselor at Park High, nodded happily in agreement.

After an exhaustive tour of the grounds, she bade them goodbye.

“Can you believe there are only eight kids in the whole junior class?” Jason thought of the over-crowded classes in Sunnysdale. After seeing the Academy, he knew he’d never regret the decision to move to Aurora. He planned on becoming the first St. John to graduate from college. And he sensed the best person to get him there was Mary Culbertson.

“Yeah, and only six in the ninth grade.” Jeremy wasn’t sure he liked the idea of small classes. It was harder to sleep without the teacher catching you. “The cafeteria is the bomb!” he pronounced, envisioning the restaurant-style seating and expansive ala carte menu.

Jason nodded distractedly. “Now if I could just figure out what to do about Christy...”

“I wondered why you were so anxious to leave her, I thought maybe you guys had a fight.”

“I *wasn’t* anxious to leave her.”

“You sure *acted* anxious, when Dad asked you about moving here.”

“Look Jeremy, I acted anxious because it looks like being separated is tearing Mom and Dad apart. Why’d you agree so fast?”

“Same reason you did.” He regarded him soberly. “Because of Aunt Valerie.”

He nodded. His little brother was a lot sharper than he gave him credit for. “You noticed it, too?”

“That, and something Adam said, that Dad should watch out for his mother.”

“What did he mean by that?”

“I don’t know. He wouldn’t say anything else.”

Even though they’d be there for good in less than two weeks, Shelly cried when they left. The house seemed so silent and empty; she was relieved to get back to work.

They jumped right into production of *Zero*. She didn’t really like the song because of the way it affected Capone. *Zero* was sort of an autobiography. It exposed deep-rooted feelings of worthlessness. During rehearsals, singing it had wrung him out. She knew he had turned to drugs to ease the pain.

Capone wasn’t thrilled about doing *Zero* either, but knew nothing could compare to what he’d been through the week before. If he’d known the pent-up feelings doing *Shelly’s Song* would bring out, he would never have agreed to record it.

Jason wiped away the tear that tracked slowly down her cheek. “When will we see each other?” her voice cracked.

“We’ll be coming back every couple weeks to visit my Grandma and Grandpa,” he promised. “And I’m sure your Mom will let you visit Aurora.”

A second tear followed the path of the first. “Every couple of weeks?” she wailed.

He understood her despair. The thought of weekend visits was almost more than he could bear. He embraced her, as sobs racked her thin shoulders. “We’ll work it out, Christy,” he promised. “Nothing in the world is going to come between us.”

“You’re on my Mom’s shit list,” David informed her. “And you’re about to become number one shit!”

“That’s nothing new,” she shrugged. “What’s the offense?”

“Well, you know she’s furious at you because Alex and her grandsons are moving away.”

She nodded. “I figured she would be.”

“But she’ll probably blame you for me, too. I was offered Vice President. I accepted today.”

She knew how much he wanted the position and that it meant he’d be permanently stationed at company’s headquarters in New York. “Oh my God! We should celebrate.” She hugged him excitedly.

“Exactly what I was thinking.” He produced a bottle of champagne. The rumbling of heavy equipment caught his attention. He looked at her quizzically.

“Oh yeah,” she exclaimed. “Come check this out!” She led him through the back door, through the screened lanai and past the gardens. The area was brightly lit with huge floodlights and, even at this hour of the night, a crew of men worked furiously.

“What’s going on?”

“I’m having this built for the boys,” she bubbled with excitement. “A quarter mile miniature racing track for their remote control cars. It’s going to have mud bogs, a pond, an obstacle course, everything!”

“How come they’re working so late?”

“The idea only came to me a couple of days ago. I wanted to have it finished by the time they get here. They’ve been working round-the-clock, three different crews.”

The night foreman noticed her and rushed forward. David watched her review changes she wanted made in the plans and dismissal of his suggestion that it might put them behind schedule, finally receiving his assurance that he could ‘work it out’.

She was an incredible woman. Success had strengthened her, increased her confidence, but hadn’t diminished her warm and generous spirit. The change only increased his admiration of her.

They walked slowly back to the house. “Jason and Jeremy are going to love that track! Did you get cars, too?”

“A whole fleet,” she smiled. “I figured if it made them happy, it was worth the investment. Plus it won’t be so awfully long before they start having children of their own. It’ll be a great way to lure them to Grandma’s house!”

“You plan on staying here then?”

She nodded. “Of course. Aurora is like a dream come true for me. Why would I ever want to leave?”

He’d gone to great lengths to avoid being alone with her. Though she continued her housekeeping duties, Alex either went out or made sure one of his sons were within earshot.

So what the hell was he doing here? Ringing her doorbell? With only one thing on his mind?

Valerie didn’t questions his motives, merely beckoned him inside.

Hours later, he drove home, filled with self-recrimination. He adjusted the rear view mirror, studying his reflection. What was wrong with him?

David withdrew his ‘blue card’ and presented it to the security guard. The heavy iron gate swung open and they were waved through. “How’s Mom holding up?” he asked Alex sympathetically.

“Not good. She’s been laying on a guilt trip and, today at the airport, she made an awful scene.”

David nodded, he'd expected as much. Irene made it clear how she felt about his upcoming move; he was deserting her.

"You made the right decision, Alex. We can't let her run our lives, even though she thinks it's her job."

"I know. Me and the boys will visit every couple of weeks. That ought to keep her happy. God knows she'd never come out here." Not the way she felt about Shelly.

Shelly waved to them from the porch as they pulled into the drive.

"Did my truck get here all right?" was the first thing from Jason's mouth. She assured him that it arrived safe and sound; along with everything else they had sent ahead.

"What about Roscoe?" The old dog was Jeremy's first concern.

"Happy as a clam. He has full run of the place."

She drew them proudly into the back yard, tromping across the back lawn, through a break in the thick hedges. Shelly had to give the contractors credit. Not only had they finished by the required deadline, the workmanship was excellent. It had turned out even better than she'd envisioned. Made completely to scale, the elaborate racetrack was constructed of various terrain: clay, gravel, asphalt, mud, with steep hills and treacherous bumps along the way. A wooden bridge spanned a small pond. Large rocks, miniature cones and dwarf trees provided a fearsome obstacle course. Floodlights stood at each end, allowing for night races.

Wide eyed with delight, the boys inspected every inch of track, amazed at each new discovery. Shelly smiled indulgently. It had cost over \$25,000, not to mention the fleet of remote control cars waiting in the garage. Judging from their expressions, she figured it was money well spent.

“Too bad we didn’t bring our cars,” mourned Jeremy. Jason nodded morosely.

Shelly winked at Alex. “I just need to get something in the garage. Will you guys come with me?”

They tromped back to the house and unlocked the garage door. Flipping on the light, she watched them expectantly. Jeremy noticed them first and let out a whoop. Surveying the rows of vehicles, over a dozen in all ranging from miniature Cadillacs to Jeeps, he babbled happily while Jason speechlessly examined each one.

“How about a race?” David challenged, reaching for a midnight blue Corvette.

He won the first race, and the second, easily navigating the obstacles and rough terrain. “Trade cars with me, Uncle David,” Jeremy pleaded.

“Okay.” They switched controls. He won again.

“I’ve been testing out the cars for you,” he admitted, laughing, as they lined up for a rematch. Alex won this time, but only after bumping David’s car off the bridge, and into the pond.

“Ooh playing dirty, huh?” David protested. From that point on it was anything goes, each intent on doing whatever it took to be first to cross the finish line. Shelly

watched as they heatedly debated the fairness of a move that took Jason's red Jeep out of commission.

"I don't know why I bothered moving," he grumbled. "I never see you anyway." After just a week in Aurora, he was already complaining about her schedule.

"We're in the middle of production," she replied defensively. "It gets kind of crazy." She knew he needed something to occupy his time. Jason and Jeremy had school, not only filling their time, but also providing the opportunity to make new friends. Alex did nothing but hang around the house.

Shelly purchased a membership at the Aurora Country Club, dropping a hint at the pro shop that he wouldn't mind someone to golf with. The very next morning, he was approached by a group, inviting him to join their game.

Each morning thereafter, they got together at the club. A collection of husbands. Bob Kline, his wife was Senior Partner at Beechum & Kline, presiding over twelve Junior Partners and 180 practicing attorneys. Nick Blair, whose better half's perfect features currently graced the covers of six major magazines. Peter Schwinn -- if you'd seen a movie in the past five years, chances were Tina Schwinn produced it. And Alex.

Even when they stayed for lunch and drinks after the game, he was home by 2pm. Shelly straggled in at eight, or even later. He continued to resent the time she spent at the studio.

After almost a month in Aurora, they flew to Florida for a three day visit.

Irene declared they had all lost weight since she'd last seen them and set about preparing a 'suitable' dinner. Jason wolfed his down and excused himself, anxious to see Christy.

Irene grilled him about Aurora. "The smog is thick there?"

"No, Mom. The house is out in the country."

"A good neighborhood?"

He snorted. "Mom, the neighbors are all millionaires. The houses cost a fortune."

"Those are the kind of places that robbers and kidnapers target," she said knowingly.

He couldn't help laughing. His mother saw danger around every corner. "No robber or kidnapper could get through the security system," he assured her. "Half the time I can't even figure it out." He could see she wasn't convinced. "Believe me, Mom, it's perfectly safe."

Nick, who'd been talking to Jeremy, saved him from further interrogation. "What's this I hear about a miniature racetrack?"

Alex described the track to his father, going into great detail, as he knew was expected.

Because he'd given Jason the rental car to take to Christy's, he drove his father's rusting station wagon to the place he still considered 'home'. He meandered through the garden, until darkness forced him inside, where he

wandered room to room. Each had its own special memories; Jeremy's eighth birthday party (which Roscoe interrupted by chasing a rat through the kitchen), the clumsy magazine rack in living room (Jason's prized seventh grade shop project), the lopsided ceramic eagle (Shelly and Monica had mistaken it for a parrot, an error the arts and crafts instructor did not find humorous) perched in prismatic splendor on the hall table.

So many reminders... Of all that had changed.

It wasn't just the move. Or the culture shock of Aurora. Or even their economic status. It was so much deeper than that.

She didn't need him. Shelly had attorneys and accountants to handle her finances, agents and producers to make her decisions, and Tony the wrestler to protect her from harm. His presence was mere window dressing in the celebrity driven town of Aurora. Like Bob, and Nick, and Peter.

Before going to bed, he drove into town and passed slowly by Valerie's house. Though the bright light in the kitchen told him she was awake, he restrained himself from stopping.

Back in Aurora, he began experiencing bouts of impotence.

"Alex, what's wrong?" She questioned him one night after considerable effort on her part failed to arouse him.

“I don’t know,” he answered miserably, humiliated by his failure to achieve an erection.

“Alex, maybe you should see a doctor...”

“There’s nothing wrong with me,” he interrupted angrily.

“Or a therapist,” she continued gingerly.

“So now I’m crazy?” he demanded. “Because I don’t *feel* like having sex, I crazy?”

She shook her head. “That’s not what I meant...”

“Did you ever think it might be you?” he continued cruelly. “Maybe I can’t get it up for the rich and famous rock star?”

She was taken aback, as much by his venomous tone as his words. Suddenly, making love was the last thing she wanted to do. She dressed silently.

“I’m sorry.” He was ashamed by the things he’d said.

“It’s okay,” she mumbled and left the room.

Late in the night, he awoke with a hard on. A particularly vivid image of Valerie’s lips around his cock was all he could remember of the dream. He studied Shelly, sleeping peacefully beside him, tiptoed to the bathroom and stroked himself into a shuddering orgasm

The scene replayed itself over and over in her mind. ‘Maybe I can’t get it up for the rich and famous rock star’. She remembered the tone of his voice, the look in his eye.

“Hey!” His hand on her shoulder startled her. “Did you hear what Sam said?”

She shook her head. “I was daydreaming.”

“He said we’re done for the day,” Capone grinned. “He has a big meeting with Tom.”

Shelly wondered if getting home early for a change would make Alex happy.

“Me and the guys are checking out a matinee. Real off, off Broadway show, everybody’s talking about it. Come with us Shelly!”

Her moment of hesitation was all it took. “Hey guys,” he shouted happily to Erik and Curt as they approached. “Shelly’s coming with us.”

Sam burst into the office. “Tom! You’ve got to hear this!” He thrust a CD into his hands.

“What have you got?”

“It’s the song of your dreams,” he crowed. “Or at least *mine*. Wait until you hear it!” He gestured impatiently to the sound system. Tom obligingly inserted the disk. A mournful melody resonated through the office, followed by a deep velvety voice. It was unmistakably Capone, but in a way they’d never heard him. The passion in his voice was almost palpable. They listened, transfixed.

*My heart lives in your laughter
I see my future in your eyes.
My hopes and dreams are in your smile,
my desperation in your tears.
Say that you’ll love me forever,
for our lifetimes, and beyond.*

*My life has no meaning,
if I can't spend it in your arms.*

His voice rose to an impassioned wail,

*I'm at the edge of an abyss...
don't know what lies below.
Will you take my hand and jump with me?
Shelly. I've got to know.*

And fell to a near whisper.

*Kiss me! It takes my breath away.
Touch me! Send shivers down my spine.
Whimper softly while you love me, Shelly,
It brings tears to my eyes.
I see you smile while you're sleeping,
Wonder if you dream of me.
My heart aches as I watch you.
Treat me gently, Shelly.
Don't stay angry when we argue.
Your silence cuts me like a knife.
I'd move the world to make you happy.
To be your lover, your husband, your life.*

Thirty seconds of instrumental were punctuated by his fervent plea.

*Kiss me. Love me. Tease me, Shelly.
Brush your silky hair against me.
Make me beg for more.
But use your power wisely, Shelly.
One look can break me.*

*Let me laugh with you, cry with you,
live and die with you.
Let me share in your pleasure
And shield you from pain.*

His tone was pleading, gritty with passion.

*I can't give you much,
Just all that I have.
My head, my heart, my love
To have and to hold.*

*Until death do us part.
My soul through eternity.*

“Can you believe he wrote that when he was seventeen years old?” Sam demanded.

“How soon can we get it to radio?” Tom questioned.

He knew he was being an idiot. Hounding Shelly about the time she spent at work, blowing up at her for every little thing. A flashback to the look of pain in her eyes, the night before, spurred him into action.

He ransacked the pantry, whistling cheerily as he assembled the ingredients for his famous fettuccine Alfredo. He cut flowers from the garden and arranged them carefully in a crystal vase, placed candles on the table and chilled a bottle of wine.

Encouraged by his good humor, the boys readily accepted his suggestion of dinner and a movie in town. Extracting two hundred-dollar bills from his wallet and handing them to Jason, he instructed. "Make it a double feature."

At six, he dialed Shelly's cellular phone. After four rings, he was directed to her voice mail. If she was recording, or in a meeting, she wouldn't be able to take calls. But he could at least get an idea of her schedule from the studio's secretary.

"She's gone already, Mr. St. John," she informed him. "They had an early day today."

"Oh really?" Maybe they could have an early dinner. "What time did she leave?"

"Let me check." He heard the sound of rusting paper. "Right around two o'clock."

"Okay, thanks." His voice was controlled but he seethed with anger. She should have been home hours ago!

By eight-thirty, the fettuccini ingredients lay forgotten on the kitchen counter, the flowers in the trash,

the candles in the drawer in which he'd found them. He'd given up on the wine and switched to bourbon.

Shelly walked calmly through the door.

"Look who's home," he slurred. "Long day at work, huh?"

"You're drunk."

He poured a shot and downed it in a single gulp. "Damn right!"

"Where are the boys?"

"At the movies. As if you were interested..." He refilled his glass and, again, gulped its contents. "You see, I bribed them. So we could be alone. But, of course, you couldn't make it home. I can only *assume* where you were."

He must have called the studio, found out about the early day. "Assume all you want, Alex. We got off early. Everybody was going to see a matinee and asked me to come along. Since that sounded infinitely better than spending the afternoon fighting with you, I decided to go."

"By 'everybody', you mean Capone."

"I mean Capone, Erik, John and Curt," she replied evenly.

He took swig directly from the bottle of Jack Daniel's, his eyes watering as the bourbon burned its way down his throat. "You know, Shelly, I am getting sick and tired of this guy. And this little lying habit of yours has got to stop!"

Her eyes narrowed and hardened, twin fragments of green stone. "And I'm getting sick and tired of fighting

with you, Alex.” She turned to leave the room, but stopped and faced him again.

“Christy and her parents will be here tomorrow,” she reminded him. “I’m telling you now, I’ll never forgive you if you embarrass me in front of them.”

Chapter 23

Jason picked them up from the airport himself. Their excited chatter was replaced by awed silence the moment they entered Aurora. The Novarra mansion came into view. Cradled by a hill overlooking the town, it was an architectural masterpiece, a showplace for only the richest of rich.

They were relieved to find Shelly's home a little less imposing, and her even less so. She greeted them like old friends, hugging Christy, then her mother. "I feel like I know you already!" she exclaimed. "Jason's told me so much about you."

Alex and Marvin Brandt were fairly well acquainted. They had worked on several construction sites together and were once on opposing bowling leagues. Marvin could see he had one hell of a hangover and wondered if these millionaire types sat around and drank all day.

Shelly took Ginger on a tour of the house. She had never met Christy's mother, but they quickly warmed up to each other. Since school had let out, Jason had been begging for Christy to come for a visit. Shelly thought it was best to invite her parents along the first time, so they'd feel more comfortable about allowing her to come alone. She shared these thoughts with Ginger.

“Oh Honey,” she drawled. “I don’t worry about those two kids. They got more brains than the rest of us put together.”

Jason and Christy slipped away unnoticed. Once out of site, he pulled her close. They kissed passionately. “I missed you so much,” he breathed in her ear.

“Me too,” she whispered, before they, again, locked lips.

Using her thumb, she erased a smudge of lipstick from the corner of his mouth. “I can’t stand us being apart. It seems like forever between visits,” she sighed.

“School will be out soon,” he reminded her. “Then we can have more than a weekend at a time.

Ginger felt like she’d stepped into the pages of a movie magazine, complete with movie stars. Sunday brunch at the Aurora Bistro was quite an experience. She felt faint when her idol, Burt Buchanan, walked in, accompanied by his six daughters; and nearly did when they stopped at their table. The girls eyed Christy curiously and flirted openly with Jason and Jeremy.

Strolling down Main Street, she recognized several famous faces. Marvin stopped in his tracks at the sight of Derek Stout, his all time favorite football player.

“Shelly!” The call came from behind them. “Shelly, wait up.”

They turned. Ginger recognized him immediately, Shelly’s partner, Capone. He was even better looking in person.

He caught up in several long strides. “Hey! Good to see you again, man,” he stuck his hand out to Alex, who rejected the offer and stared at him coldly.

Shelly jumped in. “You remember my boys, Capone?”

He nodded. They’d grown considerably since he’d last seen them. “Hey guys.” His eyes lit on the luscious young blonde.

“And this is Jason’s girlfriend, Christy,” Shelly continued. “And her parents Ginger and Marvin. They’re here for the weekend.”

“Glad to meet you,” he flashed a charming smile at Christy and Ginger and shook Marvin’s hand. “Have you eaten? Can I treat you to lunch?” he asked hopefully.

“We had brunch at the Bistro,” Shelly declined his offer. “We’re just about to head home.”

“Maybe next time,” he said cheerfully and continued down the street. “Derek, wait up,” they heard him call.

“What’s he doing here?” Alex hissed. “Looking for you?”

“He lives here.”

“Oh Great! Another lie! Where does it stop, Shelly?” He turned and strode huffily toward the car.

Ginger and Marvin eyed each other uncomfortably. Jason gripped Christy’s hand, painfully tight. They trailed him in embarrassed silence, and endured a tension filled ride home.

She followed him into the bedroom and slammed the door behind her. “Don’t you ever humiliate me like that again,” she said angrily.

“Look who’s talking,” he retorted. “Even after all the trouble he’s caused between us, you make sure he’s close by.”

“Of course he’d pick Aurora! For the same reasons I did.”

“Oh yeah,” he sneered, “millionaire’s paradise.”

He insisted in having dinner outside of town, driving miles down the interstate before exiting for a nondescript seafood restaurant.

They were halfway through their meal when the commotion began. Shelly groaned inwardly. She should never have left Aurora without Tony.

It was Jerry Burke, making his way toward their table. Though she had a good relationship with the reporter, she knew how unrelenting he could be. “Shelly,” he greeted her effusively. “How nice to see you.” His photographer snapped a picture.

“Hey Dude,” Alex said, not unkindly. “Could we have a little privacy?”

He continued undaunted. “Is this the family we’ve heard so much about? Get a picture, Bob!” Again, they were blinded.

Alex appealed. “Come on, Man. We’re trying to have dinner here.”

He snapped off two more shots, as Shelly tried to intervene. “Jerry, we’re having sort of a family celebration...”

“Just a couple questions?” he pleaded.

Alex was becoming visibly agitated, Ginger and Marvin sat frozen to their seats, the boys and Christy were intimidated by the pushy little man. Only Shelly remained unruffled; dealing with reporters was something she’d had to learn early.

Hoping to appease him and salvage the rest of their dinner, she consented. “Two questions, Jerry.”

“Okay,” he eagerly agreed. “Number one, can you tell me how production is progressing on your second album?” He deliberately chose a neutral subject.

“We’ve just finished song number five and will start taping some videos next week,” she explained.

“And now one for you,” he turned to Alex. Too late, Shelly caught the evil gleam in his eye. “Do you think your wife and her partner are engaged in any,” he placed special emphasis on the word, “*hanky-panky*?”

He was going for the husband’s reaction. Though it was a persistent rumor, Jerry knew nothing was going on between Shelly and Capone. Brent would have leaked the information ages ago.

Bob, the photographer, snapped away as Alex rose from his chair and stood towering above the much shorter man. “What the fuck is your problem?” he demanded, grabbing him by the lapels and lifting him off the floor. “I asked you nicely to leave, but now I’ll have to bash your fucking face in!” He raised his fist menacingly.

Marvin sprang from his seat and grabbed his arm. “Don’t do it, Alex!”

Alex reluctantly released his grip.

Shelly did her best to make amends with Jerry. He accepted her profuse apologies with a grin and a shrug, then hurriedly left the restaurant, anxious, not to flee Alex, but to get back to his office. He had some hot film tonight!

The Brandts were happy to be heading home. “Can you imagine having to worry about stuff like that?” Ginger asked, clearly referring to the incident at the restaurant.

“Alex is like a time bomb,” Marvin commented. “Ticking away. I wonder what’s got him so wound up?”

Christy nodded miserably. Why hadn’t Jason told her that his parents were having marital problems?

Chapter 24

She wasn't surprised, Monday morning, when Brent summoned her to his office. "I suppose you've seen these." He slid a stack of papers across the desk.

"My God," she whispered. "All these?"

"And that's just the locals. There'll be plenty more once it hits the wires. Your concerts are big news. But your husband beating up a reporter is even bigger."

"He didn't beat him up," she came to Alex's defense.

"But he pushed him around. With a camera flashing the whole time, from what I can see."

She quickly scanned some of the headlines. "Do you think the publicity will hurt us?"

"Nah," he replied, unconcerned. The truth was, he'd approved each and every one of the photos that would appear in print. No editor would dream of running a story on one of RJF's artists without passing it by Brent first.

She brought the papers home, presenting the entire stack to Alex. "You made the news," she said, unnecessarily.

Leafing through image after image of him lunging at Jerry Burke only worsened his mood. "Great! So it's in every paper, where all my friends can see it."

"What did you expect, Alex?"

"I expected to be able to eat dinner without having to be reminded about you and Capone!"

“We should have stayed in Aurora,” she protested.

“Oh sure! Maybe then we could have had dinner with the man himself.”

A knock on the bedroom door interrupted the argument. “Uncle David’s here,” Jeremy called timidly. He’d heard them shouting and was reluctant to intrude. Downstairs, he informed Jason. “They’re fighting again.” David was concerned by the announcement.

“You’re kidding?”

“One hundred percent commitment,” Brent repeated. “Twenty-one hundred stations, in thirty-six hours.”

Capone whistled softly.

“How’s that for ‘sentimental drivel’?” He borrowed Capone’s description of the song.

Alex played the ‘victim’ all week. Each variation of his attack on Jerry Burke that was published drew a fresh look of recrimination; the very mention of Capone’s name, outright hostility. Unless it was absolutely necessary, he didn’t speak to her.

Shelly felt as though an enormous weight had been lifted when they left for the airport. “Let Irene deal with his attitude,” she thought, when they were gone.

Brent replaced the receiver in its cradle. He had no regrets about making the call. He'd built a successful career out of dealing with the press and had no intention of jeopardizing a relationship it had taken years to achieve. Alex St. John had broken the cardinal rule against physical attacks. Jerry planned to make him pay.

"Taking a trip, Mr. St. John?" he said with forced cordiality. "Or running away?"

Alex eyed the pair of burly bodyguards that flanked the diminutive reporter, contemptuously. "I don't run from anyone."

"I don't blame you for taking off," he continued conversationally. "What with *Shelly's Song* debuting..." The lack of response spurred him on. "You know, Capone's little love song."

A rapid clenching and unclenching of his jaw muscle was the only sign Jerry was getting to him. His sons also noticed the rhythmic tic. "You better find security," Jason instructed his brother.

"That he wrote about his undying love... For your wife!" the reporter continued gleefully.

"You little faggot!" His enraged bellow echoed through the crowded airport. The punch would have connected if Jerry's bodyguards hadn't tackled him to the ground.

The first blow to his abdomen knocked the wind out of him, but the airport security guard prevented the second.

“Dad, are you okay?” Jeremy gasped.

Alex brushed off Jason’s attempts to help and struggled to his feet.

Jerry eyed him disdainfully. “Next time pick on somebody your own size,” he taunted.

‘Faggot’, the word burned in his ears. It had doubled as his name, all through high school. Faggot, gay boy, queer; he shuddered at the memory.

And Alex St. John would regret the reminder!

He dialed the familiar number. “I need some dirt.”

“Okay? What are you looking for?”

“Anything you can dig up. And I need you to fly out to Florida.”

He massaged his aching abdominal muscles. It had been years since he’d taken a shot to the gut, varsity football, probably. He didn’t remembering it hurting this much.

His mother fussed around, preparing an ice pack and hunting up an aspirin. “He hit you?” she asked in disbelief. “You should have had him arrested!”

“I’m lucky I didn’t get arrested, Ma,” he admitted, remembering the airport police’s threat to do just that. “I guess I started it.”

“That reporter started it,” Jeremy jumped to his father’s defense.

“Reporter?”

“Yeah. He was badmouthing my mom.”

“I might have known ‘that woman’ had something to do with it,” Irene sniffed. “What’s she done this time?”

“Seems like a pretty regular guy,” Bo reported. “Spent the whole evening with his parents.”

“Damn! Well, keep digging,” he encouraged. He’d been using the private detective long enough to know that, if Alex St. John had any skeletons, Bo Parker would uncover them.

“Come on! You got other plans?”

“No.” She had to admit the prospect of spending the evening with him was infinitely more appealing than moping around the house alone. But she knew he must have better ways to spend a Saturday night.

“It’s settled then. I’ll give you ten minutes to change.”

“Don’t tell me you don’t have a date? I don’t want you to change your plans because of me.”

“Are you kidding?” he grinned. “The more time I spend in Aurora, the more likely I am to hitch up with a rich widow!”

She laughed. From the admiring glances he received at the restaurant, Shelly had no doubt there were more than a few willing to take him up.

He broached the subject after they'd ordered. "How are things going? With you and Alex?"

"Great!"

"Jeremy said you've been arguing a lot," he said gently. "That doesn't sound too great."

The plastered-on smile left her face. "Not too great at all," she admitted. "Has he talked to you about it, David?"

"No."

"I thought it would be so much better with him living here." Tears clouded her eyes and she blinked rapidly. "But it's worse. Alex says such horrible things to me. When he's talking to me at all..."

He watched a single tear slide down her cheek. His brother's wife was a very special person. He'd spent half his life looking for a woman with even half of her attributes, and had yet to come close. Alex had always loved, even treasured, her. Something must be very wrong for him to treat her so badly.

"Shelly, do you think Alex needs to see a psychiatrist or something? I mean he has been acting a little strange. What with attacking that reporter and fighting with you all the time..."

"I suggested it, David. It only started another one of his tirades."

The only good thing about living in New Jersey, Alex thought, was being able to drive a different rental car

each time he visited Sunnysdale. He took the long way to Brian's house, anxious to test the high performance Corvette against the treacherous curves of Bayshore Boulevard.

A simple flick of a switch and the convertible top receded into its frame; Alex's hair blew wildly in the wind. He tuned the radio to his favorite station and turned the volume full blast, singing loudly with a Van Halen tune.

The radio announcer introduced it as 'the love song of the century'.

*My heart lives in your laughter.
I see my future in your eyes.
My hopes and dreams are in your smile
My desperation in your tears.*

Looking for something with a faster beat, he fiddled with the dial, getting a commercial on one setting and Rap on another. He settled for the original station.

*Will you take my hand and jump with me?
Shelly, please I got to know.*

What had the reporter said? 'Capone's little love song'?

*Kiss me! It takes my breath away.
Touch me! Send shivers down my spine.
Whimper softly while you love me, Shelly.
It brings tears to my eyes.*

He jammed his foot on the gas pedal. The powerful engine responded, the speedometer climbed rapidly.

*Kiss me. Love me. Tease me, Shelly.
Brush your silky hair against me.
Make me beg for more.
But use your power wisely, Shelly.
One look can break me.*

He approached Suicide Stretch at eighty-five mph, knowing he'd never make the Deadman's Curve at that speed. He didn't care!

Capone's voice screamed in his ears.

*I can't give you much,
Just all that I have.
My head, my heart, my love
To have and to hold.
Until death do us part.*

My soul through eternity.

He lost it midway through the curve, spinning wildly in the narrow highway, and watched helplessly as a tractor-trailer bore down on the out of control sports car. He braced for impact, instinctively protecting his head and face with both arms.

Miraculously, the Corvette slid to a stop, tires gripping the pavement. Alex grabbed the wheel and pulled safely to the side of the road. The semi driver angrily blared his horn as he passed.

Bo watched the near accident in disbelief. From what he'd learned, Alex had spent his entire life in Sunnydale. Could he have forgotten about the hairpin curve? Or was nearly killing himself his idea of fun?

The Corvette sat motionless for so long that Bo considered calling 911. Finally it pulled slowly back onto the highway. He followed, a few car lengths behind.

In the twenty minutes it took him to stop shaking enough to drive, Alex came to a decision.

She flung open the door, frightened by his haggard expression.

Without preamble, he took her in his arms and kissed her deeply. She responded hungrily, opening her lips to his probing tongue. Pressed against him tightly, she could feel the hard bulge in his jeans.

Jerry Burke chortled happily as he downloaded the photographs, dozens of them. Thank Goodness Bo wasn't above peeking in windows. Or infrared cameras.

The doorbell surprised her. She glanced at the kitchen clock: 11:45. Of the very few people that possessed the authorization card necessary to gain entrance to the estate, she could think of none who would be out near midnight, on a Sunday night.

Alex and the boys weren't due back until tomorrow afternoon. Had something happened to them? She rushed to the door.

"Capone?"

"Shelly! I... uh ... I ... uh... Could I come in?"

She ushered him inside. "Are you okay?"

He sat down at the kitchen table, his face grim. "Shelly... I wish you didn't have to hear this. And I wish, like Hell, I wasn't the one to have to tell you." He reached into his pocket, extracting a sheet of legal sized paper.

"I got a call from Brent earlier," he continued. "Professional courtesy, or some shit... Jerry Burke gave him an advance preview of his story..." He unfolded the paper, passing it to her dismally.

The laser printed reproductions lacked the quality of the original photos, but left no doubt as to the identity of the subjects.

Shelly stared, horrified, at the grainy images of Alex making love to Valerie. “That son of a Bitch!” she fumed.

Capone was relieved; anger he could deal with, crying was a different matter.

“How could he do this?” She burst into tears.

He embraced her awkwardly. He’d never been very good at consoling weeping females.

She clung to him gratefully, burying her face in his muscular chest. Her tears created a warm, damp spot on his shirt, a not unpleasant sensation. He stroked her hair, marveling in its silkiness, dipping his head to inhale its fresh scent.

Abruptly, her tears ceased and the anger returned. “That bastard,” her words were muffled in his sleeve. She lifted her head. “How could he accuse me of being unfaithful when he’s the one screwing around?”

It was the first he’d heard of Alex’s allegations, but he wasn’t surprised. He’d used the ploy, diverting attention from your own guilt by directing it toward someone else, often enough himself.

He cupped her chin in one large hand, his eyes locked with hers. “I’d have given anything to have spared you this tonight.”

She nodded, knowing it was true.

“If it makes you feel any better, RJF bought the film. The pictures won’t show up in print. Brent made a deal on the story, too, no names, no specifics. But you know how Jerry’s columns are.”

She nodded. Even without names, specifics or pictures. Jerry would ensure his readers knew who he was referring to.

“Do you need me to stay and help you deal with Alex?”

“God no!” It would be the best way to make a bad situation even worse.

Chapter 25

He found her sitting in the bedroom, her back to him, staring into space. The room was deadly silent except for a soft crinkling sound caused by her folding and unfolding a piece of paper with shaking hands.

“Shelly?” he questioned. She startled at his voice and turned toward him; her face was pale and drawn, her eyes red and puffy with dark rings beneath them. Wordlessly, she handed him the dog-eared sheet of paper.

He stared at it, stupidly. How had she gotten this? Was Valerie out to get him? Had Shelly and her set up a trap? Or was someone following him?

The realization hit him like a ton of bricks. “You had me followed? By some kind of private eye?”

She smiled thinly. “That’s it, Alex, twist things around until this is my fault. It’s becoming your specialty! But, for your information, it was your friend, Jerry Burke, that had you followed. Which reminds me,” she added coldly, “I really must call and thank him. First, for providing proof that my husband is cheating on me and, second, for giving me some advance warning before it hit the papers!”

He stood mutely, consumed by shame and guilt, staring intently at the floor.

“Is this why you can’t get it up with me?” she demanded.

He studied the tops of his tennis shoes, clenching and unclenching his jaw. “Maybe,” he said finally. “Or maybe it’s you, and Capone.”

It was more than she could take. “You’re doing it again!” she screamed. “Don’t try to blame this on me! Or Capone! You’re the one fucking around!”

“You have pictures! So what? A song can be just as incriminating!”

“What the hell are you talking about?” she stared at him, contemptuously.

“Capone’s little love song.”

“How could you even compare that to cheating on me? Capone wrote that song when he was seventeen years old! If you’d bothered to read promos, you’d know that!”

The news weakened his argument. “Still, the things in that song... You shouldn’t have let them record it.”

It was time he faced reality. “Alex, I have no say over what gets recorded. RJF makes those decisions. They decide what I sing, where I sing, and how I sing!”

Eager to shift the focus from himself, he zeroed in on the statement. “That’s our problem, RJF makes *all* our decisions.”

She snorted. RJF certainly had not instructed him to fuck Valerie. “No Alex, RJF isn’t the problem. The way you’ve been acting is.”

“How am I supposed to act?” he demanded. “Do you think I like playing second fiddle to my rock star wife? That I enjoy living in a town full of tight-ass millionaires?”

His words infuriated her. “You know what, Alex? You better get used to it. Because I am a star – and I love it! And I love Aurora, too!” She stopped, drew a deep breath, and continued. “But you know what I don’t love? I don’t love it when you make nasty insinuations about Capone and me!”

He opened his mouth to respond, but she held up her finger to silence him. “No, let me finish. I risked everything I had for this career and I’m not giving up now. But I’m also not going to let things stay the way they are. And I’m sure as hell not going to stand around while you’re banging that bitch!”

“I’ve given up a lot, too, Shelly,” he countered.

“Like what, Alex?”

“I gave up my business...”

“Your business?” she snorted. “The business that kept us on the brink of bankruptcy for five fucking years? You gave up that for a seven-figure income? Big loss, Alex!”

He stared at her. She knew how sensitive he was about that subject and had hit him where she knew it hurt the most. He responded in kind.

“And you wonder why I turned to another woman!” he sneered.

The urge to slap him was overwhelming. She deliberately composed herself. “Do you want a divorce?”

The word jarred him. “No!”

Suddenly she was bone tired. Lack of sleep and hours of crying had made her eyes hard and grainy. “What *do* you want?” she questioned wearily.

He wanted to turn the clock back two years, before he'd ever heard of Capone, or RJF. He wanted his old life back. "I want to work things out," he said solemnly.

She nodded, exhaustion overriding any desire for further discussion. "I'll make arrangements for marriage counseling." Then climbed into bed, pulled the blanket under her chin, and closed her eyes, indicating the conversation was over.

Alex stood looking down at her, debating his next move. Finally, he lay down beside her. She stiffened at his touch, but allowed him to hold her gingerly. He whispered in her ear. "Shelly, remember our last trip to Disney World? How much fun we had? I think about it a lot. How about the zoo; we got to see that baby chimpanzee? And the time we got stranded in Bill's boat?"

He felt the tension leaving her body as he continued the comforting litany. He recounted the memorable experiences they'd shared, talked about their sons, what fine men they were growing to be. He promised they would grow old together. He told her he loved her.

He knew by her regular breathing, she'd fallen asleep. Tenderly, he straightened the bedspread around her shoulders and kissed her gently on the forehead.

As long as he lived, Alex knew he'd never forget the scene. Shelly felt they had no choice but to talk to the

boys about it. It would be better hearing it from them than from one of their friends, or reading it in the newspaper.

She explained it as gently as possible, assuring them they had agreed to work out their problems.

The look of contempt on their faces was forever etched in his memory.

Jerry's column appeared nationally, including one carefully worded sentence, tacked to the end. 'Though she inspires song in the heart of her partner, I witnessed proof that a certain redheaded diva can't keep husband from the *Embrace* of other women'.

Monica phoned her. "What's going on?" she demanded.

"What do you mean?"

"Don't play games with me, Valerie. It's in the paper. Alex is screwing around. You're the most likely candidate to be screwing around with him."

"It happened," she admitted. "We didn't plan it. I have no idea how that reporter found out."

"How come you didn't say anything?"

"I knew how'd you feel. I didn't want to involve you."

"Is it serious?"

"It is for me." She held her breath, waiting for Monica's reaction and grew concerned as the silence wore on.

Finally Monica spoke. "He won't leave Shelly."

"I'm not asking him to."

“Well, it’s going to have to be you or her. Shelly is sure not going to stand for him cheating on her.”

“She really can’t stop him.”

“She’ll divorce him.”

“If she does, I’ll be right there, waiting.”

“What are you doing?” He stared at him in exasperation. “Are you *trying* for a divorce?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Alex replied coolly.

“Pleeease! At least ten people at work today showed me the article. Everybody knows it was about Shelly. And you.”

“David, haven’t you ever heard not to believe everything you read in the newspaper?”

“So it’s not true then?” he asked uncertainly.

“Nope.”

Shelly held her head high and strode confidently into the meeting, as if newspapers and infidelity were the furthest things from her mind. Capone applauded her, silently.

All eyes were on her. Tom called the meeting to order. “We are *not* here to discuss negative publicity,” he began sternly. Shelly smiled gratefully.

“I do want to discuss our strategies for handling *Shelly’s Song*.” He looked around the table. “First I would like to say that this has been the most memorable

week of my career. And I think Sam and Brent can say the same." They nodded emphatically.

"Already, marketing has handled over three thousand calls; requests for the demo. We've got editing working overtime, cranking out another 4500 copies."

A hushed silence followed. Brent added, "These are rock, pop *and* country stations. It's an across the charts hit!"

The table erupted in conversation. Everyone had a comment on their part in the production.

Capone leaned across the table and said softly. "Looks like your song is gonna make it, Shelly."

"Your song," she corrected. "You wrote it."

"But you inspired it."

She was spared from further comment when Tom called the meeting back to order. He went on to summarize their plan to release a *Shelly's Song* video; outlining the projected budgets for marketing and promotion. When Tom was convinced they had a workable plan, the meeting was called to an end.

Chapter 26

It was like walking on eggshells, for both of them. Alex ignored the massive publicity surrounding the release of *Shelly's Song*, never mentioning the numerous articles insinuating more than a platonic relationship between the singing partners.

Shelly reciprocated by avoiding the subject of his affair with Valerie, even though there were dozens of questions she'd have liked to ask him.

They were seeing a therapist every other week but, even then, avoided touchy subjects and hard questions. They made love but Shelly felt it was more out of obligation than desire.

As the date for his next visit to Sunnydale approached, she became more and more anxious. She knew it was impractical to forbid him to go. Irene and Nick didn't deserve to be punished for his indiscretion. Nor did Jason, who was eagerly anticipating seeing Christy.

The day he left, she set up an appointment with a private detective. She didn't want to upset the delicate balance they'd achieved, but her days of blind faith were over.

David invited her to dinner that night and was surprised to find Jeremy at home. "He didn't go to

Sunnydale?” he questioned when the boy went upstairs to change.

“No.” She smiled. “He had plans with his friends here. It looks like he’s getting used to Aurora.”

“That’s good.”

“Plus they’re both pretty mad at Alex.”

“How come?”

“David! Didn’t you see the paper?”

With a sinking feeling, he realized she must be referring to the Jerry Burke column.

“Alex cheated.” She confirmed it.

“I asked him about that. He said it was all lies.”

She shook her head sadly. “I saw pictures of them together.”

“Pictures?”

“Taken by the private detective Jerry Burke hired. They were pretty graphic...” Her lips quivered.

He embraced her tightly. “Shelly, I’m so sorry.” He had to ask. “Was it somebody here?” Alex had complained he had nothing to do in Aurora. Was that how he’d been occupying his free time?

She shook her head. “Valerie.”

Valerie? Why hadn’t he guessed? “Oh Shelly...” He embraced her again. “I am so, so sorry.”

For the first time in his life, Alex saw disappointment reflected in his mother’s eyes. “Are you getting a divorce?” she inquired. Without waiting for an

answer, she continued. “You’ll be the first St. John to get one.”

“I’m not getting a divorce, Mom” he assured her. “Me and Shelly are seeing a marriage counselor.”

The statement elevated Shelly in her mother-in-law’s esteem. Remembering the embarrassment she’d suffered when the column appeared in print, Irene could only imagine what it had done to Shelly.

“You’re lucky to have married such a forgiving woman.”

“I feel like I should have known something was going on,” he said helplessly. “When Valerie was hanging around so much...”

“Jason,” she said gently. “Your parents were paying her! She was supposed to be there.”

“She was there so much, Christy,” he insisted. “After she broke up with Uncle David.”

“And nobody thought anything about it. There was nothing you could do, Jason.”

“How can I forgive him?”

“Your Mom has. I read it in the paper.” She referred to the press release Brent had issued to address Alex’s infidelity.

“I’m not so sure,” he muttered. “So much of that stuff in the paper is RJF’s words. I can’t picture my Mom getting over it so easily.”

“Have you told her about our plans?” she changed the subject.

“She’s had so much to deal with,” he groaned.
“Can’t we hold off for a while?”
“Of course,” she agreed.

She eyed her sister with concern. “How are you holding up?” Neither the pressures of celebrity, nor demands of the studio, had ever dulled her spirit. Alex’s affair had.

“Okay, I guess.”

“It looks like you were right about that Valerie bitch.”

“I can’t blame it all on her. Alex certainly seemed to be enjoying himself in those pictures. And, of course, I don’t believe that it only happened that one time.”

“Why?”

“Think about it. They spent all that time together in Sunnydale. But nothing happened until after he moved here?”

Cathy nodded. “Isn’t he in Sunnydale now? Are you worried that he’ll see her?”

“I’m worried,” she admitted. “But I’m also prepared. I’m having him followed. By a private detective.”

She marveled at how much Shelly had matured in the past year and a half. She’d gone from excusing Alex’s every fault to engaging a private eye to tail him. “And?”

“Nothing. He made no contact with her while he was in Sunnydale.”

Alex despised the self important Dr. Ray. Recommended by Brent Young, the Family Therapist was well known for his celebrity clientele. He clearly sided with Shelly and placed the blame for the couple's marital problems squarely on Alex.

"For the last time," he growled. "It just happened! I don't know why."

"Mr. St. John," his tone was patronizing, "Alex... You mentioned your suspicions regarding your wife and her partner's relationship. Perhaps these suspicions reflected your own feelings of guilt?"

Shelly watched him intently.

Dr. Ray continued, "Perhaps the suspicious scenarios you described were exaggerated to rationalize your own behavior?"

"You're trying to say I made all this up in my head? So I could justify cheating on my wife?" He glared at him angrily. "You're more screwed up than I am, Doc!"

Rising, he addressed Shelly. "I'm outta here. This guy is a quack!"

"You can't keep avoiding the hard questions."

He jammed the accelerator; eyes fixed on the highway.

"You can't keep avoiding the hard questions," she repeated.

He veered onto the shoulder, tires squealing, and stomped the brake pedal. He turned to her, eyes blazing.

“The hard questions?” he spat. “Okay, let’s get to the ‘hard’ questions! I have one for you. Have you slept with him?”

She looked him in the eye. “No.”

He nodded.

“Now you. How many times?”

“Once.” His answer hung in the air.

“How do we get it back? The way we were...”

He watched the traffic whiz by, searching for an answer. “Can it ever be?” he asked finally. “The way it was? So many things have changed. I mean, Aurora’s not Sunnydale. And making records isn’t answering phones.”

“Change doesn’t have to be bad, Alex... Can’t we just accept that our lives have changed and make things work?”

He took her hand and clasped it tightly. “I’ll do everything in my power to do just that,” he promised.

She smiled at him gratefully. “A clean slate from today on?”

“A clean slate,” he agreed.

That night, for the first time in weeks, their lovemaking was spontaneous and satisfying. Maybe the idea of a clean slate would work.

“Ha! You owe me breakfast,” Alex taunted.

“You earned it,” his brother agreed, stowing his clubs. “Your game gets better every time.”

“I’ve been taking a few lessons,” he admitted.

David surveyed the elaborate course. “Aurora’s got a lot to offer,” he commented.

“Sunnydale’s course is good,” he defended his beloved hometown.

Having grown up in the close-knit community, David understood his loyalty. Sunnydale was a place where neighbors held block parties for every occasion and grade school friendships lasted well into adulthood. Band fundraisers were high priority and the high school stadium packed for Friday night football games.

“Alex, you have to get your mind off Sunnydale. Aurora is where your life is now.”

“David, look, you might think Aurora is the greatest place on earth, but I don’t. As far as I’m concerned, we’re here until Shelly’s contract runs out; then it’s back home.”

“Is that what Shelly wants?” David knew it wasn’t.

“We’ve been doing things Shelly’s way for the past two years,” Alex complained. “It’s time she started making the concessions.”

He stared at him in amazement. She’d done nothing *but* make concessions.

Alex consulted his watch, unaware of his brother’s disapproval. “We better get going if we’re going to make the cook-out on time.”

Chapter 27

“Are you sure?” Monica stared at her in dismay.

Valerie nodded. “Four months. I figured I better talk to you... Before I started to show.”

“Is it... his?”

She nodded again. “Of course.”

Monica shook her head. “How did it happen?”

Valerie grinned obscenely.

“I didn’t mean that,” Monica admonished. “I mean, how could you let it happen?”

“It just did.”

“Valerie, he fucking moved to New Jersey. To be with his wife!”

“I don’t need him around to have his baby.”

“Well, I guess he would support it. Alex is not the type to duck his responsibilities.” She thought for a moment. “Come to think of it, he’s a friggin’ millionaire! He’d probably be willing to set you up pretty good.”

Valerie nodded. She’d been thinking the same thing.

Monica shook her head sadly. Here she was, plotting with Valerie to extort money from Shelly. Ruefully, she realized the alliance meant the end of their friendship.

Chapter 28

The wheels of Jason's black Trans Am spun uselessly in the powdery sand. Jeremy whooped victoriously and maneuvered beside James' green sedan, moving in for the kill. David skillfully passed them both. Christy cheered from the sidelines, along with Angie's daughters. Since school let out, she'd been a frequent visitor to Aurora. Alex didn't like her spending the night in the house, but Shelly trusted them not to abuse the situation. Christy's mother agreed that it was much better than having her stay alone in a hotel.

Shelly and Angie strolled through the garden. "Do you think it's *really* possible to forgive someone after an affair?" she asked earnestly.

"You're asking the wrong person," Angie replied. "I'm the offending party, remember? You should be talking to James."

"Do you think he trusts you?"

"I'm sure he didn't at first. But I think he does now. It's going to take a while to know for sure."

After dinner, Shelly did talk to James. By then he'd had a few beers and was less inhibited in his answers.

"Have you forgiven Angie?" she asked. "For cheating on you?"

At first he was surprised, and offended, by the question. But he realized that she was genuinely looking

for an answer. An answer that might help in her situation. “Yeah,” he replied. “I have.”

“Do you trust her?”

“I trust her to talk to me before it gets to that point again.”

She considered the answer. “How did you erase the image of her and another man from your mind?”

“I never said I did. For a while I was angrier at him than her. He was the one that infringed on my territory.”

She knew exactly how he felt. It was what bothered her most. Another woman invading what she considered hers. Although it was attached to his body, Shelly felt she somehow co-owned Alex’s penis. She knew the taste of his semen, the texture of his pubic hair, the weight of his testicles.

She knew every inch of his body. It was her private property, and another woman had trespassed. Shelly couldn’t shake the image from her mind.

“Do you think you’ll ever get past that anger?” she asked softly.

“Someday,” he assured her. “Counseling helps; it just takes time.”

Time, she found out, was something she just didn’t have. At Monday’s production meeting, Brent announced *Upper Echelon* would begin a five performance tour in two weeks.

“We’re doing a promo tour during taping?” Capone couldn’t believe Sam had agreed to interrupt recording. “Sam’s cool with that?”

“Sam knows a good opportunity when he sees it,” Brent replied. “This is an offer you don’t pass up. And it just fell into our lap.”

“It’s worth holding up taping,” Sam confirmed.

“You’ve heard about Genna Germaine’s movie,” Brent continued. “The thing ran so over budget it probably won’t come close to breaking even.”

“Isn’t it some kind of *Gone With The Wind* rip-off?” Capone questioned.

“Who knows?” Brent shrugged. “The point is they’re looking for a really sensational promotion to launch it. The movie’s about this hot southern belle named Shelby Summers. Only now they’re changing it to Shelly St. Summers.” He paused for effect.

“*Shelly’s Song* will play during opening credits and a full version of the video will be tacked on the end. You guys will be appearing at five different premieres; LA, San Francisco, Chicago, Denver and, of course, New York”.

Capone smiled happily. He’d always wanted to attend one of those fancy movie premieres. Now he was going to five!

“How long will we be out?” Shelly asked. She hated to leave home just when her and Alex were getting things together.

“Just ten days,” he assured her, “with a performance scheduled every other night.”

She nodded, more concerned about being away from home than the fact that a major motion picture had been named after her. She just wished she didn't have to go so soon.

The thought repeated itself that evening. While Shelly had been at the studio, Alex had gone shopping. He was busily preparing his specialty, flaming hot chili, when she got home. It was such a 'normal' family evening that she didn't have the heart to bring up the tour.

Over the next few days, she remained reluctant to jeopardize the harmony. When she finally did broach the subject, Alex was more than understanding. "Hey, it's only ten days. No sweat."

The night before she left, Monica called. After filling her in on the local gossip, she asked her to put Alex on. Shelly joined the two boys in the living room, giving him the opportunity to talk privately with his brother.

But Brian wasn't the one who wanted to speak with him. "Hello Monica," he greeted her cheerfully.

"Don't 'hello Monica' me," she responded shortly. "Your brother is going to kill me but I need to know what you're going to do."

At his prolonged silence, she prodded. "About Valerie?"

It was the first time she'd introduced the subject between them and he was uncomfortable discussing it with her. "Monica, I moved to Aurora to get away from that situation..."

“But you’ll support the baby?”

“What?”

By his tone, Monica was aware of the bombshell she’d dropped. Damn it! Valerie assured her she told Alex about the baby the last time he was in Sunnydale. “You didn’t know, did you?” she asked helplessly.

Alex’s hands shook as he hung up the phone.

“I think I’ll visit my Mom and Dad for a couple days while you’re on tour,” he told Shelly.

“Good idea,” she smiled. He’d been so understanding about her going, she was not about to begrudge him an extra visit with his parents.

The LA premiere was everything he’d dreamed it would be; a gala event attended by Hollywood’s elite and powerful. He’d pictured himself in such scenes all his life, hobnobbing with movie stars and moguls, a beautiful woman on his arm.

And Shelly was more than beautiful; she was dazzling. She wore a simple deep copper sheath that accentuated her honey gold tan. A classic emerald necklace and matching earrings, the exact shade of her eyes, complimented, without overwhelming, the vintage gown.

The movie wasn’t that bad, although he would have much preferred an action flick. He knew it would be a hit with the chicks, because he’d seen Shelly, and several other women in the audience, weeping openly.

LORI NAUMANN
PRIORITIES

Chapter 29

She watched as Alex got out of his car and strode up the walk. Seeing his flustered expression, she ushered him quickly inside.

“We have to talk,” he announced. “Are you pregnant?”

“Monica told you? I wish she would have let me talk to you first.” Actually, she knew Monica would spill the beans for her, and wondered why it had taken so long.

“So you are?”

“Yes.”

He exhaled sharply. “What are you going to do?”

“Have the baby, of course.”

He nodded. It was the answer he’d expected. The one he’d hoped for. He’d thought of little else since Monica’s phone call, and had come to a realization. If Valerie was truly pregnant, he wanted to be involved in the baby’s, his baby’s, life.

“How far along are you?”

“Four and a half months.”

The answer surprised him. It had been two months since Shelly had confronted him with the photos of him and Valerie. She’d already been pregnant, from one of their earlier trysts.

“Is everything okay?”

She nodded. "I had an amniocentesis done a couple of weeks ago, everything's fine." She played her trump card. "The doctor says it's a girl."

He smiled. Two sons, and now a little girl...

She received the call the next morning, in her hotel room.

"Mrs. St. John? It's Arnold. Arnold Weaver..."

Her heart skipped a beat. "Yes?"

"I'm really sorry to be telling you this..." He pictured his beautiful, gracious client and regretfully continued. "You're husband visited Valerie Phillips this evening. I was able to record a large part of their conversation. Would you like to hear it?"

"Yes." Her voice was barely a whisper.

A somewhat garbled conversation followed, Shelly was unable to distinguish what was being said. "The first part's kind of jumbled, but it gets a little clearer," the detective explained. "Here..."

'How far along are you?' Alex's voice was distinct.

'Four and a half months.' Shelly's heart thumped wildly.

'Is everything okay?'

'I had an amniocentesis done a couple weeks ago; everything's fine. The doctor says it's a girl.'

Tears streamed down her cheeks, though she didn't even realize she was crying.

She listened, horrified, as the tape droned on. 'I'll be there for you and the baby, Valerie.' His voice was so

earnest. ‘And, of course, set you up financially.’ With whose money?

Arnold switched off the tape, unwilling to cause her additional pain. “After that,” he informed her grimly, “they had intercourse.”

“You suck! You don’t deserve Mom.”

Alex was taken aback at his tone. “What are you talking about?”

“You! At Valerie’s house last night!”

Jason must have seen his car. Why had he parked right in front? “I stopped by to talk to her, that’s all.”

“Uh huh.” His voice dripped with contempt. “You couldn’t use the phone?”

“Drop it,” he instructed sternly. This wasn’t something he was going to discuss with his son.

“I bet Mom wouldn’t understand your little visit either,” he continued, undaunted.

“She probably wouldn’t,” he warned. “But you can tell her, if that’s what you want.”

Jason shook his head miserably. The only thing he wanted was for his father to get over this thing with Valerie.

Alex nodded, relieved. He’d decided not to say anything to Shelly until after the baby was born. He would communicate with Valerie only by phone and wouldn’t return to Sunnydale until she was ready to give birth.

“What happened?” His eyes were filled with concern. Capone had stopped by her room to invite her to lunch, but instead found her crying miserably.

“I just got a call from Arnold Weaver,” she explained. He knew the name, it was the private detective Brent had recommended.

“It looks like you and Brent were right about having Alex watched...”

“Oh, Shelly.” He embraced her tenderly. “I wish we were wrong.”

She succumbed to his comforting strength. Resting her head against the hard muscles of his chest, she could hear his heart beating rhythmically, and feel the warmth of his breath on the top of her head and weight of his arms across her shoulders.

Suddenly, craving physical and emotional contact, she wanted him. She lifted her head from his chest. “Make love to me, Capone.”

He searched her face for some clue as to how he should handle the situation. She was hurt and vulnerable. He didn’t want to take advantage of her.

“Please!” she whispered. That settled it. He scooped her up in his arms and carried her into the adjoining bedroom.

Shelly was surprised at her response. After more than eighteen years of making love only with her husband, she was aroused so easily by another man. Had it been that way with Alex and Valerie? She pushed the thought from her mind and concentrated on the sensations.

Capone was an incredible lover. She came explosively. He showed no signs of slowing and continued pumping away. To her amazement, she felt the stirrings of another orgasm. Her second climax was intensified by the anguished wail he let out at the beginning spasms of his own.

“I love you, you know,” he said simply, still astride her.

“You don’t have to say that,” she protested.

“It’s true. Your husband was right all along.”

She didn’t know how to respond. How did you go from being one man’s wife to another man’s lover in one day?

David whistled cheerfully as he unpacked. He hadn’t brought much with him. His ‘efficiency apartment’ was no larger than the average bedroom. But it was in a good neighborhood and close to work. He was lucky to find it.

Irene cried when he told her he’d given up his apartment in Sunnydale, but his current girlfriend, Tiffany, was overjoyed. She was jealous of the time her new beau spent in Florida and was looking forward to having him more available.

David didn’t plan on being ‘more available’ to Tiffany. He planned on hanging out more with his brother. He was bound and determined to make him feel

comfortable in Aurora and quit pining for his life in Sunnydale.

“Well, that takes care of everything.”

Capone spent much of the afternoon on the phone, first ordering lunch for them both and then speaking at length with Brent, her accountants, and the studio attorney. She was grateful to let him take over the arrangements. RJF would hold all of Shelly’s future earnings until further notice, her accountants had transferred her liquid assets into secure accounts that were not accessible to Alex, and the attorney had ensured it was all done legally.

“Not everything,” she replied. “Tell Brent I need a good divorce lawyer.”

Jeremy could sense the tension between his brother and father and wondered at the cause. “Don’t tell me ‘nothing’, Jason,” he pleaded. “Something’s going on and I think I deserve to know what it is.”

“Okay,” he agreed. “But you have to promise to keep it quiet; for now.”

Jeremy nodded earnestly.

“Dad saw Valerie last night.”

“How do you know?”

“I saw the rental car at her house. He was there a couple of hours. I’m sure you can guess what they were doing.”

Jeremy digested the information. “Why would he do that? It seemed like him and Mom were finally happy again.”

“I don’t know, but I confronted him about it.”

“What did he say?”

“Not much. He doesn’t want me to tell Mom.”

“Are you?”

He shook his head. “Not yet, anyway.”

Chapter 30

Twenty-five hundred miles away, Capone took the stage. “I’d like to dedicate this song to my beautiful partner, Shelly,” he told the expectant crowd.

Something had changed and the audience sensed it. His performance of *Shelly’s Song* was nothing like the recorded version. His desire was almost palpable, his passion clearly evident. Shelly watched him, wondering. Did he really love her?

As if sensing her thoughts, he turned to her, gazing into her eyes.

*Kiss me! It takes my breath away.
Touch me! Send shivers down my spine.
Whimper softly while you love me, Shelly,
It brings tears to my eyes.*

The look that passed between them was enough to renew speculation about their relationship, and to bring the audience to its feet.

*Kiss me. Love me. Tease me, Shelly.
Brush your silky hair against me.
Make me beg for more.*

Critics would later call it the most unforgettable performance in history.

Chapter 31

She waited until they were back in Aurora before calling. “Hi,” she greeted him with false brightness.

Alex didn’t appear to notice the brittle edge to her voice. “Hey! How’s the tour going?”

“Great. How was your trip?” She gritted her teeth to keep from screaming.

“Okay. Mom’s mad at David. He finally gave up his apartment in Sunnydale so, of course, she thinks she’ll never see him again...”

As he rambled on about his mother, Shelly consciously composed herself. It was all she could do to remain civil, but she was not about to tip her hand. She needed to talk to her sons before she dealt with Alex. She couldn’t risk losing them, too.

Capone appeared at her door early that morning. “I thought I’d sit in on your meeting with Gary. If that’s okay?”

“Sure.” She was not looking forward to the meeting, discussing strategies for her divorce, and was more than glad to have him there for support. Capone and Gary Marshall were good friends; he handled *Upper Echelon’s* contracts and supervised their accountants. Gary was referring her to his partner, Todd Williams, for

the divorce. Both had agreed to fly to Chicago for the consultation.

Seated across from him, she appraised the well-known divorce attorney. Todd was tall, thin and distinguished with steel gray hair and eyes to match. He gestured expansively when he talked, his voice deep but smooth. He put her at ease immediately and questioned her delicately about the circumstances surrounding the break up of her marriage.

“Another woman is pregnant with my husband’s child,” she told him bluntly. “He’s been cheating with her for quite some time.”

Todd looked at the woman sitting across the desk. She was beautiful, true. But it was more than that, an indescribable allure. Not to mention her wealth. This husband of hers must be a total idiot!

“So time is of the essence, then,” he commented without inflection.

She nodded. “He doesn’t think I know about this woman being pregnant, but I plan to confront him when I get home; in five days.”

“Do I understand that there are minor children involved?”

“I have two sons, fifteen and seventeen.”

“Will you be requesting custody?”

“Yes, but...” she paused. Todd waited silently. “They’re old enough to make their own decisions,” she continued, finally. “This is going to be hard enough on them and I don’t think they should be pushed into anything.”

He admired her decision. So many times, both parents, eager to get the best settlement, used children as a bargaining tool. At seventeen and fifteen, these kids *were* old enough to make the decision. He just hoped her husband felt the same way.

“I’ll get on it right away,” he promised.

Capone saw them to the door. “That wasn’t so bad,” he remarked after they’d gone.

“It was awful!” she exclaimed. “I felt like I was going to cry the whole time.

He shook his head in amazement. He’d had no idea the meeting had been so trying for her.

Jason hung up the phone angrily. Damn his father for making him feel so guilty when he talked to her! The urge to warn her what a cheating liar he’d become was overwhelming.

He’d hardly spoken two words to Alex since they’d been back. Could barely stand to be around him. He had always looked up to the man, idolized him even. All he felt now was pity. Pity for a man too blind to see what he had.

The premiere was attended by Denver’s power brokers, cattle ranchers and oil barons; along with their privileged wives. Once again, Capone performed a spectacular rendition of *Shelley’s Song* to a standing ovation.

There was a confidential fax waiting for her at the hotel desk the next morning. The cover sheet was signed by Todd Williams and explained he'd worked up a preliminary separation agreement. He wanted her to read it over and schedule an appointment with him after she got back to New York.

She scanned through the two legal sized pages. The document outlined terms of a separation with intent to divorce. Its provisions called for Alex to immediately vacate the home in Aurora and return to his legal residence in Sunnydale. Shelly, Jason, and Jeremy were to remain in Aurora. Shelly's accountants would continue to pay the mortgage, utilities and property taxes on both residences until after the divorce was final. It provided him a monthly stipend of \$1000 and indicated that all further marital assets were frozen.

The next night she would attend the last premiere of the tour, in New York. She'd spend the night in the city and head home in the morning, ready to do battle.

She both welcomed, and dreaded, her upcoming confrontation with Alex. Welcoming the opportunity of presenting him with Arnold Weaver's tape, exposing his lies and seeing him squirm. Dreading the thought of watching him walk away, forever.

But it was the meeting with her sons that had her really frightened. She knew that Jeremy had adapted pretty well to Aurora. But Jason had left a pretty big part of himself in Sunnydale, Christy. Would they choose to go back with their father? And would she have the strength to accept their decision gracefully?

Capone begged her to come with him to the post-premiere party, but she firmly declined. She just wanted to see her sister.

Though it was close to midnight, the doorman was at his post and quickly stepped up to the limo. “Good evening Mrs. St. John. She’s expecting you,” he informed her.

Cathy ushered her inside, searching her face for some clue to why she was spending the night in town instead of heading right to Aurora.

Shelly didn’t hold her in suspense. “You remember I told you I didn’t believe that Alex and Valerie had been together only that once?” She didn’t wait for a reply. “I was right, because she’s four months pregnant with his child.”

“He told you that?”

“He didn’t have to. My private detective got it all down on tape.”

“Oh my God! Shelly, are you okay?”

“Not really,” she admitted. “I still can’t believe he would do that to me.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Divorce him. I thought about it before, but he swore he was committed to saving our marriage. Then he refuses to go back to the therapist and continues to lie. With Valerie being pregnant...”

“Isn’t she a little old to be pregnant?” Cathy asked dubiously.

“Thirty-six. Monica was thirty-six when she had her last baby.” The thought jarred her. Monica must surely know about Valerie’s pregnancy, yet she hadn’t had the decency to alert Shelly. “I bet she can give her all sorts of pointers,” she added bitterly.

“I never would have believed it,” Cathy mused. “Alex getting involved with another woman.”

“I know. And then I did something that makes me feel like a hypocrite. I slept with Capone.”

She gasped, disbelieving. “You did?”

She nodded miserably. “I was upset. Capone was there. He was so *understanding*...”

Cathy assessed her admiringly. She didn’t question her womanhood when her man cheated. She got even by sleeping with one of the country’s hottest studs! “Are you going to keep seeing him?”

“No. At least not until I get my divorce and things are more settled.”

Her heart sunk when she saw David’s car in the driveway. But, as she let herself in, she realized it was good he was there. He could keep his brother occupied while she talked to Jason and Jeremy.

She stiffly accepted Alex’s welcoming kiss and desperately tried to make eye contact with David. Finally he took notice and, when Alex went to call the boys, whispered, “What?”

“I need you to keep Alex busy for a while,” she whispered back. “Can you think of some excuse to get him into town?”

“You okay?” He didn’t like the look in her eye.

“I’ll explain everything later. I just need some time alone with the boys.”

He nodded. “I’ll try.”

Jeremy bounded downstairs “Mom! I’m glad your home!” He nearly knocked her down with his exuberant embrace.

Jason followed more slowly. She’d always had a special bond with her oldest son and instantly sensed something was bothering him. Avoiding her eyes, he leaned down to hug her. She held on longer than usual, reluctant to let him go.

She could hear Alex and David in the other room. “Why can’t you just go alone?” Alex grumbled.

“You know I can never find that place. If you come with me, we can be there and back in no time.”

“I can’t understand why you have to buy this golf club today. Shelly just got home.”

“I told you. Monday’s my manager’s birthday,” he insisted. “I can’t get this club anywhere else.”

Alex called out to Shelly. “Do you mind if we run out and pick up this club David needs so desperately?”

“No, not at all,” she assured him.

“I owe you,” she mouthed to David, as he closed the door behind them.

She wasted no time. The Aurora Country Club was no more than thirty minutes, round trip. “Jason. Jeremy. I

have some really important things I want to discuss with you.”

Jason knew she'd somehow found out about his father's visit to Valerie.

“You know that me and your father have been trying to work out some problems?” They nodded. “Well, sometimes people just can't get their problems worked out. When that happens, they usually decide to get a divorce. I'm really sorry, but that's what I've decided to do.”

They were not as shocked as she expected them to be. Encouraged, she continued. “There will be a separation, of course. That means your Dad will be going back to Sunnydale and I'll be staying here. And it means that you boys will have to make some kind of decision. It comes down to three choices really; living with your father, living with me, or living half and half with both of us.”

She drew a deep breath and hurried on. “Whatever you decide, I want you to know it won't change things between you and me. I love you guys whether you're here, or a thousand miles away.”

“Mom,” Jason answered quickly. “There really isn't any choice for me.” Her breath caught in her throat. “School starts in a couple of weeks. I'd be crazy to switch from the Academy back to Park High.”

Silently, she thanked Mary Culbertson and turned to her younger son. “Jeremy? Do you need some time to decide?”

He shook his head slowly. “I'm with Jason.” But, unlike his brother, he continued to idolize his father. And

the news of divorce hit him hard. “Does Dad know about any of this?”

“No,” she admitted. “You boys were my highest priority. I wanted to make sure I talked to you first.”

If only the estate had some kind of gatehouse or caretaker’s cottage, like some of the other homes in Aurora. She could have used a place to send the boys while she confronted Alex. Instead, she sent them upstairs.

“David, could you wait for us in the kitchen?” She wanted him close by in case things got out of hand. David was calm and rational, and could quickly diffuse a bad situation. “I need to talk to Alex.”

“Do you want me to leave?” he asked, uncertainly.

“No stay,” she said firmly. “But for now, in the kitchen.”

Judging by her determined expression, it was serious business. David set about preparing a pot of coffee. From the looks of it, they would need it.

“I missed you, Babe.” He threw his arms around her but she shrugged off the embrace.

“Don’t, Alex.” Crossing the room, she snatched her handbag from atop the credenza and began rummaging through it. “Don’t you have something to talk to me about?”

He realized Jason must have told her about his visit to Valerie and mentally mounted a defense. “I don’t think so.” His expression bewildered, he stalled for time.

“I think you do,” she informed him coldly, extracting a small tape recorder from her bag.

With genuine bewilderment, he stared at the recorder as she hit the ‘play’ button. “Everything’s fine. The doctor says it’s a girl.” It was Valerie. And him. “I’ll be there for you and the baby, Valerie. And, of course, set you up financially.”

Seconds of silence followed. He knew that they’d been kissing, and also what came next. He grabbed for the tape recorder, knocking it from her hands. Prying open the device, he plucked out the tape, threw it on the floor and stomped it repeatedly under the heel of his shoe.

“It’s a copy,” she calmly reported. “My lawyer has the original.”

He stared at her helplessly. She continued icily, “It’ll come in real handy if you decide to contest the divorce.”

The word hit him like a ton of bricks. “Shelly, come on. We can work this out.”

She shook her head. “We tried that route, remember?”

“You can’t mean this.” His eyes implored her, but Shelly held firm.

“I can. And I do.” She handed him the separation agreement Todd Williams had prepared. “This hasn’t been formalized, but it pretty well explains everything.”

He grabbed the papers from her hand. It seemed to take him forever to read the typewritten pages. Scowling, he looked up at her and slowly wadded the agreement into a ball. “I don’t think so! I’m staying right here!”

“No,” she replied steadily. “You’re not.”

“Who’s gonna stop me?” he demanded loudly.

“The police,” she informed him. “You see, since you couldn’t be bothered with any of the details of purchasing this house, your name doesn’t appear on the deed, or the mortgage. So legally, it’s mine.”

“Bullcrap! We live here together as man and wife that makes this my legal residence.”

“No. It doesn’t. You’re still registered to vote in Sunnydale and you’re using a Florida Driver’s License. That, and your Occupational License, which my lawyer says you just renewed. As far as the law is concerned, you live in Sunnydale.”

His jaw muscle ticked as he searched for a rebuttal, but he sensed it was a losing battle. If Shelly already had her high priced lawyers working on it, the divorce was a done deal. “Just because Jason is a little mad about seeing me at Valerie’s doesn’t mean he’ll stay in Aurora,” he warned.

So that’s what had been bothering him. He’d been stuck in the middle. Damn Alex for involving Jason in his lies! “I’ve already spoken to them,” she advised him. “They’re both staying.”

“Can’t you be the least bit understanding? I made a mistake.”

“And you kept making that same mistake, over and over. And now you and that mistake are going to have a baby. Do you think I’m going to support your little bastard?”

It was the first time he could remember having the urge to smack his wife. His fingernails bit into the palms of his tightly clenched fists. “I’m not leaving without seeing the boys.”

She nodded. “I’ll call them down.”

Jeremy looked at the floor, but Jason stared him dead in the eye. Both confirmed their intentions of staying in Aurora.

With a heavy heart, he plodded upstairs to pack his things. Shelly went to rescue David from the kitchen. “What’s going on?” he demanded.

“Alex is packing,” she replied wearily. “I found out he’s still seeing Valerie. We’re getting a divorce.”

He pushed past her and headed upstairs.

“Are you fucking crazy? You can’t just leave. You need to stay and try to save your marriage.”

Alex glared at his brother angrily. “Just butt out!” he commanded.

“I just want to know why! Why would you give up everything to be with Valerie?”

“I said butt out!” He continued to stuff clothes into an already overflowing suitcase.

“Alex, don’t do it. Don’t throw away your marriage for a piece of ass! Valerie’s a good fuck, but how do you think she learned all those little tricks? She’s been around...”

The blow caught him completely off guard, causing him to stumble backward. Alex followed up by grabbing his shirt and pushing him up against the wall. His tone

was menacing. “Don’t ever talk like that about her again!” he warned, drawing back his fist.

“You sure you want to do that, Bro?” David flexed his well-developed pecs, his voice dangerously calm.

Alex released his grip but remained grimly determined, his voice cold and harsh. “I’m sure about one thing. I’m sure I’m not going to discuss this with you. You better leave.”

He reluctantly left him to his packing.

“Well?” She searched his face for some clue to what had transpired upstairs. “He told you?” She wondered what David thought about being the uncle of his ex-fiancee’s baby.

“Told me what?”

So he hadn’t had the courage after all. “Valerie’s pregnant. With Alex’s baby.”

The dumbfuck! Hadn’t he heard of condoms? “I see why you’re so anxious for the divorce.” Any thoughts he’d had about encouraging her to reconsider vanished at the news. He knew she’d never play stepmother to the child.

“I can’t stay with him,” she explained. “It’s not just the baby. He never stopped lying...”

He had to ask. “And the boys?”

“I haven’t told them yet.”

“Haven’t told them?”

“I mean about Valerie being pregnant. Of course I talked to them about the divorce.”

“And? Will they be staying?”

“Oh!” She nodded happily. “Yes.”

He massaged his jaw, still tender from the force of his brother's blow, wondering how things could change so much in so little time. For so many years, he'd have given anything to have what Alex had: a beautiful wife, two fantastic kids, and a happy marriage. He wouldn't dream of trading places with him now.

"How did you find out? About everything?"

"I had a private investigator following him," she explained.

He wasn't surprised she'd engaged a private eye. Shelly had grown quite resourceful. "You'd think he'd have thought of that, after the last time," he commented.

"I know. I truly never expected this guy to come up with anything. But Brent thought I should hire somebody and, of course, now I see what good advice it was..."

The sound of footsteps on the stairs interrupted her. By the speed in which they neared, she knew it was one of the boys. "Dad's ready to go," Jason informed them. "He's up there now, talking to Jeremy."

She steeled herself for the inevitable confrontation. Instead he chose to vent his anger on his brother.

"What are you waiting around for?" he demanded. "This isn't some soap opera! Don't you have your own life?"

"I thought I'd offer you a ride," David replied, unruffled.

"No thanks," he sneered. "I'm driving the van." The old mini van was titled in both their names so he knew

she couldn't prevent him from taking it. Shelly had no intention of trying.

That night, she gently explained to her sons that they would soon have a stepsister. Jason's reaction was immediate. "That idiot! My God, I'm so glad I don't have to live in Sunnydale."

Jason digested the information more slowly. He hadn't really believed his parents would get a divorce. He was sure they'd end up staying together. But if Valerie was having a baby, it wasn't likely. He might even end up married to her.

"Please understand, he's not perfect," she implored them. "Nobody is. This divorce is between me and him. Not you and him."

She knew she needed to set them up with some type of counseling. The boys had been through so much in the last two years. They must be as stressed out as she was. "Hey! How about we order one of those pay-per-view wrestling things off the satellite?" she suggested. "I think we got some of that gourmet popcorn left."

They ended up watching not one, but three, pay-per-views. She figured being subjected to six hours of professional wrestling was a small price to pay if it helped them through this first, very difficult, night.

Chapter 32

After an enthusiastic production meeting in which the promotional tour was pronounced a smashing success, Brent summoned Shelly to his office.

“Shelly,” he explained. “Somehow Jerry Burke got wind of your separation. I’d expect something to show up in print within the next couple of days. With *Shelly’s Song* breaking all kind of records, it’s bound to be picked up.”

He knew the news of her upcoming divorce would lend credence to rumors of romance between her and Capone. With *Shelly’s Song* number one on the charts, the publicity would be priceless. Still, he couldn’t help feeling guilty about taking advantage of the situation.

“My God!” she gasped. “He knows everything. Does he have spies around every corner?”

Valerie’s house was his first stop in Sunnydale. “Shelly kicked me out,” he announced. “She’s divorcing me.”

She wondered if he expected her to be upset by the news. “You look beat.”

“I’ve been driving for the past eighteen hours,” he admitted. “Driving and thinking. I spent the first couple of hours kicking myself for breaking up my marriage. And letting down my family. After that, I started to realize that

my marriage has been broken for a long time. And that I have family right here in Sunnydale.”

He paused, gathering his thoughts, before continuing. “Jason and Jeremy have no desire to come back. They didn’t blink an eye when I left.” The fact still caused him immeasurable pain. “I must have done something wrong, with them.”

She touched his arm comfortingly. It had obviously cost him a lot to leave his sons.

“The point is, I have another chance, with my daughter. Valerie, I think we can be a family. Me, you, the baby, and Adam and Rich. Do you want to try?”

She ignored the fact that, less than twenty-four hours ago, he’d been booted out by his wife and forsaken by his sons, dismissed the notion that it might be too soon for him to make another commitment. “Are you asking me to marry you?” she nailed him down.

“Yeah. I guess I am.”

Irene stared at her middle son in dismay. “What have you done that would cause your wife and son to disown you?”

“It’s a combination of things, Mom,” he explained patiently. “A lot of things changed when Shelly got so famous. She changed! Everything changed.”

She regarded him shrewdly. “So my grandsons? They changed, too?”

“If you want to know the truth, they did,” he replied sharply. “They were taken in by that theme-park of

a town and the fancy-schmancy private school. Sunnydale is just past history to them!”

She knew her grandsons. And it would take a lot more than a fancy school and glamorous town for those young men to turn their backs on their father. After Alex left, she placed her first ever call to Aurora.

“Grandma?” It was the last person he expected. He hoped she wasn’t calling to speak to his father. He wasn’t about to explain that he was living back in Sunnydale.

“Hello, Jason. How are you?”

“Fine, Grandma. How are you?”

“Worried. About you and your brother.”

So she knew about the separation; at least that made it a little easier. “We’re okay, Grandma. Really!”

“Don’t be strangers,” she pleaded. “Your Grandpa and me couldn’t take it if you didn’t visit.”

“Are you kidding? You know I can’t live without my apple pie fix. And how would Jeremy survive without your stroganoff?”

Chapter 33

It had been many years since Brent had made such a grave miscalculation. He'd been right about the reports of Shelly's divorce being picked up by the AP, but he'd been very wrong about public reaction. Clearly the idea of her breaking up a happy family to carry on with Capone touched a nerve. The studio received hundreds of letters and e-mails denouncing her lack of morals.

"I can't believe he actually did it!" she exclaimed, inspecting the ring Valerie proudly presented. The three-quarter carat Princess cut diamond had cost Alex over \$3,000. He had felt a little guilty about spending Shelly's money to buy another woman's engagement ring, but had decided that it was a little late to be honorable.

"Are you happy for me?"

"I'm happy for you. I'm sad for Shelly." Monica couldn't help feeling like a traitor about the way things had worked out.

"The way things were going, Alex would have ended up leaving her anyway, even if I hadn't been in the picture."

"But you were in the picture!" Monica was always blunt. "And then getting pregnant; it didn't give him much choice."

“I don’t agree, Monica. I didn’t put any pressure on him. I wasn’t even the one who told him I was pregnant. You were!”

“I know. It’s just that... It’s always been Shelly and Alex. They got married right after me and Brian. We were always together, the four of us. And then we had kids; we raised them together.

“Well now it’s me and Alex. And a new baby to raise!”

“Thanks again, David. I owe you big time!”

“No problem, Shelly,” he assured her, smiling as he hung up the phone.

Tiffany was furious. “How can she expect you to play nursemaid to them every damned night?”

“It’s not every night,” he corrected her.

“It’s been twice this week,” she pointed out. “And you had dinner over there Saturday.”

“She’s worried about them, Tiffany. They just lost their father.”

“He’s not dead, for Christ’s sake! He’s in Florida.”

He couldn’t understand her lack of compassion, but didn’t have time to argue. “Well, in any case, I’m off to Aurora.” He ignored her petulant glare on his way out.

It was something he’d come to enjoy, covering for Shelly when she had to work late. They’d settled into a comfortable routine, preparing dinner together. Though the three of them were all thumbs in the kitchen, they’d managed to come up with some surprisingly tasty dishes.

Afterward, they usually rented a pay-per-view or staged elaborate races in which they competed ruthlessly.

“Uncle David?” Jeremy questioned as he diced tomatoes for taco salad. “Do you think parents love their children unconditionally?”

“In most cases,” he replied. “And definitely in yours. Why do you ask?”

“Because I wonder how my Mom and Dad feel about me and Jason since we helped fuck up their marriage.”

David eyed him with concern. “What do you mean?”

“Well, when Mom got all famous and everything, she wanted us to move to here. We didn’t want to. I think Dad would have... but me and Jason kept complaining.”

“We just stood around like asses,” Jason muttered. “And they started fighting more and more.”

“Your Mom and Dad are adults,” he told them. “It was up to them to keep their marriage together. Not to you, or anybody else.”

Jeremy nodded uncertainly and David went on. “With any kind of a loss, people tend to lay guilt on themselves; to feel responsible. When someone dies, their relatives feel guilty for not having spent enough time with them or for having argued with them in the past. They wallow in ‘if only’s’. A divorce is kind of like that. If only I’d said that, done that, noticed that.”

“I can’t stop thinking about how we were such jerks about moving here. It probably caused him to start up with Valerie...”

“What I’m trying to say,” David broke in evenly. “Is you’re bound to feel like you could have done something more, or different. That’s natural. But they made the decision alone. They didn’t ask our permission.”

“It’s just so messed up,” was all Jason could think to say.

He repeated the conversation to Shelly later. “I didn’t know,” she exclaimed. “I expected them to be upset. But I don’t want them to feel guilty! I’ll talk to them about it.”

“I wouldn’t just bring it up out of the blue,” he cautioned. “That would be too obvious. Just work it into your normal conversation, here and there.”

“You’re right.” Once again, she realized how lucky she was to have him as a friend.

Alex eyed the attorney expectantly. “Did you talk to my wife’s lawyer?”

“Why didn’t you tell me your wife was *the* Shelly St. John?”

“How many are there?”

“Well, this one can afford the best lawyer in New York. I’m out of my league against Todd Williams.”

“So what are you saying? That I should get another lawyer? I can’t afford one.” Shelly had frozen all their assets. “Listen,” he decided to be blunt. “I really don’t have a leg to stand on in this divorce. But my wife has made a hell of a lot of money in the past couple of years, while I stayed home and took care of things at home. I had

to close my business. If I could get some kind of settlement...”

“I could take the case on a contingency basis,” the lawyer offered. “And let Mr. Williams know we’d be interested in a settlement.”

“Yeah. That sounds good,” he agreed. “I guess I don’t have too much of a chance fighting for custody of my sons?”

“Your sons are what sixteen, seventeen? If they want to live with their mother, the judge is going to agree.”

“Okay, but ask for the house. I want the house.”

“That’s right. The woman lives somewhere in Sunnydale. I remember Shelly telling me that.”

Jerry scribbled notes as Brent talked. “You say she’s four months along?”

“Right,” he confirmed.

“Okay. I think I got it. How soon did you want it to go to press?”

“Yesterday!”

He looked around the waiting room uncomfortably. All these pregnant women! He was the only man there. He realized he had never gone with Shelly to the obstetrician. She’d squeezed in appointments on her lunch break or after work. He’d always been working himself. This was something new to him.

He listened intently as the doctor explained that the pregnancy was progressing normally, but they would be monitoring her closely for any problems and was delighted to hear the sound of his baby's heartbeat.

On the way out, Alex consulted the office about the cost of prenatal care and delivery of the baby. To her relief, he settled the bill on the spot.

Chapter 34

Brent smiled with satisfaction. Jerry had really come through. He'd devoted his entire column to the 'real reason' for the St. John break-up, portraying Shelly as the devoted wife and Alex as the home wrecker. The fact that he'd fathered a child with another woman and had moved back to Florida to be with her was held up as evidence of his disgrace.

"So now we know why," Adam commented bitterly. "I wonder when she was planning to tell us about the baby."

Rich shrugged. The article certainly had answered some of their questions. Like, for instance, what had possessed Alex St. John to propose to their mother. And why he had moved back to Sunnydale. Things they had puzzled about since she'd happily announced that she planned to marry Jason and Jeremy's father.

"Says here she's more than four months pregnant. Did you suspect anything?"

"No," he admitted. "I always thought Alex was a pretty cool guy. You know, it seemed like his family was real important to him..."

“How could you?” his mother wailed. “How could you embarrass us like this?” She waved the newspaper article in his face. For once, Nick made no attempt to stifle her.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled.

“And to think I worried about your *wife’s* behavior while she was gone,” she sniffed. “What kind of example are you setting for your sons?”

“Mom, give it a rest. Things happen...”

“No, son,” his father interrupted. “She won’t give it a rest. You need to start thinking about somebody beside yourself. You’ve shamed this family with your behavior. Now there’s an illegitimate child to consider...”

“No, there’s not,” he interrupted. “I’m planning to marry Valerie as soon as my divorce comes through.”

The news didn’t shock them. They had very old fashioned values and expected him to do the right thing. The baby didn’t deserve to be born out of wedlock.

“Have you seen my Dad around at all?”

“No,” Christy replied. “But I’ve been pretty busy, with school starting and all.”

“I know what you mean.” Mrs. Culbertson had insisted on a rigorous schedule. With her help, he’d decided to apply for Rutgers and he lacked several courses required for admission.

“Jason,” she sighed. “What are we going to do? Our senior year is supposed to be the best time of our lives. Are we going to spend it, all, apart?”

“No,” he promised. “Definitely not.”

Brent plopped two bulging sacks on the table.

“What’s that?” she inquired.

“Sympathy cards,” he informed her. “There’s a couple more bags of them in my office. They’re all for you.”

Shelly had to admit that reporters could be useful, even Jerry Burke. The article couldn’t have come out at a better time. Though she knew she was being silly, she felt like Jerry had been trying to help her.

Chapter 35

His editor handed him the neatly printed letter. “Here’s one that ought to interest you. It’s from Shelly St. John’s husband.”

‘I am constantly surprised by the fact that newspapers of your quality employ the likes of Jerry Burke. Not only does he lack writing talent, but his method of obtaining subject matter leaves much to be desired. I have had the misfortune to meet up with Mr. Burke twice. Both times he was rude and offensive. On at least two separate occasions, he had me followed by a private detective and once had me physically attacked as I tried to avoid his line of questioning. I hope you will seriously reconsider having employees like him bringing down the good name of your paper. Sincerely, Alex St. John.’

“That’s nothing compared to the one he wrote to me.” Jerry pulled a rumpled sheet of paper from his pocket and passed it to the editor.

‘Hey asshole,’ it began. *‘Giving my wife those filthy pictures wasn’t enough for you. You had to make sure my marriage was history by supplying her with that*

disgusting tape. Is your own life so pathetic that you can't stand anyone else being happy?'

The editor was unruffled. Gossip columnists were typically loved or hated. Loved by the readers who lived vicariously through reports of celebrity scandals. Hated by the celebrities creating the scandals that were reported.

Jerry hadn't been too concerned by the letter, either. If Alex had only stopped there, instead of enclosing the revolting little hand drawn cartoon, featuring two gay men in a compromising position, on which he'd scribbled '*Jerry Burke sucks dicks*'.

Chapter 36

“She was okay about giving up the house?”

“She’s agreed to turn over the house and it’s entire contents,” the lawyer repeated. “She requested only one item, her mother’s tea pot, I believe.”

Alex nodded grimly. It was obvious that she wanted no reminders of her life with him. Nothing from the home they’d purchased together and lovingly renovated. Not one stick of the antique furniture that had taken years to accumulate. Not one trinket they’d collected during happier times. Just a worn out old teapot.

“As I’ve explained, this appears to be a pretty fair settlement offer...”

“A million bucks doesn’t seem that great. Shouldn’t I get like half of what she made when we were married?”

“You can ask for anything you want. But I’m advising you to hire someone with more experience to represent you. Todd Williams made it very clear that the sum is non-negotiable.”

Alex thought it over. A million bucks was a pretty tidy sum. Enough to pay off the house and maybe even make a couple of investments. Even if he could get more, did he really deserve it? “Take it,” he instructed. “Let’s get this thing over with.”

The attorney stifled a smile. It was the first million dollar settlement he'd ever negotiated. And it would be the highest fee he'd ever collected!

"So we're moving over there?"

"That's what Mom says," Adam confirmed.

"When?"

"She wasn't really sure. She just said she wanted to get settled in before the baby was born."

"That's like four months away."

"She made it sound like it was going to be sooner than that."

Rich wondered how Jason and Jeremy would feel about them living in their house.

"Alex St. John has just gotten on my last nerve," Jerry complained. "He's been sending nasty letters to me and my editor."

"What do you want me to do about it?"

"Nothing. Just give me the go ahead to dig up something on him that I can use in my column."

"Be my guest," Brent replied. He owed Shelly's husband no loyalty.

Shelly collapsed into the seat beside him, exhausted. "Thank God it's Friday!"

"Hell of a week, huh?" Capone agreed.

The limo raced toward Aurora. They began sharing a ride to the studio again after Alex moved out. Both felt it was silly to take separate drivers into the city each morning.

“We’ll have it easy the next few weeks,” he continued. “Just final editing, promotional meetings, and stuff.” They had completed recording the last song of the album early in the week and the last video footage that afternoon.

“No more late nights for a while,” she breathed happily. “Plus the whole next week off!”

“I’ll miss you,” he said softly. “Can we have dinner one night?”

“Yes. At my house.” She ignored his petulant look. He couldn’t understand why she was reluctant to jump into a relationship with him. But Shelly knew she wasn’t ready to make that kind of decision. She regretted the lapse in control that allowed her to sleep with him that once.

He knew that ‘her house’ meant dinner with her two sons and maybe a board game later. Not exactly a romantic evening, but he’d take what he could get. “I’ll call,” he promised as they pulled into her drive.

She found David and the boys playing gin rummy at the kitchen table. “Hey guys! Can I play next hand?” She plopped down in the vacant chair next to Jeremy. David won the hand and shuffled the cards.

Jason cleared his throat loudly. “Let’s forget cards for now.” As if on cue, Jeremy excused himself and left the room.

“Mom, I need to talk to you.”

David rose. “I’ve got to be going...”

“No, Uncle Dave,” Jason interrupted. “I want you to stay, if you would.”

Shelly nervously wrung her hands, worried by his tone.

“I want to marry Christy,” he announced bluntly. “Right away.”

“Jason!” she exclaimed. “You’re only seventeen!”

“I’ll be eighteen in November. She’ll be eighteen in January. We’ll be of legal age.”

“I thought you wanted to go to college!”

“I do want to go to college. But I want to be with Christy, too! I love her.”

“But Jason, marriage? That’s such a big step. You’re so young!”

“Christy’s parents got married when they were seventeen. It worked out fine. They’re still together!”

She knew she couldn’t touch *that*. Not while she was in the middle of a divorce! She looked at David helplessly. “What do you think about this, David?”

“I’m not sure. What are your reasons for wanting to marry her?”

Shelly thought it was a good question and nodded. A horrible thought crossed her mind. “Is she pregnant?” she asked Jason, her voice almost cracking.

“No,” he replied sharply. “We haven’t even slept together.”

“Is that why you want to get married?” David questioned, gingerly.

“Maybe that’s part of it,” he admitted, embarrassed. “But mostly we can’t stand being apart.” He looked at Shelly imploringly. “You, of all people, should understand that!”

How could she argue? She knew, all too well, the devastating effect distance could have on a relationship. And she knew Jason genuinely loved this girl. She also knew she needed time to think.

“Jason, I want you to know that I appreciate you including me in this decision,” she began. “But I need some time to think about it. Can we discuss it again tomorrow?”

He hugged her, gratefully, knowing she wouldn’t jump to a conclusion, based only on what she wanted. She would think about it and try to do what was right. For everybody. “Thanks, Mom,” he said softly before heading upstairs. “You too, Uncle David,” he called over his shoulder.

“Oh my God,” she breathed. “What do you think of that?”

“Are you that surprised?” David questioned gently. “He’s been pretty serious about her.”

“I know. But marriage? He’s so young!”

“He’ll be eighteen soon. He’ll be going off to college...”

“College? How can he go to college if he’s married?”

“Shelly, don’t be ridiculous. You’re a millionaire! It’s not as if you can’t support them; put them both through college.”

She looked at him thoughtfully. She hadn't thought about it that way. "So you think they should get married?" she asked him.

"I don't know," he admitted. "But I do know that Jason is a level headed kid. I know he'll make the right decision. But, not only that, they'll both be eighteen in a couple of months. You really won't be able to stop him from marrying her. You can support him or alienate him. That's the real decision."

"How'd you get so smart?" she asked him. She'd come to rely on him so much the past few weeks. He was a familiar presence in their home and had made the transition much smoother for the boys. And they all counted on his practical advice and insight.

He smiled. "Just comes nat-u-ral," he drawled.

They lay in her bed together, after having made love. "Alex?" She drew her finger lightly across his chest, circling his nipples.

"Huh?"

"Adam and Rich were saying how it would be nice if we all had a chance to get used to each other before the baby is born." Her hand moved to his stomach, tracing his ribs.

"Good idea," he replied distractedly.

"Don't you think living together is the best way to get used to each other?" She caressed his hips and upper thighs.

“Probably,” he sighed, parting his legs as she moved to his testicles.

“You agree then? That we should move in?”

He basked in the heat of a throbbing erection.

“Sure.”

Chapter 37

Shelly didn't get much sleep that night. She spent her night worrying about Jason. Her son had a very bright future, and could wreck it by marrying so young. But he was a very mature boy. And a very stubborn boy. She remembered David's words, 'you can support him or alienate him'. She knew she didn't want to do the latter.

She arose early and set about completing her plan. Her first call was to Maggie, her Realtor, then Ginger Brandt. She spent the rest of the morning on the phone, once with David, twice with Maggie, once with Gary Marshall and again with Ginger Brandt. At 3pm, a deposit of \$3,000,000 was taken on the estate next door. The buyer was listed as John Shelly.

That evening, she avoided Jason's attempts to discuss Christy, asking him to wait until after they'd eaten. Nor did she let David in on why she'd invited him for dinner.

"Let's take a walk and talk about it," she suggested after dessert. "Jeremy, David, you come with us, too." Picturing the customary walk in the gardens, they followed, confused, as she headed down the drive and opened the gate. They grew even more confused when she strode determinedly down the street, finally stopping at the heavy steel gates of their next door neighbor.

Oddly, Shelly produced the key that unlocked them. She led them down the walk to an enormous gothic

mansion. It had been modeled after a Scottish castle but sported modern amenities such as the screen enclosed, heated swimming pool, full sized gym and massive game room.

She extracted another key from her pocket and opened the front door, beckoning them inside. They walked through the silent house. It was completely furnished in period pieces, dark heavy furniture and rich drapes. Each room was decorated in a different 'theme'. One done completely in greens, another in gold. The large formal dining room was a mixture of blue velvets and white lace.

Finally Jeremy could contain himself no longer. "What are we doing here?" he questioned. "Whose house is this?"

"I bought it," Shelly exclaimed. "Today!"

"Why?" Jeremy asked.

She looked at David meaningfully. "I thought Uncle David could live here. So we could have him close by."

He stared at her, stunned. "Shelly! You're crazy! This place must have cost a fortune!"

"It did! But it was worth it if you'll take it."

"But Shelly..."

She cut him off. "Actually, the reason I bought this place was twofold." She took Jason by the hand and led him outside, behind the house and around the pool, until they came upon a smaller house. The caretaker's cottage consisted of two bedrooms, a cozy living room and a large kitchen. Two wooden rocking chairs sat on the large wrap

around porch. Jason noticed a sign above the front door. It read ‘Welcome, Christy!’

He turned to his mother, his head cocked quizzically. “It’s hers,” she explained. “She can either live here alone or with you, when you get married.”

He inspected each room. The cottage was also fully furnished, but much simpler than the main house. Bright floral curtains framed the numerous windows. Pastel prints covered the walls. The long time caretakers of the estate had recently retired and moved to Arizona, to be closer to their children. It was one of the reasons the owner had been willing to sell. Especially when Shelly had offered to take over possession and upkeep immediately.

Catching up with them, David and Jeremy found the small house and noted the sign above the door. David grinned and flopped into one of the rockers, his nephew flopped down beside him.

Shelly was explaining to Jason the reason she’d bought the house. “I don’t want you to rush into marriage just because you want to be close to Christy. But I won’t stand in your way, either. After you’re eighteen,” she qualified.

He nodded. “But until then, I want to give you the opportunity to see her regularly. Because I understand how difficult being apart can be.”

“She’ll love it here!” he exclaimed, hugging her. “Do you have any idea how cool you are?”

She laughed. “Well, Christy’s Mom is pretty cool, too.”

“You talked to her?”

“Of course, you didn’t think I’d get you all excited without finding out if she’d let her come?”

He was astonished at the lengths she’d gone to make him happy, and equally so by her next statement.

“I don’t want either you or Christy to give up your education, so I’ve arranged for her to join you at The Academy. And I’ve got Mrs. Culbertson checking out colleges.”

He gasped. “You are the coolest Mom ever!” he almost shouted.

Later, she thanked David. “It was you that helped me come to a decision,” she told him.

“How?”

“When you said I could afford to send them both to college. It seemed so simple, but so effective. If Jason wants to marry Christy after they’ve finished college, I’m all for it. If he decides not to wait, I can’t afford to alienate him.”

“That makes sense,” he agreed. “Now about the big house... I’ve been thinking about it. I can’t take you up on it.”

“What? Why not?”

“I can’t afford a house like that. The electric bills alone would kill me.”

“David,” she said cautiously. “I don’t want you to pay anything for the house. I thought you understood that.”

“Shelly, that house must have cost a fortune. The upkeep alone will be enormous...”

“Let’s talk turkey,” she interrupted him. “I have more money than I know what to do with. More than I can spend in a lifetime. Alex agreed to a million dollar settlement. I have more than five million stashed away. Plus our album is due out in a couple of weeks.”

“The house must have cost...” he interrupted.

“Let me finish” she insisted. “Having you around is worth more than money can buy. I’ll be going on tour in a little more than six weeks, David. I’ve arranged for my housekeeper to work extra hours, but if you were around, I’d feel so much better.”

Alex couldn’t believe what she’d done. Jeremy told him about David moving next door and that Christy would be living there too, in a ‘little house’. Alex listened unemotionally but called her that evening. “What the hell is this about Christy moving in with Jason?” he demanded.

She replied that Christy would be living next door and that Jason would not be living with her.

“Why would you do such a thing? Jason’s seventeen years old! Do you think it’s a good idea for his girlfriend to be living right next door? In her own house? Don’t you think that’s a pretty big temptation for him?”

She explained that Jason had originally intended to marry her. That she thought this was a way to let them be together without getting married. A way for them to finish college.

But he thought it was ridiculous. “You should have just told him ‘no way’ when he told you about getting married. What’s the matter with you? Can’t you say no?”

She could see they were getting nowhere. “Alex why don’t you think about this a while and then we’ll talk again later? But I want you to think real hard about the fact that Jason will be eighteen in November. It isn’t like we can stop them then.”

“You could stop them if you tried. Instead of throwing your money around and buying houses for everybody...”

She hung up on him.

What Jason had described as a ‘cottage’ was almost as large as her parents’ home in Sunnydale. Christy was stunned by Shelly’s generosity. “Your Mom is awesome,” she exclaimed, for the umpteenth time.

He nodded. His life was so perfect! His smile turned just as quickly into a frown. If only his Dad were here, too...

“They look happy,” David commented, watching Jason and Christy together.

“Yeah. They do. Now when are you moving in?”

“Shelly, I just can’t accept living in that house rent-free.”

“David, come on! It’s better that I just leave my money sitting around in the bank? The house is an investment. If you don’t move in, it’s just going to sit empty.”

He eyed her uncertainly.

“Listen, I won’t be keeping tabs on you,” she assured him. “You can have anybody over anytime you want. We can even set up some kind of signal so we’ll know when not to disturb you.”

He shook his head, chuckling. “I’ll move in, at least while you’re on tour. But, if for any reason you change your mind, I’ll move right back out with no hard feelings. Okay?”

“Okay,” she agreed. “And the same goes for you. If you change your mind and want to move out, I’ll *try* not to have any hard feelings.”

Coincidentally, that very day, Valerie was moving in with Alex. She bustled about, issuing directions. The heavy oak dining table and chairs were relegated to the garage in favor of her more modern, glass and wicker set. The four-poster brass bed he’d slept in for years was replaced with her king sized motionless waterbed. His favorite beat-up blue suede recliner looked totally out of place surrounded by her immaculate white linen living room set.

Alex has insisted the boys share a room, so that Jason and Jeremy would have a place to sleep when they visited. Their furniture was crammed into the smaller of the two upstairs bedrooms. The larger bedroom quickly filled up with Adam and Rich’s things.

LORI NAUMANN
PRIORITIES

Chapter 38

Christy looked lovingly around the cottage one last time before locking up. She passed through the recently constructed gate linking the two properties, cut across the racetrack and entered Shelly's house through the back door.

Jeremy was in the kitchen, finishing breakfast, and offered her a Pop Tart. "Guess who's here?" he asked excitedly. Without awaiting her reply, he gleefully informed her. "Sam Stone!"

Her mouth dropped open. "Where?"

"In the living room. He's here with Capone, waiting on Mom."

She wondered how many people could say they'd been in the same room with two such gorgeous men. Capone greeted her like an old friend. Sam Stone hugged her! Christy nearly fainted.

"Sorry for taking so long," Shelly apologized as she came downstairs. She wasn't the least bit shocked to see the Hollywood heartthrob standing in her living room. "Sam!" she greeted him with a hug. "I didn't know you were in town." He was a close friend and frequent visitor of Capone's. He'd even talked about buying some property in Aurora.

"I'm doing the Tonight Show," he announced casually.

Sam was one Hollywood's sexiest and most sought after leading men. His last film had earned him Best Actor and his most recent, *Chicago*, promised to be a blockbuster. He and Capone could be brothers. Both had the same black hair and eyes, chiseled features and cocky stance. Both possessed a quick temper and were prone to brooding silences.

"What's this I hear about you buying my house out from under me?" he teased. "That place sounds like exactly what I'm looking for."

"You snooze, you lose," she retorted. "Besides, I'm not as picky as you. I made offers on all six houses on this block."

Christy hated to be late for class. Mr. Rainer, her oh-so-proper Literature instructor, didn't take well to late enrollments that interrupted his carefully planned lectures. She'd learned that the day before, when her addition to his class had caused a pained expression in his eyes. But she also didn't want to leave with Sam Stone there.

Capone solved her dilemma. "Hurry up, Shell! We'll be late for the meeting."

In the limo, Sam produced a small glass vial and tiny silver spoon. Filling the spoon with the powdery contents of the vial, he held it to his nose, snorted deeply and passed it to Capone. Shelly declined their invitation to sample the cocaine.

Open use of drugs was common in the entertainment industry. It was just another thing she had gotten used to. She accepted, but never participated, in it.

Their meeting was primarily to discuss early sales figures on the album (better than expected) and go over last minute changes in venue for the tour. Except for re-taping a portion of their last video, the tour was the only thing on their agenda. That meant a welcome month-long vacation for the band members.

Brent stopped Shelly on her way out. "Have you seen this?" He held up Jerry Burke's column.

She shook her head and quickly scanned the column. "Hell of a way to find out things," she commented wryly. She wondered why Jerry was so interested in Alex. Obviously, he was still having him tailed, or how would he have known about Valerie moving in? She studied the photo that accompanied the article, eyes burning with tears. Barely visible, at the far right corner of the shot, was Monica carrying an overflowing box.

"It probably won't get much better," Brent warned. "Your husband made the mistake of getting on Jerry's bad side. Sent him some kind of nasty letters or something..."

"Did you know Valerie moved into our house?" Jason cornered her when she got home.

"Not until this morning," she replied, calmly.

"How could he do that?"

"Your Dad asked for the house as part of his divorce settlement. I agreed..."

"But the divorce isn't even final yet!"

She, too, was disgusted by how quickly he'd moved his mistress into the home that had once been her pride and joy, but kept her feelings to herself. "Jason, I can understand you being upset. But you need to accept the fact that your father chose to make a life with Valerie, and support him if you can."

"I don't know if I can," he admitted.

"What's worse than having your Mom take up with a married man?" Rich asked. "Having it plastered all over the newspaper!" he answered himself.

Adam nodded miserably. He, too, was embarrassed by the column. "It makes her sound so trashy."

"Why'd we have to move here anyway?"

"To get 'used to each other' before the baby is born," he mimicked his mother's explanation.

"To make sure he didn't get away, is what I think," Rich voiced what they were both thinking.

David endured his mother's stream of criticisms directed at his brother. As if his adulterous affair and the resulting illegitimate pregnancy hadn't been enough, he'd had the bad taste of moving her in. Had he any idea how the women in church were talking? Couldn't he see what a fool he was being?

It was a welcome relief when his father came on the line. He avoided the subject of Alex but asked about Jason and Jeremy. And Shelly. “I’m proud of you, son,” he added. “The way you’ve been looking out for your brother’s family.”

David didn’t answer. He wondered how proud his father would be if he knew how he felt about Shelly. He was hopelessly in love with his brother’s wife!

Chapter 39

The gentle pressure of her fingers felt wonderful to the aching knot of muscles in his neck. It had been a hell of a day, spent trying to resurrect former business relationships. Though the mortgage and utilities on the house were paid by Shelly's accountants, Alex knew the meager amount in his checking account wouldn't last until he received his divorce settlement.

The site foremen were much more interested in discussing his well-publicized divorce, than subcontracting him any jobs. But finally, he'd been allowed to bid a project.

He actually welcomed the excuse to return to work. Sitting around at home made him feel worthless, and edgy. He began to notice little things about Valerie that bothered him; like the inordinate amount of time it required her to do her hair, or nails. And the total lack of interest she showed in her sons.

It wasn't that she ignored them, exactly. They always had clean clothes, hot meals and spending money. She made sure they brushed their teeth, changed their underwear and remembered their lunch. But he had never seen her sit down and talk to them, help them with their homework, or inquire about their day.

They met up at the breakfast or dinner table but rarely in between. The boys stayed in their bedroom, watching TV or playing video games. If they went out in

the evening, she never asked about their plans or where they would be.

It was a painful reminder of his relationship with his own two sons, with whom he had so little contact.

Chapter 40

She laughed at the speed in which they rejected her suggestion of a vacation.

“Practice SAT’s are next week,” Jason and Christy chorused in unison. Jeremy announced there was ‘no way’ he was missing his Saturday night date with DiDi Buchanan. Obviously, they’d settled into life in Aurora. Even the promise of an exotic trip couldn’t lure them away.

“Well, I guess I’ll just hang around here, then,” she smiled broadly.

Jason nodded. “Good.” Shelly wasn’t underestimating his affinity for the town. Who could resist the seduction of attending the fabulous Aurora Academy, or belonging to the exclusive Aurora Country Club? What could be better than having the woman you love right next door?

“You’ll have to take some time out to visit your Grandma,” she reminded them. “And your Dad. And your parents, Christy.” They’d canceled an earlier trip to Sunnydale, after learning that Valerie was living with Alex.

“Okay,” Jeremy agreed. “But we’re staying at Grandma’s.”

Shelly nodded. She understood them not wanting to stay with their father. She couldn’t imagine herself ever setting foot inside the house again, now that it was *hers*.

“That’s all you got?” Jerry asked disappointedly, viewing the photos from his computer.

“That’s it,” Bo confirmed. “He seems like pretty regular guy. I’ll see if I can get something on his lady friend...”

“Just him working? I can’t get much of a story about a man working.” Or could he?

‘Filthy Rich – or Just Filthy?’ captioned the photo of Alex, sweaty, dirty, and hard at work. ‘Why would the husband of a multimillionaire be laboring in the scorching Florida sun?’ Jerry Burke posed to his readers. ‘Could it be that his lovely wife has frozen their assets, in retaliation for his adulteress affair?’

Unlike Rich, Adam didn’t think the column was funny. Alex was a nice guy. He was one of the few people in the world that acted like he gave a shit about them. Him, and his brother David...

David St. John was the one man they could count on. They’d scoffed at his promise to keep in touch when he’d broken off with their mother, but had soon come to realize that he meant it. He remembered their birthdays, not just by sending presents or money, but planning a special way to spend the day. He’d once taken off work and flown to Sunnydale on an hour’s notice because Rich was thinking about quitting school. And he never hesitated to help them out financially.

If Alex was even half the man that his brother was, they had no business making fun of him.

LORI NAUMANN
PRIORITIES

Chapter 41

Christy folded each item carefully before packing it neatly into the appropriate suitcase, all the while chattering non-stop. Shelly smiled at her tenderly. Having had the opportunity to get to know her, she couldn't imagine a more wonderful daughter-in-law and looked forward to the day she and Jason would marry.

Spending four weeks at home made it harder, not easier, to leave. She would have given anything to get out of the tour, and actually considered feigning a debilitating illness that would prevent her from traveling. But she knew Brent would dispatch a team of specialists, with instructions to have her up and around before the first show.

“Don't worry, they'll be fine,” David assured her as she climbed into the limo. She hugged each of them again and tearfully waved goodbye.

The atmosphere in the plane crackled with excitement. It was always that way, before a big show or tour. Soon the anticipation of performing overpowered her homesickness and Shelly joined in the raucous banter of her fellow band members and assorted crew members.

They kicked off the tour in Boston, a sold out show, with tickets being scalped outside for \$250 and up. In Seattle, also a sell-out, fans that were unable to purchase tickets converged in the parking lot of the stadium, outnumbering the paying audience two-to-one. The

Atlanta show was extended for another night and both nights were jammed packed with screaming fans.

The first two weeks of the tour flew by without her realizing it. Shelly was too exhausted to be homesick. She wondered how the boys were doing but didn't worry about their welfare. David would see they had everything they needed. And, from what he'd reported, Christy had pretty much taken over everything else.

She smiled at the thought of her future daughter-in-law. If Christy were the girl Jason ended up marrying, he'd be a very lucky man.

They'd settled into a regular routine. After school, they gathered at the cottage to do their homework. Usually Christy would whip up some type of delectable snack, that Jason and Jeremy would make short work of.

They loved the cozy feel of the simple cottage. Christy's hope chest treasures blended into the original country décor. Shopping expeditions with Shelly had yielded new curtains, linens, kitchen and bath items. The large braided rug in the living room was very rare and had been purchased in New York, but was nowhere near as beautiful as the elaborate latch hook rug in the bedroom that Christy had lovingly handmade. When Shelly heard she was a good pianist, she surprised her with an antique Baby Grand. It was her prized possession and proudly dominated the small living room. Each item had been placed carefully, creating a warm and inviting atmosphere.

She'd taken over the cooking, wholeheartedly. Each night, after David got home from work, she presented them with lavish French, Mexican and German cuisine;

recipes she found in the multitude of cookbooks checked out from the library.

Christy wanted to show Shelly that she could be counted on to help out in her absence. She'd come to love and respect her and knew she'd be very lucky to have such a warm and generous person as her mother-in-law.

Chapter 42

“Where’s Adam and Rich tonight?” he questioned after eating dinner with her, alone.

“I think they went to the skating rink,” she answered vaguely.

“Oh. I was thinking maybe we could all go bowling or something.”

“I don’t think they’ll be home until late. And Rich said something about spending the night at his friend’s.”

Disappointed, he continued hopefully. “How about me and you then?”

“Alex, I don’t think that would be good for the baby.” She patted the rounded bulge of her abdomen.

“A movie?”

“Actually,” she yawned. “Right now a nap sounds like heaven.”

He nodded. “Go ahead. I’ll see what’s on cable.” Flipping through the channels, he settled on an old John Wayne film. The grainy image of Hollywood’s version of the wild west blurred. He realized he was crying. Crying for his two sons, living a thousand miles away, and for their mother, whose love he had lost.

“I got nothing on the guy,” Bo Parker reported. “But I e-mailed you some dirt on the lady.”

Jerry wished he'd checked his mail before phoning the private detective. "Like what?"

"I don't know if it's anything you can use, but she seems to have quite an appetite for married men."

"Intriguing..."

Chapter 43

Maybe if she hadn't stopped home that weekend, halfway through the tour, she wouldn't have suffered this indescribable feeling of loneliness. Maybe if she weren't feeling so lonely, she wouldn't have let him kiss her. And if she hadn't responded so hungrily to the kiss, maybe he wouldn't be unbuttoning her blouse...

All this went through Shelly's mind before she stopped Capone at the second button. "I can't."

He groaned "Shelly!"

"I'm sorry."

"Stop fighting it, Shelly," he said huskily. "I love you. Let me make love to you."

"I can't," she replied firmly. "I'm just not ready."

He searched her eyes for some indication that 'no' really meant 'yes'. Finding none, he resignedly relinquished his position of temptation, on the couch beside her. "I've got to go then," he announced. "Because, Shelly, you are driving me craazy!"

In the doorway, he offered one last appeal. "Shelly, please! Isn't there anything I can do to make you understand how much I love you?"

He stared at the door as it closed firmly behind him. Did she have any idea how much her rejection aggravated his already overpowering desire?

Jerry chortled happily as he put the finishing touches on his story. His column would be double its usual size this week, due to the large amount of information he had to report, on one Valerie Phillips.

RJF's courier approached her after the show, Shelly signed for the package and ripped it open anxiously. She wondered what kind of 'information' it contained. Brent had said only that it was something she needed to see.

Inside the plastic mailing envelope, she found three sheets of photocopied pictures, shots of Valerie; Valerie with Alex, Valerie with Monica, Valerie with her two boys, a younger Valerie with an unfamiliar man. A yellow sticky note was attached. 'This is a rough draft of Jerry Burke's column'. It was signed by Brent.

Capone watched as she read each page carefully. He looked over her shoulder. "What's so interesting?"

"My God," she breathed, handing him the pages she'd finished reading. "If only I'd known she was such a conniving bitch..."

Bo Parker had interviewed people in Rocky Creek. A small rural town, located just thirty miles west of Sunnydale, it was the last known address of Valerie Phillips. The townspeople remembered her well. "She's a back-stabbing bitch!" "She's trouble." "She stole my sister's husband."

A woman relayed the story of her brother-in-law. Valerie had made friends with her sister, all the time making a play for her husband. Eventually the man left his

wife and moved in with Valerie. Within six months, Valerie had moved on to another man (a lawyer). The woman's sister took her husband back but the marriage was never the same.

An interview with the lawyer followed. "I married her," he lamented. But that hadn't worked out, either. "Valerie is just not the monogamous type." She left him too, for another man. Another *married* man.

This man's wife hadn't taken him back. He was bitter and happy to give a statement. "Valerie's a whore and liar! She practically threw herself at me day after day. She convinced me to leave my wife to be with her and her kids. And everything was going just great. Or so I thought. It turned out she was screwing my best friend the whole time. I got rid of her. *And* the best friend!"

The private eye visited Spring Hill, on the tip of a waitress in Rocky Creek's one and only diner, and ferreted out Rich's and Adam's father. Or fathers. They each had a different one. Adam's father declined to be interviewed, commenting only, "I have nothing to say to or about that woman."

Rich's father had plenty to say. "She was screwing around even before she got pregnant. I've never even been sure the boy is mine. She just used the pregnancy to nail me. I haven't seen him or her in years, and have no desire to. I'm sure she's still up to no good. And the boy can't be much better."

The story ended with the details of Shelly and Alex's divorce proceedings and Valerie's pregnancy.

Capone studied the photo of Valerie and Monica. Even at six months pregnant, he had to admit she was good looking if you liked that ‘Valley Girl’ type. It was the other woman in the photo that caught his attention. “Who’s this?” he questioned, pointing out the exotically beautiful Monica.

“That’s my sister-in-law. We were best friends for years... Now she’s best friends with her.” He could tell by her tone how much Monica’s betrayal had hurt.

“With a best friend like that, she doesn’t hardly need any enemies,” he commented.

“I know. Poor Alex! I wonder if he’s seen this?”

Capone shook his head. “Poor Alex, hell! He wasn’t forced into anything. If his girlfriend happens to be a sleeze, that’s *his* problem.”

She remained silent, but couldn’t help feeling that Alex had been a sitting duck. He certainly hadn’t been the first husband to be seduced away by Valerie

How could she feel sorry for him? Just because he had come across a particularly wily woman? Would she use this woman’s track record to justify his behavior, even forgive him?

Aware that further discussion of Jerry Burke’s column would lead to her defending Alex, Capone dropped the subject. And though they shared a limo back to the hotel, neither spoke. Both were contemplating the possible consequences of the revelations about Alex’s mistress.

Early the next morning, he made a phone call. “Brent? Capone. I have an idea...”

Shelly also placed a call that morning. She got her sons on the line and outlined the contents of Jerry Burke's column.

"You mean Valerie's some kind of serial adultress?" Jason asked.

"It seems like it. Plus she's been married three times."

"This was all in the newspaper?" Jeremy commented. "I feel bad for Adam and Rich."

"Oh my God, I didn't even think about that. There was even a quote from one of their fathers. He said he wasn't even sure it was his son and that he didn't want to see him."

"You mean they don't have the same father?"

"Not according to Jerry."

"They think they do!" Jeremy exclaimed. "They think he died in some kind of car accident. They both act like he was some kind of *God*."

Shelly was sickened at the thought of the pain the story would cause everyone involved. "You know, guys, with all this going on, your Dad is going to need you guys more than ever. The column will probably run today or tomorrow. Why don't you give him a call?"

Chapter 44

A free morning was a rarity for her. Irene and Nick had Marlene for the day and Monica was completely caught up on her housework. She lingered over a second cup of coffee and enjoyed being able to read the entire newspaper without interruption.

She read the article twice, just to be sure she understood correctly. Jerry Burke had run an expanded column, devoted entirely to her best friend. Her expression grew more and more grim the further she got into the article. Valerie had been married three times! And engaged God knows how many times. How many marriages had she broken up? The article cited at least two. What kind of a woman was she?

Struck by a sobering thought, she groaned aloud. She had helped her nab Alex! She had set Valerie up as Alex's housekeeper, giving her the opportunity to be alone with him. She had said nothing when she found out that Valerie was attracted to him. And had remained her friend even after Valerie became pregnant with his child. She had done all of this at the expense of her friendship with Shelly!

She thought of the quote in the article, "She made friends with her and all the while was making a play for her husband." How could she have been so blind? She had thought herself a good judge of character. She hadn't been totally comfortable with Valerie and Alex's

relationship, but rationalized that if Alex and Shelly were to be divorced, Valerie would make a good replacement.

She never dreamed the whole thing could be part of some coldly calculated plan. She decided to confront the situation head on and quickly dialed the familiar number, waiting impatiently for the phone to ring.

“Hello?” Luckily, it was Valerie.

She got right to the point. “Have you seen today’s paper? Jerry Burke’s column?”

“No, why? Another story about Alex?”

“No. About you.” She paused. “And Valerie, it’s not very nice.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, there’s a lot of stuff about you and other guys...” Monica was becoming uncomfortable. How could she tell Valerie what the article had said?

“Like what?”

“Like... I don’t really want to go into it over the phone. Why don’t you run up to Hogan’s and buy the paper?”

“Yeah. I’ll do that.” She was anxious to get off the phone. “I’m going right now.”

“Okay,” Monica replied, but Valerie had already hung up.

She headed straight for the door. What was in the column that Monica couldn’t discuss over the phone? Every other article they’d read together, in detail, critiquing the photos and dissecting each bit of information.

She read the story in the supermarket parking lot, her face draining of color. It was all there. They'd left out the names, but not the facts. What would Alex say? She shook her head ruefully; he'd apologized to her for putting her into the 'other woman' position. How would he react to finding out it was a position she knew well?

Driving home, her mind raced. She knew she would come up with something to tell Alex and how she would explain to Monica. But right now, she needed time to think! She went to the telephone in the kitchen and turned the ringer switch to 'off', repeating the process with every phone in the house. Then she sat down, to come up with a plan.

"So I guess my Dad looks like a fool right now," Jason summed up his conversation with Shelly.

"I does look like he got suckered," Christy admitted. "But I'm more worried about Adam and Rich. They must be devastated."

He nodded glumly, watching her putter around the cozy kitchen preparing breakfast. "I don't know how I'd handle it if I suddenly found out that Jeremy and I had different fathers. Fathers that didn't even want to see us."

Christy thought he'd had his share of family problems to deal with. And had handled them quite admirably! She put down the toast she was buttering and walked over to embrace him. "I'm sure you would take it in stride. The way you always do."

He pulled her down into his lap and kissed her deeply, not sure how he had survived before she moved here.

Chapter 45

Alex's truck careened into the driveway just before noon. Was he home for lunch or home to confront her about her past? She waited anxiously for him to come in. After fifteen minutes has passed, she realized he planned on staying outside.

She walked out into the yard and caught sight of him raking leaves. Approaching him, she knew he'd seen the paper. His jaw clenched and unclenched furiously as he attacked the small pile of leaves. "Alex?" she asked hesitatingly.

He stopped and stared hard at her. "Not now, Valerie," he said shortly. "I'm not up to discussing it." Before she could respond, he resumed his frantic raking.

She stood there silently, uncertain what to do. "Alex?" she asked again softly.

"Valerie, I said not *now*," he said. He continued raking, the scratching sound punctuating his words. "Please respect that."

She stood there another moment, watching him and then turned and walked toward the house. She watched from the window for a long time. It was obvious he was not planning to come in for a while. After he'd raked the entire yard, he hauled the leaves out back. He was in the process of lighting them and she knew he wouldn't leave a fire burning unattended.

She was loading the dishwasher when the front door slammed. “Rich!” she exclaimed, surprised. “What are you doing home?”

He turned to her and she gasped. His upper lip was bloodied; swollen to three times its normal size. His right eye was black from the cheek to above his eyebrow. His nose was encrusted with dried blood. “What happened?”

“What does it look like?” he snarled. “I got my ass kicked!”

She ignored his language. “Why?”

“Like you care! You can’t even answer the fucking phone!”

“The phone never rang,” she protested.

“Well, the principal tried to call like ten times. To let you know I’m suspended. Finally he just sent me home.”

She remembered avoiding Monica by turning off the ringers. “You got suspended? Why?”

“Cause that’s what they do when you take on the whole fucking school!”

Although he had a hot temper, Rich had been in very few actual fights. He’d never been suspended. “Why would you do that?” she questioned.

“Because the whole school is calling you a slut...” He drew a ragged breath.

She stood mutely, unable to come up with any words of comfort for her son.

“And,” he continued. “Because I’ve been stupid enough to believe that my father is dead. That he was

some kind of fucking *saint*! And that Adam is my blood brother even though we look nothing alike!”

He paused, before adding coldly, “And that you’re not a slut.”

She took a step backward, as if she’d been struck. “I can’t believe you said that!”

“Oh come on, Mom,” he continued hotly. “You think I don’t remember all those ‘uncles’ when we were young? You think I haven’t figured out what was going on? You think I don’t despise you for lying about my father?”

“I won’t have you talking to me like that...”

He didn’t let her finish. “Have it your way,” he sneered.

“Rich! Rich!” she called, but he continued upstairs without acknowledging her.

She sank down into the couch weakly. She had been so worried about Alex’s reaction to the article, she hadn’t even thought about her sons. She *had* lied to them about the identity of their fathers. Both men had made it clear they wanted no part in their son’s lives and she’d thought it would be easier this way. Why hurt them by telling them the truth?

She realized Adam would be just as upset as Rich. He got home from school just as Alex’s truck roared out the driveway. She prepared to face her youngest son.

Unlike Rich, he was deadly calm. “How come you lied to us about our fathers?” he asked evenly.

She searched for the words. “I didn’t want to hurt you...”

“What if we got sick and needed a blood transfusion or something? Don’t you think we deserved to know the truth?”

“What good would it have done? They never wanted to be there for you. Never even asked to see you.”

“Don’t you think we deserved to know that we aren’t brothers?”

“You *are* brothers!” she exclaimed.

“But we always wondered...” his voice finally betrayed his emotion. “Don’t you understand? We always wondered why we don’t look alike. Act alike, think alike...” He shook his head helplessly, unable to continue.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured. “I’m so sorry.”

Wordlessly, he turned to the stairs, in search of his brother. He knew he’d been beaten up and suspended from school. He’d come close to it himself.

The kids had been brutal, shoving the article at him almost from the minute he walked in the door. Asking all kinds of questions about his mother. Insinuating, perhaps rightly so, that she’d gotten knocked up by a rock star’s husband for the money.

Alex knew exactly what the boys had been through. He had to leave the job site that morning after the foreman complained that his presence was too much of a distraction for his fellow workers. Now he just wanted something to eat. But the girl that took his order openly stared at him before rushing to speak with the girl at the register. By the time he got his food, at least six employees had peered at him through the drive-thru window.

Suddenly he lost his appetite and, having no place else to go, headed home.

The phone rang as soon as she reset the ringer switch. “Is my Dad there?” Jason questioned. Alex’s truck was just pulling into the driveway.

Valerie was surprised. Although Jeremy had called several times, Jason hadn’t initiated one phone call to his father since she’d been there, and barely spoke a few words when his father called him.

She brought the portable phone outside and presented it to Alex. “Your son,” she informed him. He grabbed the phone and moved out of her earshot.

“Jeremy?”

“No, Dad. It’s Jason.”

He held his breath. Jason was nowhere near to forgiving his affair with Valerie and refused to even acknowledge the fact that he would soon have a baby sister. If he was calling, instead of Jeremy, it could only be bad news. Alex knew they must have seen Jerry Burke’s column. Would they disown him?

“Listen Dad, me and Jeremy were wondering if you could come out soon for a visit. We really miss you.”

He exhaled slowly. What he wouldn’t give to see his sons right now! Only he wasn’t about to go to Aurora. There was no way he could face Shelly.

“Mom won’t be home for a least another month,” Jason continued. “So you don’t have to worry about that.” Shelly had readily agreed to her sons’ suggestion of inviting their Dad for a visit. “And Uncle David said you could stay at his house.”

“How soon are we talking about?”

Jason would like nothing better than to see his father to make a hasty retreat from Valerie. “How about now?”

“I’ll try to get a flight out in the morning.” He jumped at the opportunity to get away from Sunnydale for a while.

“We’ll be waiting,” Jason promised.

Valerie eyed him expectantly when he came inside, anticipating some type of confrontation, but he headed directly upstairs, ignoring her. She followed and stood, watching, as he fumbled around in the closet. “What are you looking for?” she questioned.

“My luggage,” he replied shortly. Locating the suitcase, he began stuffing it with clothes.

“Where are you going?”

“To Aurora.”

She stared at him. “You’re going back to *her*?”

He considered telling her ‘yes’, but instead reminded her Shelly was on tour.

“How long will you be gone?”

“A week.” He zipped up the suitcase.

“So, instead of talking about this, you’re just taking off?”

“I can’t talk right now. I don’t know what to say. This will give me some time to think.”

“What about us? Rich and Adam are really upset, too.”

“Some time alone with them is probably the best thing.”

She couldn't believe he would just leave without giving her the opportunity to defend herself. "You can't just walk out like this," she shrielled.

"Watch me," he replied evenly.

She followed him downstairs and out the door, shouting at his back. "You find out a couple of things about my past and you walk out?" she demanded. He ignored her. "You know what, Alex? You're a coward!"

He turned on his heel so sharply that she almost walked right into him. "I'm warning you, Valerie," he growled. "I am way too pissed to talk about this right now. We'll discuss it when I get back next week."

"I can't wait until next week," she shrieked. "I need to know what you're going to do. What you're thinking..."

"Okay, Valerie," he said coldly. "What I'm doing is visiting my sons for a week. What I'm thinking is that I left my wife for a whore."

She wanted to slap him so badly that the tips of her fingers tingled but, judging by the look on his face, he was likely to hit her back. He got into his truck and left without another word, spinning gravel in his haste to get away.

He spent the night in a hotel near the airport, and ordered a pay-per-view movie. But it was a waste of money. He couldn't concentrate on the dialog or the plot. Or think about anything but the newspaper article. Jerry Burke had set out to make him look like a fool, and had been wildly successful.

He'd been completely taken in by her lies. Early on, before their relationship had become intimate, Valerie had confided in him about her past. He remembered the tears she'd shed at the recollection of her husband, Adam and Rich's father, being killed in an accident. And her grief over being dumped, for another woman, by her second husband.

He also remembered David warning him that she'd been with a lot of men. But what had he done? He punched him! And later accepted her explanation that someone had told David a bunch of lies.

He needed to apologize to his brother, and his sons, for fucking up so bad.

Chapter 46

He found out it wasn't necessary. They were all at home, awaiting his arrival. David bypassed the handshake and embraced him warmly. "Good to see you, Bro!" he exclaimed. The boys were equally receptive. Alex was moved to tears when Jason hugged him. It had been a long time since they had connected.

It was a briskly cool day, though the sun shined brightly. They lounged on the porch overlooking the fragrant and prolific blooms of Shelly's carefully tended rose garden. Laughing and joking with his sons and brother, Alex realized how profoundly he had missed them. "How about we all go out to dinner?" he suggested.

"Actually, I thought we could go over to Christy's," Jason explained. "She's been working on some kind of Mexican recipe."

He had forgotten all about Jason's girlfriend living here. "Sounds good to me."

David piped in. "You won't be disappointed. Christy's becoming quite the gourmet cook."

They walked down a well-worn path to the cottage. Once inside, Alex looked around him appraisingly. The little house was warm and welcoming. David and Jeremy, obviously used to spending time there, flopped down onto the couch. Alex followed suit. Jeremy flicked on the TV as Jason went in to the kitchen to assist Christy.

Watching them together, Alex could see that they loved each other. The way he automatically moved to her side to help her make the salad, and touched her hand across the counter, his broad smile when she was looking, his wistful one when she wasn't.

He had that once, genuine, unconditional love, with Shelly. He realized, now, that it had never been that way with Valerie. Passion, yes. Lust, definitely. But he had never had to stifle the urge to kiss her in public. They had never held hands in the grocery store. Or communicated wordlessly across a crowded room.

He found himself envying his son. Jason had recognized true love and hadn't let circumstances (or geography) get in the way. Remembering his displeasure at learning that Christy was going to move in here, he was glad that Shelly had overruled his objections.

As David had predicted, the meal was superb. "Where did you learn to cook like this?" he questioned.

"She just picked it up," Jason answered proudly. "She gets all kinds of cook books from the library and watches these cooking shows. Isn't she awesome?" He beamed as Christy blushed.

After dinner, David suggested a game of pool. "I've been practicing, Bro, and I think I can kick your ass!"

"You're on!" Alex was quick to rise to the challenge. Jeremy and Jason stayed with Christy, allowing their father and uncle some time alone.

Alex whistled softly as he entered the house. "Did you ever picture yourself living in a place like this?" he questioned, curiously.

“No,” he admitted. “But then, without Shelly, I wouldn’t be.” He watched for his brother’s reaction.

But Alex merely asked, “How’s she doing?”

“Good.”

“I really screwed up with her.”

“I know.”

“You tried to warn me.”

David shrugged.

“Did you know all that stuff about her?”

He shook his head. “Don’t you think I would have told you? I knew she’d been married, of course. A couple of guys told me she’d been around. I kinda figured that, you know... But *I* was going to marry her.”

“What do you think about her now?”

“I think the question is what do *you* think?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “She’s pregnant with my baby... But was that all part of some plan on her part?”

“What does she say?”

“I haven’t talked to her.”

“You haven’t talked to her at all?”

“No. After I read the article, I was too mad. Then the boys called and asked me to come up here. I just couldn’t bring myself to face her... I spent the night in a hotel.”

“I can’t believe she let you go without an argument.”

“We did have an argument. A short one. I called her a whore.”

David winced. “How are Adam and Rich?”

“I’m sure they’re pretty upset. I didn’t talk to them, either. This is something they need to work out with their mother. I’m sure she’ll come up with a way to handle it.”

Chapter 47

She wished she *could* come up with a way to handle it. The boys had stayed in their room the night before, even refusing to come down for dinner. She knocked on their door that morning and Rich informed her, from behind the closed door, that Adam had already left for school. Long before his usual time, most likely to avoid her.

Rich stayed holed up all afternoon until she finally demanded he come downstairs. He walked sullenly into the kitchen. “You wanted something?”

“I wanted to talk.”

“Okay,” he said, scowling. “Let’s talk about Alex. Did he move out?”

“No,” she replied quickly. “He went to visit Jason and Jeremy.”

“Pretty good timing, don’t you think?”

“Why do you say that?”

“Oh come on!” he sneered. “He’s got to feel like an idiot. Even more than us! He was married to Shelly St. John. *The Shelly St. John*. And look what he ended up with.” He eyed her contemptuously. “A gold digging slut!”

She smacked him square across the face, leaving a red imprint on his left cheek, a blazing compliment to the blackened right eye and fat lip he’d sustained in yesterday’s fight.

His expression never changed. “You done?” he asked.

She nodded wordlessly and he went back upstairs. He didn’t come back down.

Adam didn’t want to talk, either. “What’s there to say?” he asked. “We know the truth now.”

“Don’t you want to hear why I told you something different?”

“You already told me. You wanted to protect us.”

“And you’re okay with it?”

“I didn’t say I was okay with it. I just said there’s no point in talking about it.”

She searched for the right words, but nothing seemed appropriate. The uncomfortable silence stretched on. Finally Adam excused himself. “If there’s nothing else, I’ll be heading upstairs.”

She watched his back as he ascended the staircase. She didn’t know which was more painful; Rich’s name-calling or Adam’s dismissal.

Chapter 48

They gathered at Christy's to watch the satellite feed of *Upper Echelon's* outdoor concert in St. Louis. Rumors that the event would be televised for pay-for-view caused the crowd to swell to an estimated fifty thousand, each trying for their fifteen minutes of fame by mugging for the cameramen.

The opening act, an upcoming all female band by the name of *Pork*, wound down and *Upper Echelon* was announced. The audience cheered as Capone and Shelly appeared on stage. He grabbed the microphone. "St. Louis," he shouted "are you ready to rock and roll?" A roar of 'Yes!' from the crowd was punctuated with screams and whistles.

"We got a real special show tonight," Capone promised as the band broke into the first strains of *Legends*. Laser lights cut through the darkness behind them. Again the crowd roared.

Christy marveled at how different they appeared. Capone was clearly a born performer. He played the audience like a finely tuned instrument. Shelly also donned a larger-than-life on stage presence, inconsistent with her at-home image.

Alex watched as they put on one of their best performances, his soon to be ex-wife and the man he had accused her of cheating with, so many times. He wondered if she missed him, as much as he missed her.

Shelly replaced the microphone in its stand smiling broadly. It had been a good show, worthy of Brent's last minute decision for airtime. To her dismay, the band started again, Capone broke into *Shelly's Song*.

The audience went crazy. She stood to the side, confused by the unexpected encore. Had she missed something in the prep? Sam would kill her for ruining a live performance! Capone continued, unaffected by her mix-up.

*"I can't give you much, just all that I have
my head, my heart, my love – to have and to hold.*

The song was winding to an end.

*Until death do us part. My soul through eternity.
Shelly, will you marry me?"*

He knelt before her, on one knee, and extracted a ring from his pocket. The huge diamond glinted in the harsh light. "Will you marry me?" he repeated into the mike, while reaching for her left hand.

With precision timing, the sky erupted in a flash of bright white light. A collective gasp spread through the crowd, followed by, "Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes."

She stared at him dumbfounded as the cameras zoomed in for a close-up. Minutes ticked by as fireworks boomed behind them and the crowd chanted, ‘Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.’

Finally, she nodded and Capone slipped the ring onto her finger. Pandemonium erupted in the audience. The extra security guards Brent had arranged were not enough to control the mob. Frenzied fans stormed the stage, trampling each other and demolishing everything in their path. The band was quickly spirited backstage and whisked away in a waiting limo.

“Oh, my God,” murmured Jason. Jeremy’s mouth hung open.

“How could you do that?” she demanded in the limo. Curt, John and Erik looked on uncomfortably.

“I love you, Shelly,” he offered.

“We’ve talked about this, Capone! I told you I can’t make any commitment to you!”

“No,” he corrected, not the least bit inhibited by the presence of the other band members. “You said you couldn’t sleep with me again.”

“That’s right! And if I can’t even make the commitment to sleep with you, what could possibly make you think I’d marry you?”

“I thought maybe that’s what you were waiting for...”

Curt snickered and even Shelly had to smile. “I really love you,” he continued. “I’ve only proposed

marriage twice in my life Shelly! And both times it was to you. Doesn't that tell you something? Maybe I shouldn't have put you on the spot." He flashed her a dazzling smile. "But at least you said yes."

She slid the ring from her finger and handed it to him. "At the time, it was impossible to say no. But that *is* my answer."

He looked to them for support, but Curt and John weren't about to be involved in this decision. Erik wanted nothing more than to commend her decision, but knew he better keep his mouth shut.

Alex felt sick to his stomach and excused himself. He went back to David's and lay on the bed, in the enormous guest room. He'd been right about Capone all along. She hadn't even waited until they were divorced before agreeing to marry him.

"Wasn't that the most romantic thing you've ever seen?" Christy exclaimed.

"Romantic?" Jason snorted. "She's still married to my Dad."

"Not for long," Christy reminded him. "And, considering the situation, can't you see why she'd want to move on?"

David agreed. "If this is what's going to make your Mom happy, we need to show our support."

Jason thought it over. She deserved to be happy and, if marrying Capone would do it, who was he to disagree?

“Do you think she loves him?” Jeremy asked. No one ventured an answer. If Shelly had been carrying on a love affair, she certainly hadn’t let on.

Was she marrying Capone just to spite Alex? Or did she really love him? The questions nagged at him, making sleep impossible. He rolled over in bed and squinted at the alarm clock. It was after midnight and he had to be up early for work the next day. The phone, sitting on the nightstand beside his bed, sounded like a trumpet in the silent room, blasting his head from the pillow.

“David?” It was Shelly. “I’m sorry for calling so late. Did I wake you?”

“No. Not really. Congratulations!”

“I guess you saw the concert?”

“Yeah. Plus a clip on the news.”

“We’re the kids very upset?”

“Surprised.”

“They weren’t the only ones. I had no idea he had something like this planned...”

“We talked about it,” he explained. “They’re okay. They just want you to be happy.”

“They don’t think I’m marrying him do they?”

His heart skipped a beat. “You took the ring...”

“What else could I do, in front of all those people? I gave it back.”

“So you’re not engaged?”

“Of course not! Make sure the boys know that, okay?”

“Okay.” He hung up, feeling better than he had all evening.

Alex had also heard the phone ring and wondered who would be calling his brother at this hour. He’d been doing a lot of thinking. Capone’s proposal had made one thing clear. The past was the past. His, Shelly’s, and Valerie’s.

It was time to concentrate on the future. His own engagement, his unborn child, his future wife and soon-to-be stepsons.

He awoke the next morning with his mind firmly made up. He needed to get back to Sunnydale, and start acting responsibly. He had to do right by his baby, and Valerie. He had never run away from obligations. Though the thought of her marrying Capone made his skin crawl, it was probably best that Shelly had moved on. It dispelled any illusions he may have harbored about them getting back together.

He joined the kids for breakfast. They were going to school for a half day, it was the first time they’d attended that week. Mary Culbertson had arranged an abbreviated schedule in honor of their father’s visit. She’d seen the press surrounding the family and knew some concessions were in order.

“Mom called last night after the show,” Jason informed him. “She gave Capone back his ring and told him she couldn’t marry him.”

LORI NAUMANN
PRIORITIES

He'd feel a lot more confident about his future with Valerie if Jason's news didn't make his day.

Chapter 49

“No, Brent,” she repeated firmly. “I’m not going to pretend anything!”

“But your fans already saw you accept,” he whined. “It’ll break their hearts.”

“You should have thought of that when you and Capone hatched up this scheme,” she admonished, and almost laughed at his innocent expression. She knew her partner, however resourceful, could never have arranged it alone.

“So what do we do?” he asked plaintively. Capone had been so sure she’d agree to marry him, that Brent had foolishly agreed to his very public proposal. He’d flown to Little Rock to try and convince her not to formally announce her refusal.

“What you do best,” she replied. “Get your reporter friends to spin it any way you want. Just make it clear that there’s no engagement.”

He nodded resignedly.

Brent managed to squeeze interviews with the morning news shows into their schedules. Capone appeared on *Wake Up America*, melting the hearts of women nationwide with his impassioned description of how Shelly, the love of his life, had broken his heart by rejecting his marriage proposal.

Shelly was equally charming on *Sunrise*, explaining that she had two sons to think about and that

jumping into a relationship with Capone would be selfish and irresponsible.

After fielding dozens of interview requests, Brent realized that by declining Capone's marriage proposal, Shelly had pulled off the publicity stunt of the century. Everybody wanted to hear their story.

Monica watched Shelly admitting the devastating effects of her husband's affair and confessing her fears about starting another relationship, on *Sunrise*. She was filled with admiration for her sister-in-law. Marrying Capone would have been an easy way to snub her nose at Alex. But she was more concerned about her sons' well being.

She shook her head sadly. She'd turned her back on Shelly, in favor of a lying bitch. It was the worst mistake of her life! She knew now that her former friend was no friend. She'd done some snooping of her own. The residents of Rocky Creek were less than willing to talk about Valerie Phillips, aware that anything they said could wind up in the next day's newspaper.

But she did manage to get one bit of advice from the brother of one of her ex-husbands, only after explaining that she was Alex St. John's (and soon to be Valerie's) sister-in-law.

"Don't trust her," he warned. "If you repeat this, I'll deny it. I had an affair with her while she was married to my brother."

She wondered how she had so completely misjudged her. This was the kind of stuff you saw on talk shows, 'I slept with my husband's brother'. They'd watched topics like it, together, and joked about the guests' outrageous behavior! She never dreamed they could do a whole show just on Valerie.

She knew she would never again trust her. Or let Brian within hundred yards of her. And she would never, ever forgive her for ruining her relationship with Shelly.

Chapter 50

Despite his firm intentions, he still hated to leave Aurora. He'd felt so comfortable, sheltered, secure and surrounded by family. Knowing he'd have to face Valerie made it even harder.

He'd spoken to her only once, since he'd been here. It was more of a travel itinerary than a conversation, but he knew eventually they'd have to talk.

He stood out in the driveway, deliberately procrastinating. David sensed his reluctance and pulled him aside. "Alex, come back anytime you want. For as long as you want..."

"Well, guys," he addressed his sons. "I guess I better be going if I'm going to catch my plane." He hugged them both and then moved to Christy. Embracing her tightly, he whispered in her ear. "Take care of my son. Please?"

She returned the embrace and whispered back. "I promise."

He looked back for one last glimpse of them, waving, before speeding toward the airport.

He stopped just inside the driveway and gazed at the house. Even this close to winter, a hedge of red hibiscus bordering the walk bloomed profusely, as did the pink oleanders near the front door. He could see, from this

distance, that a couple of roof shingles were curling and needed replacing.

The house could stand a coat of paint. It was starting the chip around the eaves. He smiled to himself, remembering the last time they'd painted. It must be close to fifteen years ago. It had been a very long process. The first step was combing through hundreds of home decorating magazines, looking for colors that 'worked' together. Shelly favored pastels, while he liked browns and grays.

They both fell in love with the house in an advertisement, sunny yellow with deep green trim and white accents. The second phase was getting the materials at a bargain. They haunted the paint section at the local home improvement center, where mixing errors sold for two dollars a gallon, finally amassing twenty gallons of yellow variations and four gallons of dark greens.

They poured all twenty gallons into a garbage can and mixed it together with a broom handle. After adding a gallon or two of white, they had an exact match to the house in the picture. They did the same with the green and were ready to begin step three.

Painting the house was far from easy, especially with a toddler and a four-year-old 'helping'. He smiled again at the memory. For a while everything was yellow, their hair and fingernails, the front door handle, the refrigerator, the dog. Even the bathtub had a yellow tint.

He put the truck in gear and continued down the driveway. "I wish I could turn back time," he said aloud. The sound of his voice startled him. "Three years," he

continued silently. Before New York. Before Capone. Before Upper Echelon. He parked the truck and closed his eyes, imagining Shelly in the house making dinner, Jason and Jeremy watching TV in the den.

The front door slammed and Valerie walked across the lawn toward him.

“You’re back,” she said, as he got out of the truck.

He nodded.

“Not talking?”

He set the suitcase on the ground and turned to face her. “I’m not leaving you,” he informed her. “But I would be interested in hearing your version of the story.”

“Fine,” she replied. Finally, somebody wanted to hear her side of the story.

The nagging feeling in the pit of her stomach would not go away. Monica knew what she had to do. She dialed the number nervously but hung up before it began to ring. What in the world could she say to her? And would Shelly even be willing to hear her out? After debating another half an hour, she decided to call David instead.

“Monica? What’s up?” He was surprised to hear from her. While Brian called frequently, Monica never had.

She got right to the point. “I need some advice. I’m sure you’ve heard all stuff about Valerie?” He told her he had. “Do you think it’s true?”

“Probably.”

“I think so, too. I talked to a couple of people in Rocky Creek and they confirmed some of the things.”

“Well... There you go.”

“The thing is, David. I need to talk to Shelly. I’m sure she won’t forgive me. I was just wondering if you thought she’d even talk to me...”

“I think she would talk to you. And probably forgive you. But she won’t be home for another couple of weeks.”

“Oh, David! What a fool I am. What a god damned fool! I’m sitting here trying to figure who’s worse, me or Valerie. I all but fucked him for her!”

David smiled at her usual choice wording. “Come on, Monica. What could you have done?”

“I could have stuck by her. Like you did.”

“Call her,” he encouraged.

She sat across from him at the table to better read his expression. “I won’t lie to you, Alex. I have made some mistakes in the past,” she began. “I was young and stupid when I was got pregnant with Rich and not much smarter when I had Adam. Both of their fathers were losers and treated me like crap. I didn’t want the boys to know what kind of men they were. So I made up a story, about my husband being killed in an accident. I told it so many times, that I started to believe it...”

She wondered if tears would help and effortlessly produced a ready flow. “After that, I was so hurt and

afraid,” she sobbed. “I thought married men were safer somehow. They wouldn't want any real commitment from me.”

She wiped her eyes with the corner of her shirt and drew a shuddering breath. “It took a while, but I figured out that it wasn't right and I stopped dating altogether. Until I met David...”

“It never occurred to you to tell me about any of this?”

“I'm not proud of my past, Alex. It's not something I really wanted you, or anybody else, to know about.”

“You don't consider that lying?”

Looking down at the floor, she mumbled. “Yes, it's lying.”

“I'm glad to hear you say that. Because I'd have a real problem if you didn't. We have one chance, and one chance only, to make this work. And the key is honesty. From here on out, we have to be completely honest with each other. Agreed?”

She nodded. “Agreed.”

“Okay, then I want to know, is the baby mine?”

So he doubted even that. “Yes. Do you want to take a blood test?”

“No. I just wanted to be sure.”

Jason shifted slightly on the couch. The weight of her head in his lap was putting his leg to sleep. “It seemed like my Dad didn't want to leave,” he commented.

“He’s got a lot going on,” Christy agreed.

“Do you think they’ll ever get back together?”

She sat up, straddling him to look directly into his eyes. “You know they won’t,” she said gently. She leaned closer, their noses less than an inch apart. “Too much has happened...”

Their lips met. He wrapped his arms around her, crushing her breasts against his chest. She thrust her tongue into his mouth and ground her hips against his rising erection. He could feel himself losing control, and abruptly pulled away.

She was both relieved and disappointed by his show of restraint.

She came in as Alex was getting undressed. He sat on the edge of the bed in his underwear. She stripped naked and stood before the mirror. Now seven months pregnant, a large bulge curved from her pubic hair to her belly button. Her breasts were fuller, the nipples large and dark. She lightly fingered each one erect, watching him in the mirror.

Her hands moved from her breasts down her stomach, and into her pubic hair. He stared as she opened the lips of her vagina and gently thumbed her clitoris, her eyes on his reflection.

Finally, he could stand it no longer. He went to her, pressing his erection against her naked behind. She turned and knelt before him, stripping off his boxer shorts.

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Any efforts at control, on his part, were canceled out by the heat of her lips on his engorged penis.

Chapter 51

“Marry me, Capone!” the young woman screamed.

“Sorry,” he said into the microphone. “I’m holding out for Shelly.” The crowd cheered.

“He doesn’t know when to give up,” she complained into her own mike. The audience roared.

Their on-stage banter delighted fans and critics alike. Brent granted as many interviews as possible in between performances, but requests continued to pile up. Tickets to the remaining five shows of the tour were worth a small fortune.

What he wouldn’t have given to add a few more cities to the tour! But Shelly remained firm, especially as the last concert grew nearer. She was ready to head home.

Chapter 52

He didn't know whether to be tolerant or tough with them. Because neither approach seemed to work. Rich was angry and hostile, swearing at his mother, cursing Alex. Adam, stoic and withdrawn, rebuffing any attempt at interaction.

He knew Valerie was also at her wits end, but he felt they should try harder to draw them out, get them to talk about their feelings. It was the source of many arguments between them.

Valerie knew she had to work on rebuilding their trust, but dealing with them was a nightmare. Rich called her all kinds of terrible names and Adam shut her out completely. She didn't know what Alex expected her to do.

The situation came to a head one evening. "What did you say?" Alex demanded, passing Rich in the kitchen.

"I said you're an asshole," he replied matter-of-factly.

"Why would you say that?"

"Think about it." Rich smiled smugly. "You left 'the bomb' to be with 'a bomb'. Only an asshole would make such a mistake."

It was all he could to keep from knocking the hell out of him. From that day on, he left it up to Valerie to deal with her sons.

Chapter 53

He cocked his head at the sound of a knock at the front door and glanced at the clock. Almost midnight.

“Jason,” he greeted his nephew with concern. “Is something wrong?”

“Can we talk?”

David led him to the kitchen. “Want something to drink?” he offered.

Jason shook his head and sat down at the island bar. “I... Well, me and Christy... We want... We’re ready to have sex.”

David nodded and waited for him to continue. “I wanted to know what you thought about it. If you had any advice...”

He bit his lip to keep from laughing out loud. Jason wanted advice from him? The kid was in a more mature relationship than he’d had in his entire life! After a moment he asked, “Why didn’t you talk to your Dad about this while he was here?”

“I wanted to, but then I thought he’d find some way to blame it on my mom.”

“Don’t you want to talk to her?”

Jason looked at him skeptically. “Come on, Uncle Dave. Mom’s great, but...”

Okay then. It was up to him. “Sex can be a beautiful experience,” he began awkwardly. “Especially if you are truly in love with the person.”

“I have no doubt about that. I love her.”

He nodded. “I know that.”

“So you think we’re ready?”

Frankly he couldn’t believe they’d waited as long as they had. He thought of his current on again/off again relationship. He and Amber had sex within an hour of meeting. “It doesn’t matter what I think, Jason. It’s what you and Christy think. You’ll know when the time is right.”

“Okay.” He shifted uncomfortably. “Can you give me any pointers on... You know... How?”

David ran his hands through his hair. He knew he should be instructing him to use a condom, warning him about unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. But he knew these kids. They were deeply committed to each other.

“Put her satisfaction above yours,” he directed. “Don’t be afraid to ask what pleases her.”

Jason nodded solemnly.

He added, with some embarrassment. “And remember that women need to be ‘warmed up’. You can’t just... jump right on.”

He could see that it made his uncle uneasy to talk about sex with him and wondered why. David was one of the biggest players around. Ever since he could remember, his uncle had dated beautiful women.

He let him off the hook, “Thanks, Uncle Dave,” he said, rising. “You’ve been a lot of help.”

After he’d gone, David reflected over the conversation. Had he done the right thing? Should he

have advised Jason to wait until after marriage? Should he tell Shelly about their talk?

Chapter 54

Her eyes blurred with tears as they entered Aurora. It was so good to be home. When no one came out to get her bags, the driver carried them inside. The house was quiet. Shelly looked at the clock, wondering if she was early. It was after five, so actually, she was a little late.

She headed back outside, crossing the vast lawn. Her calls of greeting echoed through the emptiness at David's. After two months on tour, she would think they'd be more anxious to see her! She frowned. If they weren't at Christy's...

An enormous 'welcome home' sign on the front porch restored her faith. David flung open the door just as she raised her hand to knock. "*Surprise!*" shouted Jason, Jeremy and Christy, behind him. Followed by, "*Happy Thanksgiving!*"

She looked around in astonishment. Two large pumpkins provided the base for a table overflowing with delicious looking desserts: apple and pumpkin pies, strawberry cheesecake, brownies and assorted cookies. The dining room table had been beautifully set with burnt orange linen napkins and candles, an elaborate cornucopia centerpiece, and miniature pumpkins at each setting. A roast turkey sat, ready to carve, on the sideboard.

"We thought we'd have Thanksgiving early," Jeremy explained. "So we could have it with you first."

They'd agreed that the boys would spend Thanksgiving with Alex and Christmas with Shelly. Because she'd have less than a week with them before they left for Sunnydale, she was particularly dreading the holiday. She hadn't thought of celebrating early; it was brilliant!

Christy bustled about in the kitchen, sending Jason and Jeremy out with platter after platter of steaming food, as David carved the bird. They refused Shelly's offers of assistance, insisting she 'relax'. Finally, she was satisfied everything was perfect and they sat down to eat.

"I'd like to say grace this year," Jason volunteered. "If it's okay with you, Mom?"

She nodded. They joined hands and lowered their heads

"Dear Lord, I'd like to give thanks for the food we are about to eat," he began. "And for the family that I'm able to share it with. My mother, who in the past year, has proven herself to be wiser and stronger than I ever imagined. My Uncle David, without his advice I'd be a mess. Jeremy. It's not often your brother is also your best friend. And, Christy. Lord, I know you put her on this earth to be my wife and soul mate. Thank you for making her perfect. Amen."

"I'll stay right here," Rich replied firmly.

"No," Alex corrected him. "You'll come to my parents' house with the rest of the family."

“What family?” Rich demanded. “You, your mistress, and her two bastard sons?”

“Go to your room!” Valerie shrieked.

He stared at her for several moments, contempt clearly evident in his eyes, before turning slowly toward the stairs. They watched him go.

“It’s probably better if he stays home,” she whispered. Alex nodded, resignedly.

Shelly intended to go back to bed, after seeing the kids off to school, but ended up puttering around in the kitchen instead. She thought about making something special for dinner but remembered they had enough ‘early Thanksgiving’ leftovers to feed an army. Christy had outdone herself.

The telephone ringing broke into her thoughts. “Hello?”

“Shelly, it’s Monica.”

“Monica?” she asked, surprised. “Is everything okay?”

“No, Shelly. Everything’s not okay. Everything sucks! I found out that I screwed over my best friend in the entire world to hang out with a conniving slut. So I’m calling that former best friend... to let her know that I realize that I’m a back-stabbing bitch. Even though I denied it for a long time.”

She thought about the many times she’d cursed Monica, in the past few months. And about the many

times she'd missed her. "We were all taken in by her. Us, and a lot of other people, it seems like."

She could hear her crying on the other end. "Monica. Come on. It's okay."

She drew a ragged breath. "Shelly, I knew what was going on," she confessed brokenly. "I knew she was pregnant before Alex did."

"Are you looking for my forgiveness? You have it."

Again she could tell Monica was crying. "Shelly... Thank you."

"It's okay. Call me again sometime, huh?"

"I'll do that."

"Promise?"

"I promise," Monica assured her.

"You're just saying you have plans," he complained. "You already told me your kids are going to Florida." His lower lip thrust out in an adorable, boyish, pout.

"They are. I have plans with Cathy."

"She can come with us!" His eyes lit up at the thought of spending Thanksgiving with *two* beautiful women.

"She's cooking dinner," Shelly explained. "I'm finally going to meet her mystery man."

"Let me come with you, then," he pleaded. "Otherwise I'll be all alone, eating fast food in front of the TV."

Capone had thrown together parties attended by hundreds of people and catered with the finest foods, at the snap of his fingers. She knew that by Thursday he could organize the most elaborate Thanksgiving banquet. He wouldn't need to rely on 'fast food' and the TV.

Still, it was hard to deny him the simple request of a place to spend the holiday. "I'll see if Cathy has room for another guest," she promised.

Chapter 55

“Something has got to be done about them,” Alex declared firmly after his latest run in with Rich.

“Like what?”

“Boot camp? Reform school? I don’t know.”

“You can’t just send them away!”

“And we can’t just let it go on.”

“You have to give them some time, Alex! They’ve had a lot of adjusting to do.”

“We all have,” he pointed out. “Adam and Rich need to act more maturely...”

“How mature was it to go running off to Aurora?” she interrupted. “And what about staying home from work every day because you’re afraid that the guys at the job site might gossip about you? Is that what you consider mature?”

“We’re not talking about me, Valerie,” he reminded her.

“No, we never do. Do we?”

He shook his head. Every discussion they had turned into an argument or led to sex. Couldn’t they ever just talk about their problems?

Chapter 56

“I’m glad you’re traveling with them,” Shelly confided. “Even though they’re almost grown, I still worry about them flying alone, especially during the holidays.”

“I worry more about leaving *you* alone, especially during the holidays.”

“I’ll be fine,” she assured him. “I’m spending the night at Cathy’s tomorrow night and maybe Thanksgiving night, too. You guys will be home Saturday!”

David knew he should be getting to bed, if he planned on catching their seven a.m. flight in the morning, but made no move to leave. It was the first time he’d had her to himself since she’d been back. He cherished these private moments together, just talking.

“Did I tell you Monica called?” she asked happily. “We’re friends again!”

“That’s good. You two were so close, for so many years, it was a shame that you weren’t talking.”

“Speaking of talking... I wanted to thank you for talking to Jason. I know it must have been uncomfortable. Even Alex has trouble talking to them about the ‘sex’ thing”.

“He told you?” He’d agonized over whether or not to divulge his conversation with Jason, finally deciding that keeping the boy’s confidence was very important to their future relationship.

“Yeah. Of course.”

“Did you tell him to wait?”

“No,” she replied. “Did you?”

“No,” he admitted. “But afterward I thought I should have.”

“Do you think he would have listened?”

He shook his head.

“Then why bother? Remember what you said, ‘accept or alienate’? That’s my new motto.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I told him to let his heart guide him to what was right.”

He smiled. Wasn’t that just about what he’d advised Jason?

Alex picked them up from the airport, dropping Christy off at the Brandts’ and proceeding to his parents’ house. Irene clucked over the two boys, proclaiming they’d each grown a foot and would be grown men before she got to see them again. She chided David about being ‘too skinny’ and demanded to know what he’d been eating.

“Well, I’ll have to make up for that while I’m here, won’t I? With some good southern cooking.” Irene took him literally and began rummaging through the refrigerator. As Alex and the boys left, she was setting a plate of chicken and dumplings before him.

He drove slowly toward the house, wanting them to himself for a little while longer. “Are you guys hungry?” he asked. He knew what their answer would be.

“Why don’t we stop at Fergies?” Their old favorite.

“Okay,” they chorused, more to humor him than any real desire to go. They’d long outgrown Fergies. After lingering over a pizza and playing a couple of video games, Alex knew he couldn’t put off the inevitable any longer and headed home.

Valerie greeted them warmly. Jeremy accepted her hug but Jason couldn’t help drawing away. She dropped her hands to her sides and turned to Alex. “What took so long? I’ve got a big dinner waiting?”

“We stopped for something on the way home.”

“I told you I was making dinner, Alex.”

He shrugged. “I forgot.”

She spun around and stomped toward the house. Jason and Jeremy exchanged uneasy glances before following their father up the walk.

It was kind of a shock to see the changes Valerie’s had made. She’d completely redecorated, using many items from her old house. Alex followed her into the kitchen.

“Don’t screw this up, Valerie,” he warned.

“Me? You’re the one who decided to stop when you knew I was making a special dinner.”

“I just wanted to spend a little time alone with them. I’m sorry.”

“A little consideration for me would be nice.”

He nodded, his jaw clenched tightly. He wanted so much for this trip to be enjoyable for the boys. And didn’t need it to start off with a fight between him and Valerie.

As if sensing his thoughts, Valerie sought a compromise. "I bet you didn't get any dessert at Fergies. You think the boys would go for some German chocolate cake?"

His jaw loosened, shoulders relaxed. "I've never seen them turn it down," he smiled. "I'll go ask."

Jeremy wolfed down two huge slices of the cake in less time than it took for Jason to finish one small one. "Where's Adam and Rich?" he inquired.

Valerie answered. "Adam's out, Rich is upstairs."

"How come he didn't come down for some cake?"

She looked to Alex helplessly. What could she say? The truth was that Rich rarely came downstairs at all. At least not when anybody else was around.

"Rich is having some problems," Alex answered his son. "He's gotten kind of antisocial."

They wondered what he meant. "Let's go say hi to him," Jeremy suggested.

Alex held his breath as they headed upstairs.

Their knock was greeted with, "What do you want?"

"Rich," Jason said through the closed door. "It's me, Jason."

"So?"

"So we're anxious to see you. What's up with the locked door?"

They could hear him moving around and, finally, the lock springing back. He flung open the door and beckoned them inside. A strong odor of marijuana permeated the room, causing Jeremy to cough softly.

Jason was floored by the change in his appearance. Gone was the shaggy brown hair. His head was now shaved clean with the exception of a long, thin ponytail hanging halfway down his back. It had been tinted a vivid green. His left eyebrow was pierced in three different places, each sporting a tiny gold hoop earring. Always lean, he'd lost at least twenty pounds.

He lit up a cigarette, inhaled deeply and eyed them appraisingly. Clean cut Jason, in his Nike sneakers, blue jeans and white, button-up Ralph Lauren shirt; open at the collar to reveal a thick gold chain. And Jeremy, in the baggy Jncos that were so popular with the kids his age.

"From the pages of *GQ*, step Jason and Jeremy St. John..." he said snidely. Exhaling a cloud of smoke into their faces, he continued. "To grace the life of their bastard step-brother."

"Hey, Rich. It's not like that..."

He snorted loudly. "It's not? Tell me you don't think my mom's a whore!" He didn't give them time to respond. "She stole your father!"

"My Dad was just as responsible," Jason responded. "We've forgiven him. You need to forgive her."

"Alex was a lonely guy who was a perfect target for my Mom. I'm not saying he isn't the biggest asshole in the world. I'm just saying that my Mom has had a lot of practice in breaking up marriages. I should forgive that?" His hand shook as he drew deeply on the cigarette.

He searched for something to say. Some way to comfort him. It would be hard to defend Valerie. Any sense of forgiveness he'd felt toward her had disappeared at the sight of Rich's obvious pain. Couldn't they see that he needed help?

"Maybe 'forgive' is not what I meant," he began slowly. "Maybe 'forget' is a better word. Or at least not let it rule your life..."

"I'll tell you what to forget," he sneered. "Forget about us being one big happy family. We're not the friggin' Brady Bunch! If you want to be a family with Slut and Asshole, go right ahead. I don't need any of you!" He glared at them for a moment before adding. "Now get the fuck out of here!"

Yanking open the door, he practically shoved them out.

"Oh, my God!" Jeremy exclaimed. "He's sure changed. I wonder what Adam's like."

Knowing Adam's tendency to clam up in the face of adversity, Jason could only imagine.

Rich sat back on the bed and lit another cigarette. Did those dumbfucks think they could just meld together into one big family? They had better get a dose of reality orientation.

Wait until they got together for Thanksgiving dinner! Irene finally had only good things to say about Shelly. It wasn't that she suddenly approved of her more. It was just that she approved of Valerie so much less. Monica wasn't speaking to Valerie, so Alex wasn't

speaking to Monica. Which caused considerable strain between him and Brian.

And wasn't David supposed to be there, too? They all knew how he felt about Valerie. It ought to be quite a show. Rich was having second thoughts about his refusal to attend.

"I'm really glad you're here," she exclaimed, "to help me with the cooking and everything!" It had been years since she'd prepared anything more complicated than a sandwich, but Cathy was determined that Thanksgiving dinner be perfect. "You have made turkey before, haven't you?"

Shelly laughed. "Of course! You're really worried about impressing this guy, aren't you? He must really be something."

"He is! I'm completely head over heels in love with him," she confessed.

She'd seen her sister with many different men. Each time Cathy had wondered if he was 'the one', but stopped short of falling in love.

"Shelly..." She touched her arm lightly. "Just so you don't freak out tomorrow, it's Tom."

She didn't make the connection. "Tom Meyers," Cathy elaborated.

Shelly's jaw dropped. Tom Meyers was one hell of a catch, one of New York's most eligible bachelors. Handsome, rich *and* a nice guy.

They waited for dinner to be served, two separate camps, crowded into Nick and Irene's small living room. Monica and Brian's brood on one side, Alex and Valerie's on the other. Monica talked loudly about her last phone conversation with Shelly, purposefully irritating Valerie. And how happy she sounded, just to needle Alex. Brian finally insisted she cut it out.

David cornered Rich outside the bathroom door, herding him into the small guest bedroom. "Is this how you spend the money I send? Hair dye, piercing holes in your body? And drugs? Adam is so stoned he doesn't even know where he is!"

"I know, I'm sorry." He seemed genuinely remorseful, but then added conversationally "Why don't you just send a pistol next time? Then we can blow our brains out and get it over with."

He winced. "Hey Rich, *I'm* sorry. I shouldn't have come down on you about the money. It's just... You've changed. I'm worried about you." He wrapped his arms around the boy's too thin shoulders.

It was the first time he'd allowed himself to be comforted. To his horror, he began to cry. Great sobs wracked his body. David needed no words to convey his concern and support, he just held him tightly until the flow of tears ebbed.

He pulled away, embarrassed. "I don't know why I did that," he muttered.

“It’s okay,” David replied gently. “We can all get a little overwhelmed at times.”

Rich bolted from the room.

The mask of hatred returned to his face, as they sat down for dinner. A pointed comment about his hairstyle, from Irene, set him off. “Old bitch,” he mumbled, loud enough for everyone to hear.

Brian shot Alex a warning look. He wasn’t about to have some snotty kid call his mother a bitch. At Thanksgiving dinner. In her own house.

“Shut the fuck up,” Alex ordered angrily.

Valerie glared at him angrily. Irene had started it! “Why don’t you shut the fuck up?” she demanded.

The younger kids giggled uncomfortably at curse words being said in front of their grandparents.

Nick interrupted the exchange by addressing Alex. “I won’t have this language in my home. If you can’t control your *family*, maybe you should leave.”

His jaw tightly clenched; he rose angrily. “No sweat, Dad. We’ll be on our way.”

David tried to stop him. “Come on Alex, Jason and Jeremy came here for Thanksgiving dinner...”

“Which is pretty much ruined now,” Alex pointed out.

He placed a hand on each boy’s shoulder. “They’re staying,” he said firmly.

Alex nodded, furious. “Come on, Valerie.” He grabbed her hand and stomped out the door. Rich followed, smirking. Adam, dazed and unfocused, trailed behind.

The sisters prepared an enormous Thanksgiving feast. Cathy proudly offered each dish for their approval and blushed when Tom pronounced the meal ‘delicious’.

Capone wasn’t a bit surprised that Tom was Cathy’s ‘mystery man’. Not much that went on at RJF got past him. “Why didn’t you say anything?” she asked him after dinner.

“It was just a rumor,” he whispered, as the couple rejoined them.

“Well, it won’t feel much like Thanksgiving in LA,” Capone remarked. “It’s supposed to be like seventy-eight degrees.”

“You going to LA?” Tom questioned.

“Yeah, I’m headed out there tomorrow.”

“What’s going on out there?”

“Business,” he replied shortly.

“We’re headed out, too. To Aspen.”

“Tom’s teaching me to ski,” Cathy added. And then asked with concern, “What about you, Shelly? You’ll be all alone. Do you want to come with us?”

She shook her head. The last thing she wanted to be was the third wheel on Cathy and Tom’s romantic weekend. “I’m actually looking forward to some peace and quiet. The kids won’t be home until Saturday.”

Irene slammed the door behind them. “Good riddance,” she announced to no one in particular. Nick nodded grimly.

Outside, Alex grabbed Rich roughly by the shirt. “Are you happy now?” he demanded. “Have you humiliated us enough yet?”

Rich eyed him contemptuously. “I don’t know. Have I?”

He twisted the fabric in his large hand, causing the boy’s collar to tighten around his neck. Pushing against his chest, he backed him against the van. “Yes! You have! And it stops now!” His face was inches away, angry and red, eyes blazing.

“Get your hands off him,” Valerie commanded coldly. “Let him go now, or I’ll call the police.”

Her words penetrated his fury. He released his grip, shaking off the cloud of rage that had descended on him. “I’m sorry,” he said shakily, afraid of how close he’d come to hurting the boy.

Chapter 57

Watching Tom and Cathy together, Shelly decided not to spend another night at her sister's. She didn't want to stand in the way of them capping off a wonderful Thanksgiving with a night of lovemaking.

She hitched a ride home with Capone. "Come to LA with me, Shelly," he pleaded, as the limo made tracks for Aurora.

She shook her head. "I told you, I'm looking forward to some peace and quiet before the kids get back home."

"Then spend the night with me tonight." He moved in to kiss her but she pushed away.

"Capone, listen. I've been doing a lot of thinking." He groaned. "You are one of my best friends in the whole world." He groaned again, this time louder. "And I'm so sorry if I led you on..."

Childishly, he covered his ears with his hands. "I don't want to hear anything except that you love me! That one day you'll marry me!" He lowered his hands and cocked his head, as if waiting for her to say the words.

"It would never work," she said gently. "We're too different."

"Opposites attract," he pointed out.

"Maybe. But do they stay together? And I have two sons to think about."

"I'd be a great step-father..."

“But when you have kids you can’t just take off any time you want,” she interrupted him. “Or go out partying every night.”

“I’d cut down,” he said sincerely.

“And you couldn’t do drugs. Or drink too much.”

“I could quit,” he promised.

“And Capone, I would never accept you seeing other women.”

He knew his love for her was genuine when he couldn’t bring himself to say it. That he would give up other women.

Chapter 58

Alex agreed that the boys should spend the night at their grandparents', but grew angry when David explained that they'd changed their travel plans. The mere mention of Shelly's name had netted them four tickets during one of the busiest traveling days of the year.

"Come on, David. I'm sorry about what happened today, but there's no reason for them to leave early."

"Alex, you and Valerie need to get it together."

"Are you sure you want to do this? Because I'm going to have a real hard time forgiving you..."

"The last thing I want is for us to be enemies, Alex. I just want what's best. For Jason and Jeremy. For everybody."

"Oh, yeah. Saint David!"

"Think about it, Alex! You've got a relationship with them now. Do you want risk that?"

"No," he admitted grudgingly.

"And Alex, take a good look at Rich and Adam. They've got some major problems."

"Give me a break, David. We're doing the best we can."

"We booked you a flight, but you can stay until Saturday if you want," he offered.

"I go where you go," Christy stated firmly.

“Well, if you wanted to stay with your family...”

“You are my family, Jason.”

“I love you,” he whispered, before hanging up the phone. He wished they were back in Aurora now, knowing she was right there in the cottage when he needed her.

She slept late, ate a light breakfast and took a luxurious, hour-long bath. Still dressed in her favorite terry cloth robe, she sat down with the morning paper. The front hall intercom beeped, signaling someone had passed through the gate. She peeked through the front window.

David’s Jeep Cherokee roared down the drive and stopped in front of the house. She ran out to greet them. “What are you guys doing here? I didn’t expect you until tomorrow!”

“We’ll let Uncle David fill you in,” Jason replied. “While we carry in the luggage.”

She drew him into the kitchen and supplied a hot cup of coffee. “What happened?”

“Well, Rich called my mom an old bitch just as we were sitting down to dinner.” Shelly’s eyes widened. “That started an argument between Alex and Valerie. Then my Dad asked them all to leave.”

“Wow! That tops the Thanksgiving that Jason got a pea stuck up his nose!”

He laughed. “I’ll say!”

“Why did Rich start in on your Mom?”

“Oh, Shelly,” he sighed. “You should see them. It would break your heart. Adam was white as a sheet, zonked out on drugs. Rich asked me to send him a pistol, so he could blow his brains out.”

“Oh my God!” she gasped. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m flying back to Sunnydale in the morning. I’ll try to arrange some kind of psychiatric help for them.”

As usual, when she needed some kind of referral, she consulted Brent. He had more contacts than anyone she knew. She phoned him at home the next morning. “I need a good therapist.”

“We all do, honey!”

“I’m serious, Brent.” She filled him in on the situation. “Somebody that treats young adults would be ideal,” she concluded. “Can you help me out?”

“Let me get this straight. The woman who stole your husband? Her two sons? That’s who you want to hire a therapist for?”

“Yeah,” she replied. “And if one word about this makes it to print, I’ll know exactly where it came from. And I’ll never forgive you! I’ll walk away from RJF and tell Tom the reason why.”

“Let me make some calls. I’ll get back to you this afternoon.”

She reached him on his cell phone as he left the airport. “David, I just talked to a Dr. Kramer, from Evergreen Woods in Orlando. It’s the top psychiatric center in the state. They deal only with teenagers and young adults. He could see the boys today.”

He marveled at her ability to secure an appointment at the top psychiatric center in the state, within hours. “Thank you, Shelly. I’ll see that they get there.”

But first he had to convince Alex, and Valerie.

Alex opened the door slowly and eyed him suspiciously. “I thought you went back to Aurora.”

“I came back,” David explained. “I wanted to talk to you and Valerie.”

“What about?”

“Adam and Rich.”

“What about them?”

“Why don’t you get Valerie?” he suggested. “Then we can all discuss it.”

He didn’t like his brother’s attitude and was about to refuse, when she came in.

“Hello, Valerie,” David said evenly. “I was just asking Alex if we could talk a while, about Rich and Adam.”

Alex glared at him furiously. “What about them?” she asked.

“I think they need some psychological help.”

“What?” she demanded. “Who the hell are you to tell me what my sons need?”

“You know how much I care about them.”

“You need to know when to keep your nose out of other people’s business,” Alex told him. “You always seem to be butting in.”

“My kids are not going to see some shrink!” Valerie added.

“Will you two open your eyes?” David pleaded. “Did you even notice that Adam was stoned out of his mind Thanksgiving? Can’t you see Rich is ready to explode?”

“You’re imagining things,” Valerie huffed. “They’re just having trouble adjusting.”

“Did you know that Rich asked me for a gun? So he could blow his head off?”

Her eyes widened. “And who knows what kind of stuff Adam is getting high on. You could find him dead tomorrow!”

“He asked you for a gun?” Alex asked, horrified.

He nodded. “You can’t afford not to take him seriously. There’s more than one way to commit suicide. He doesn’t need a gun.”

“They’d never agree.” Valerie murmured. “To see a psychiatrist...”

“If I could get them to agree,” David interjected. “Would you let them see Dr. Kramer? He’s supposed to be the best in the state.”

She nodded slowly.

Alex took him upstairs and tapped on the bedroom door. “Rich?” No answer. He knocked harder, still no answer. “Rich?”

David stepped forward. “Rich? Adam? It’s David. Can I talk to you?”

The door opened slowly. Alex noticed the odor immediately. When had they started smoking pot? He realized they could have been doing it up here for months. That and a lot more. He never made the effort to come into their bedroom.

“You stay,” Rich pulled David into the room. “You go,” he slammed the door on Alex.

“I thought you went back to New York,” was his greeting.

“I came back. To see you.”

“What for?”

“I want to take you to see a psychologist.”

“Hear that, Adam?” he guffawed. Adam sat in on the bed, a little more alert than when David had last seen him. “He wants us to see some shrink!”

“Why?” Adam asked blankly.

“Because I’m worried about you, damn it! Why the hell do you think?”

He had their attention. “Rich, you’re mad at the world. And Adam’s built a wall around himself! Now, I am *not* going to give up on you two. You have an appointment with the best damn psychiatrist in the state of Florida. And I’m going to see that you make it!”

“Okay,” Adam answered simply.

David turned to Rich. “What do you say?”

“Let’s go.”

They parked in front of a large brick building, surrounded by immaculate grounds, and walked down a long corridor, looking for Dr. Kramer's office. The place bustled with activity. A group of young men shot billiards in a room near the front door. A noisy game of cards was being played farther down the hall. Out back, they could see a basketball game in progress. One entire wing appeared to be classrooms, including a huge room devoted entirely to computer workstations.

In another area, a group of young people sat in a circle talking. A middle-aged man led the discussion. He rose and walked toward them, extending his hand to David. "Mr. St. John, I presume? I've been expecting you." He introduced himself to Adam and Rich. "Let me just wrap up the group and I'll be right with you."

He asked to meet with David first. "I spoke with Mrs. St. John," he began. "Your wife?"

"No, my sister-in-law," David corrected him. "It's kind of complicated. I was once engaged to Valerie, Rich and Adam's mother. Now my brother is planning to marry her."

He nodded impassively. He'd dealt with all kinds. "So what exactly is going on with the two boys?"

"Well, my sister-in-law is really famous. So, when my brother got Valerie pregnant, it was in the paper and everything. Then this article comes out, slamming Valerie, and the boys find out she lied to them more than she told them the truth."

"And they're angry about this?"

“They’re more than angry. They’re devastated. Rich went through a total personality change, got expelled from school, lost a ton of weight. Adam’s into drugs. Rich threatened suicide...”

The word brought alarm to the doctor’s face. “I’ll see them now,” he declared. David was banished to the waiting room.

It was more than three hours before they came out. Rich was strangely silent. Adam’s eyes were puffy and red. Dr. Kramer beckoned him into his office.

“The boys have suffered severe emotional trauma,” he pronounced. He recommended in-patient therapy. At least sixty days, possible more. “We’d need a consent for treatment,” he concluded. “Can you get the mother here?”

“Can I talk to them?”

“Of course,” the doctor replied. “Let me know when you’ve come to a decision.”

He gently explained Dr. Kramer’s recommendation. “He thinks you need in-patient therapy...”

“He told us all of this already,” Rich interrupted.

“You realize it means you won’t be home for a couple months?” He had to make sure the boys knew what they were agreeing to.

They nodded. “What about our clothes and stuff?” Rich asked.

He promised he’d take care of it. He’d buy them a whole new wardrobe if that’s what it took.

“You had them committed?” she asked, horrified.

“No, Valerie. They agreed willingly.”

“They agreed to go stay in this looney house for two months?” She couldn’t believe it was true.

“It’s a really nice place. They feel comfortable with this doctor. You need to come down and sign the consent.”

“Okay,” she agreed finally. David provided her with a list of items the boys had requested from home.

“I’ll stick around until you get there,” he offered.

“Don’t bother,” she told him. “I think you’ve done enough for one day.”

He notified Dr. Kramer of their decision and assured him that Valerie was on her way to sign the consent forms. Afterward, he stopped in the front office to settle the bill. He knew Alex hadn’t received any of his divorce settlement and this place looked like it charged pretty steep fees. But he wasn’t about to let a twenty-percent co-payment interfere with the boys receiving treatment.

The girl in the front office provided him with the financial forms, as well as a brochure of the facility. He read through it quickly. Evergreen Woods was a privately owned venture. It had won national recognition in the treatment of teenage emotional problems; including drug and alcohol abuse.

It was considered, not a mental health institution, but a school. And billed itself accordingly. Because of this, the brochure explained, they did not accept insurance

assignments and all fees were due prior to service. A schedule of the 'tuition' fees followed.

He nearly shit at the figures. \$16,000 a week apiece! With minimum treatment of sixty days, that was at least \$250,000. If they had to stay longer... There was no way he could swing this.

He approached the girl at the desk. "It says here that all tuition must be paid in advance..."

"That's correct, sir."

"But there's no way I can come up with this kind of money right now."

She wondered how he had gotten to the first appointment. Evergreen Woods had a very strict selection process. They were the best, but you had to be able to pay. She consulted the file briefly. "It's already been taken care of," she reported.

He arrived back in Aurora that evening. She searched his eyes for some indication of what had transpired.

"They went willingly," he informed her. "Alex and Valerie didn't put up much of a fight, either."

"Good."

"You should see the place, Shelly. It's top of the line, all the way. They'll be there about two months."

His face was lined with exhaustion; she knew he'd had a pretty rough day. "You're a hell of a guy, David St. John," she lauded, thinking how lucky Adam and Rich were to have him on their side.

“You, too,” he remembered his dismay upon learning the tuition at Evergreen Woods. And his relief at discovering that it had been taken care of.

Chapter 59

Originally, she'd hired a crew to do the Christmas decorating. But David and the boys had protested, wanting to do it themselves. "There'll be so much to buy, so much to do. Are you sure you want to take on a project like this?" she questioned. "And then take it all down again later?"

They insisted they did, and headed into town with Christy, in search of holiday décor. Somewhere between the house and the store, the project became a competition. It was decided that they would hold a contest for the best decorated house. Jason's Bronco was loaded from stem to stern when they returned.

She slammed the phone down angrily. "They still won't let me talk to them!"

Alex rubbed her shoulder sympathetically. The boys had been at Evergreen Woods for more than two weeks and, still, Dr. Kramer had not permitted visits or phone calls.

He was starting to get a little worried himself. It seemed like a top-notch place, but who knew what went on behind closed doors? How could phone calls, or even visits, from their mother interfere with therapy? He placed a call to his brother, outlining his concerns.

David didn't know how to tell him. "Alex," he began gently. "Right now Adam and Rich are calling the shots, with Dr. Kramer's help. Please understand that they need to feel in control of their lives."

"Sure," he agreed, not quite sure what his brother meant.

"What I'm trying to say is, that the boys decide who they'll see and what calls get through."

It suddenly dawned on him. "You've seen them, haven't you?"

"The day before yesterday," he confirmed. "They're doing real good. Adam's detoxed and Rich has put on a few pounds. Be patient, Alex. They've got a long way to go."

Shelly was appointed as judge of the contest. She grew more and more apprehensive about the task as the deadline approached. Each determined to outdo the other, they'd made many more trips to the store and spent hours in the freezing cold; assembling their purchases. After all the intense labor, she was reluctant to name anyone the 'winner'.

In the end, the choice was easy. Christy won hands-down. She had shunned the glitzy, pre-packaged ornaments and had made the majority of her purchases in the craft aisles.

An evergreen wreath adorned the gate. Elegantly simple, with delicate holly berries and white baby's breath. Garlands, complete with huge red velvet ribbons, were

wrapped around the porch railing. A hand-painted mat at the front door proclaimed ‘*Merry Christmas to All*’.

The huge, all white wreath on the front door was inspired. She’d used a styrofoam base and attached anything she found interesting. Some she’d bought, some she’d picked up in the yard and sprayed white, others were simply lying around the house. The result was a breathtaking variety of texture and tones: flowers in every shade of white; some fresh, some dried, interesting twigs, pine cones and leaves coated with tree flocking, glittering miniature tree ornaments. Swatches of lace camouflaged any bare spots. If you looked closely, you’d discover a white teapot from a doll’s tea set, a small ceramic angel, an ivory thimble, a tiny stuffed polar bear, a string of faux pearls, a hollowed out eggshell. Shelly smiled when she spotted Jason’s fourth grade art project, a white clay elephant.

Stepping inside, she looked around admiringly. Cranberry and flocked pinecone garlands were strung along the fireplace mantel, on top of which sat a nativity scene. She’d draped the small dining room table with red felt, which hung to the floor, and topped it with a white lace overlay. A white plastic laundry tub, almost the size of the table, contained two large poinsettias and several white mums.

The effect was dazzling. Shelly marveled at her flair for combining colors, texture, and placement of a few simple items to create such dramatic results.

“You win,” she declared, smiling at her. “Now I just have to think of a prize!”

“We weren’t doing it for a prize...” Christy protested.

“I know. But I think I have just the thing.” Shelly smiled secretively.

Chapter 60

He only saw the psychologist because Dr. Kramer insisted on it. His experience with Dr. Ray, the uppity marriage counselor, had soured him on shrinks. Curtis Whelland, however, was nothing like he'd expected. He was much younger, no more than thirty-five. And much less formal, clad in blue jeans and an open necked shirt. He greeted Alex with 'Hey, Dude.'

But despite the casual dress and attitude, Dr. Whelland was one of the best psychotherapists in the area. He was well known for his radio talk show, *Love Talk*.

Alex was relieved when he motioned him to a chair across from his desk. He'd been afraid that he would have to lie on a couch with the doctor standing over him, probing his psyche.

"Tell me about yourself, Alex."

"Well, I'm getting divorced to marry another woman..."

He interrupted. "Not your circumstances, Alex. Tell me about yourself. What kind of person are you?"

He leaned back in his chair. What kind of person was he? What kind of question was that? "I'd say I'm kind of normal."

"How so?"

"Well, I've been married over eighteen years."

"But you said you're getting a divorce?"

He nodded. "That's not so normal, I guess. Especially if you're divorcing a major celebrity."

"A major celebrity?"

"My wife is Shelly St. John. She's a singer."

"I've heard the name," he nodded thoughtfully.

"Are you in the music industry?"

"Me? No way!"

"But you married someone in the business?"

"She wasn't in the business when we got married. She only got into it about three years ago."

"So she suddenly changed careers in mid-life?"
And she'd become such a success. No wonder the marriage had been strained. "And then?"

"And then everything became such a mess. I screwed around on her. I got somebody else pregnant."

"And how do you feel about that?"

"You want to know the truth?"

"There's no point in continuing if you're not completely honest with me, Alex."

"The truth is that, at the time, I didn't really feel anything. I was having problems with Shelly and turned to Valerie. She was nothing more than a piece of ass. Oh, excuse my French!" The doctor motioned for him to continue. "I never thought about leaving Shelly for her... But then she got pregnant. And things changed."

"So you developed feelings for Valerie?"

"I guess. And, of course, for the baby. But I knew I was making a mistake. Leaving Shelly... When my sons decided to stay in New Jersey, to be with her, it nearly

killed me. Then all this stuff came out in the paper about Valerie.”

It was clear that Dr. Whelland hadn't seen the stories. “What kind of ‘stuff’ are we talking about?”

“It was in all the papers. You didn't see it?”

The doctor shook his head. “Well, you must be the only one. Everybody in my town's seen it.” He took a deep breath before continuing. “It seems that Valerie is kind of a slut. Or maybe home wrecker is a better word. They dug up at least three other married men she'd been with. Marriages she broke up. She lied to her sons about who their fathers were. They're so screwed up that we checked them into Evergreen Woods.”

“You've talked to her about this?”

Nodding, he replied, “Some. She admits her past with married men. She says that single men hurt her so bad in the past that she was driven to date married men. At least that's how she explained it to me.”

“You accepted this explanation?”

“Well, I didn't have much choice.”

It was certainly a complicated scenario. But he'd seen his share of complicated scenarios. Alex St. John seemed like a decent enough man. A regular Joe caught up in some irregular circumstances. He asked him about his relationship with his sons and was relieved to hear they'd worked out their differences. He asked about his relationship with Shelly.

“Well, it's hot and cold. We mostly talk on the phone. Sometimes we get along okay, other times we do

nothing but fight.” He paused before continuing. “I have to admit that she’s acted more mature about it than I have.”

“Are you still in love with her?”

He seemed startled by the question and lapsed into an uncomfortable silence. “I’ll always love her,” he answered finally.

The doctor nodded. “Do you want her back?”

“I don’t know,” he answered honestly. “I think about her all the time... But it’s rough being married to someone so famous. And then she has this other guy in love with her. He asked her to marry him, but she refused.”

Suddenly it dawned on him who they were talking about. He’d seen her singing partner’s public proposal and read about her refusal in the newspaper. The case was becoming more complicated with each new piece of information.

Alex felt better after the session. They hadn’t made any astounding breakthroughs, but it was good just having someone to talk to, somebody who was removed from the situation. He scheduled another appointment for the next week.

Chapter 61

As usual, she sought Brent's recommendation. "Who's the best decorator in New York?" she demanded.

"Clark Ashton," he replied, without hesitation. "You redecorating?"

"Yeah. Sort of. You say he's the best?"

"The best! But he's got a hell of a waiting list."

She called before lunch. After leaving her name with his secretary, she waited impatiently for him to come to the phone. She explained her proposition. "And I'm kind of in a hurry..."

"You have a small cottage you'd like to decorate?" he asked, astonished. "A small cottage?"

"Well, if this worked out, I'd have my house decorated too..."

"Mrs. St. John, do you have any idea how busy my schedule is? It certainly wouldn't be profitable for me to take time out of that schedule to work on a small cottage. Now would it?"

"Money is no object," she interjected.

He remained unimpressed. It never was with his clients.

"Listen, I kind of have an ulterior motive," she admitted.

His interest piqued. "Oh?"

"This is for my future daughter-in-law. She lives in the cottage." She paused. How could she explain it to

him? “The thing is... This girl is unbelievable. She has a real talent. She can *sense* what’s going to look good, picture it in her head, and then pull it all together; make it work.”

“This talented daughter-in-law? Has she had any schooling?”

“No. That’s the thing. It just seems to come naturally to her.” Finally she was getting his attention.

“Certainly whoever gave you my name will have access to the name of a good decorating school, Mrs. St. John. Thank you for calling,” he dismissed her.

“No, Mr. Ashton, wait! You don’t understand. I’m sure there are some really good decorating schools out there. And the instructors in those schools are good. But I’m not looking for good. I’m looking for superb! A master at his craft. And that’s what I’ve been told about you. If I have to get on a waiting list, fine! Put me down.”

He was flattered but unrelenting. “I’m booked through the year,” he informed her.

“Fine,” she repeated. “What’s the next open date? So I can mark it on my calendar?”

“January or February of 2001.”

“It’s a deal.” She hung up, smiling. She knew Christy had enormous talent; with the right mentor, she could be a huge success. She was willing to wait thirteen months for the best.

She was flabbergasted to receive a call from his secretary the next day. “Your initial consultation is January fifth,” she informed her. “Be here at one o’clock.”

“He makes his appointments that far in advance?” she asked, incredulous.

“Of course,” she replied huffily. “With the holidays and everything.”

“Do you know what day that falls on?”

“Tuesday!”

She thought quickly. “Are you talking about January fifth, 2001?”

“No 2000,” she replied, finally understanding. “He squeezed you in.”

Shelly let out a whoop. “Oh my God! This is totally awesome! This will make the best Christmas present!”

The secretary smiled. People didn’t usually get *this* excited about a decorating job.

“Hey! Do me a favor, will you?” she continued. “Can you send me some kind of appointment card or something?”

Chapter 62

Capone's eyes filled with tears. He blinked, causing them to overflow and trail slowly down each cheek.

"Very good!" the instructor cheered him. His fellow classmates applauded. "Now anger."

He drew his face into a scowl and tried to remember a time when he was truly pissed.

"Excellent. Now pain."

He watched as the others in the class performed the same exercise, hoping to get some tips he could use for himself. He doubted it. He was by far the best actor in the class. Maybe even better than the instructor herself.

It wasn't hard. Certainly easier than singing! All he had to do was detach himself. Adapt his behavior to the circumstances. If he were supposed to be mad, he'd yell. In pain, he'd scream. He could cry at will. Or laugh heartily, at nothing. It was all a big lie! And he'd had plenty of practice with that.

LORI NAUMANN
PRIORITIES

Chapter 63

“They won’t be home for Christmas,” she said sadly, hanging up the phone. “Damn that Dr. Kramer!” She’d finally been allowed to speak with them. But they hardly wanted to talk at all.

Alex would never admit it, but the news came as a relief. Without the daily confrontations with Adam and Rich, he and Valerie had been getting along much better.

“They did invite us to come there, though.”

He could think of better ways of spending Christmas, than in a mental institution with Valerie’s belligerent sons, but knew he was being selfish.

“I don’t know why we can’t just take some time off,” she complained. “It’s too cold to come to work.”

Capone hustled her into the waiting limo. “We got an album to do, Honey! Cold or no cold.”

“We just came off tour for the last one! When do we get a break?”

“Shelly, we have less than six months left on our contract. When do you think we’re supposed to squeeze it in?”

“But Tom said that was no problem. RJF can extend our contract until the album is finished.”

“I don’t want to extend. I want to re-negotiate.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Money!” he exclaimed, exasperated. “We’re worth a lot more to them now than we were when we first signed. I want a *lot* more money!”

“And you should see Uncle David’s house,” Jeremy babbled on, describing their extensive Christmas decorations. “He even climbed up that big huge tree in the front yard to hang this awesome star!”

“It sounds cool,” Alex replied.

“It is! Oh, and then me and Jason set up this gigantic sleigh with reindeers and everything! And Christy made this stuffed Santa Claus out of some old clothes...” He trailed off. “I wish you were gonna be here.”

Alex swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat. “I wish I was, too, son.”

He relayed the conversation at his appointment with Dr. Whelland, the next day. “This will be the first Christmas I spend without them,” he concluded.

“Just because you can’t be with them every holiday, doesn’t mean you can’t be a good father.”

“I was wondering what you thought about me flying out there?”

“I’d advise against,” the doctor replied. “There’s a healthy way to deal with divorce. Getting on with your life is part of it. Disassociating with your ex-wife is another part.”

“I can’t see any harm in it,” he insisted. “Just this first Christmas...”

“What about the first New Year?”

He remained silent. “First Easter?”

Still no reply. “What about your fiancée? And your ‘first Christmas’ with her?”

“He’s awesome, isn’t he?” Rich remarked after David left.

Adam adjusted the headphones of his portable CD player, one of the many gifts David had brought them. “Yeah! If only Mom would have stayed with *him*.”

“He’s too good for her,” Rich dismissed.

The boys exchanged solemn glances. Neither one was looking forward to seeing her the next day. They’d allowed Dr. Kramer to talk them into inviting her for Christmas, but had been having severe second thoughts.

He should have known there would be a lot of traffic with the holiday and all. The normally two hour drive from Orlando to Sunnydale was stretching to more than three and Irene would kill him if he was late for dinner. Thankfully he pulled in just as she was setting the table.

“The butter Nick, not the salt,” Irene scolded him impatiently. He looked at her blankly. “I swear, sometimes I wonder where your head is!” She reached for the salt shaker sitting in front of him.

David watched the exchange, troubled. It wasn’t the first sign of his father’s mental decline he’d noticed.

That morning, he'd witnessed a similar episode before leaving for Evergreen Woods. He looked to see if Brian had caught the incident, but his brother was busy globbing mashed potatoes onto an already overloaded plate.

He was fine through the rest of the evening, entertaining the kids during dinner and delightedly handing out Christmas gifts to his grandchildren, never once slipping up on a name.

"Mom?" he asked after everyone had gone home and Nick had turned in for the night. "Is Dad okay?"

"Of course. Why do you ask?"

"It's just... sometimes he seems a little out of it. Has he seen his doctor lately?"

"Just last week," she informed him. "His blood pressure was running a bit high and the doctor put him on a new medicine. But everything else was fine! He got a clean bill of health."

He almost convinced her to accompany him to his parents' house, but as much as she knew he wanted to go, she just couldn't face Irene. He refused to leave her alone and go by himself.

They ended up ordering out for pizza and watching a Christmas special on TV. Alex couldn't concentrate on the sappy movie. His mind wandered. He couldn't help wondering what his mother had made for dinner. Where his sons were spending Christmas Eve. What Shelly was doing...

Shelly watched as the embers died out, reluctant to leave her cozy spot in front of the fireplace. She stretched luxuriously and relived what had been a perfect day. Marvin and Ginger Brandt had arrived early in the afternoon. Remembering the look on Christy's face, as she proudly showed her parents through the cottage, caused her to smile.

Later, Angie and her family rumbled in on, of all things, a pair of motorcycles. Removing her helmet and shaking out her long blonde hair, she explained that they had been early Christmas gifts, from James to himself. They attended an extravagant Christmas Eve dinner at the Aurora Country Club and, afterward, took a horse drawn sleigh through town.

After Angie, James and the girls roared off toward home, they sat by the fireplace, roasting marshmallows and describing their favorite Christmas memories.

"It's snowing in New York. Be sure to sit next to an exit," she advised him sagely. "In case the wings of the plane ice up."

"I will, Ma," he promised, embracing her tenderly. "Merry Christmas. I love you."

She held tight to her youngest son. "I love you, too, David. Be careful."

He moved to his father. "Dad... Take care of yourself, okay?" Ignoring Nick's embarrassment, he threw

his arms around him and pulled him close. “I love you, too, Pops,” he said softly.

Most of the students were home for the holidays. Only Adam, Rich and a few others remained. Dr. Kramer had planned an afternoon church service and Christmas dinner for the families of those that stayed. He greeted each of them personally, and thanking them for coming.

Valerie ignored his outstretched hand. “What’s going on with my sons?” she demanded. “When will they be home?”

He studied her. She was a beautiful woman, even carrying a full term pregnancy. Blonde, tall and tan, with a dazzling smile and seductive blue eyes. She could easily have been a model, or even a movie star. He thought about what her two sons had told him about her.

Talking with them alone had been basically non-productive. Each boy had only a vague sense of what was bothering him. Neither could pinpoint a specific cause. It was only after he brought them both in for a joint session, that they’d been able to express themselves.

They’d been devastated by the discovery that they were not true brothers. But it was more than that; the fact that their fathers were alive and apparently wanted nothing to do with them. Valerie had told them that their father had been killed in an accident when they were just toddlers.

She’d woven elaborate tales about what a wonderful man he’d been. How handsome and brave.

How smart and generous. How much he'd loved her and his sons. She'd even told them his name, Bart Phillips. Because they'd never met any of their relatives, they didn't know that Phillips was her maiden name.

When they were very young, she promised to find them a new father, just as wonderful as theirs had been. And she tried so hard to live up to that promise. With each new relationship, they prayed she'd found him. Some of the men they grew very close to, hoping he'd be the one.

But no one measured up to Bart. Time after time she explained, 'he just wasn't good enough', 'he just can't replace your father'. They would be disappointed, but secure in the knowledge that she was doing everything she could to find them a suitable Daddy.

And, as a means to that end, they participated in her schemes. If Valerie was supposed to be poor and helpless, they played the part. If Valerie was acting the devoted mother, they went along to the movies, theme parks and restaurants as if it were an everyday outing.

But most often, Valerie portrayed the footloose single woman. Many, many times, even at a young age, they'd been left alone while she was out on a date. When she entertained at home, they were banished to their rooms or sent to a friend's house. Some of the men she dated had no idea she had children. Some found out only after she'd succeeded in seducing them. Some after they'd moved in.

Adam and Rich remained ever loyal to the cause. Suffering her cycles of inattention and smothering. Shrugging off the snide comments people made about their mother.

It wasn't until she'd taken up with Alex St. John that they'd begun to doubt her. It was hard to stomach the thought that their mother had broken up his marriage. They had a hard time facing Jason and Jeremy. But, as usual, they'd given her the benefit out the doubt.

The truth about her had shaken their entire world. They'd spent their lifetime looking for a man like Bart Phillips. A man that didn't exist!

Wondering if she knew the amount of damage her lies had inflicted on her sons, he consulted his watch. "Rich has requested a quick meeting with you before dinner. Is now a good time?"

Alex was amazed by the change in them. Adam was clear-eyed and cognizant. Having put on some weight, Rich no longer seemed emaciated and sported a bushy crew cut, in his natural shade of blonde. Three tiny scabs dotted his eyebrow, where gold hoops had previously been displayed.

"Would you mind waiting in the lounge?" Dr. Kramer asked. "The boys wanted to speak with their mother alone."

He led them to his office after directing Alex to the lounge. He'd questioned the prudence of having the meeting on Christmas Day, but the boys had been adamant. "Rich, I believe you had something to say," he prompted.

Without taking his eyes from the floor, Rich mumbled. "I'm not coming home from here."

"What?" Valerie asked sharply. "Where would you go?"

“I’ll get an apartment somewhere.”

She snorted. “How do you think you’re going to pay for it?”

“I’ll get a job.”

“You got expelled from school, remember? How’s a high school drop-out going to get a job?”

Rich bit his lip and fell silent.

Dr. Kramer watched the exchange with interest. She’d reacted to the news by attacking him, never asking why he didn’t want to come home.

“So this is how you treat me?” she continued. “After all I’ve done for you?”

Adam spoke up. “All you’ve done for us? All you’ve done is lie to us our entire lives.”

“I did lie to you,” she admitted. “But I did it for your own good. How would you have felt knowing that your fathers didn’t care about you at all?”

“At least we would have known the truth,” Rich said angrily. “We wouldn’t have this fantasy about Bart *the saint* Phillips!”

“What was so bad about Bart Phillips?” she demanded. “It gave us something to strive for.”

Adam rolled his eyes. “It gave you a way to keep us quiet while you ran around with married men!”

She rose from her chair. “I don’t have to put up with this from you boys! Especially on Christmas!” Her voice caught in a sob. “I did the best I could do raising you two alone. I can’t believe this is the thanks I get!” She threw the doctor a withering look and tromped out of the office.

“Which way is the lounge?” she demanded of a young woman in the hall. Alex didn’t know what to make of her sudden decision to leave, but fell into step behind her.

“Where are we going?” he asked, in the car.

“Home!” She burst into tears.

Chapter 64

“Where is everyone?” he called at the door.

“In here, Uncle David. Hurry up!”

The Christmas tree blazed with lights and was surrounded by dozens of wrapped gifts. Shelly, Jason, Jeremy, Christy, and her parents sat on the floor amid the multicolor packages. “You didn’t open your presents yet?”

“Of course not! We were waiting for you.”

Touched by the gesture, he flopped down beside Shelly. “Let’s get this show on the road!”

Jeremy passed out small, beautifully wrapped boxes. These are from Christy,” he announced.

She’d knitted mufflers of the finest Angora wool for each of them. Jason’s blue, Jeremy’s red and David’s brown. She anxiously held her breath as Shelly opened hers. She’d chosen a blend of rust, brown, orange and red because it reminded her of her hair. The complicated stitch was more difficult than anything she’d ever tackled and she’d had to unravel and restart it dozens of times; determined that it be perfect. She knew Shelly had the money to buy anything she wanted and would appreciate a handmade gift. She wanted it to be extra special. As special as Shelly was.

Ginger gasped loudly at the contents of her box. Lifting the classic pearl necklace, chosen with Shelly’s advice and financial assistance, from its velvet bed she

discovered the matching pair of earrings hidden beneath, eliciting another loud gasp. Marvin, a dedicated baseball fan, stared mutely at his pair of V.I.P. season passes.

“These are from me and Jason.”

For Christy they’d chosen the Hopi Indian vases she’d admired in town, for David, a membership to the Aurora Country Club, and for the Brandts, annual passes to Disney World, for Shelly, a bread-maker.

She’d been, by far, the hardest to shop for. Between them, they couldn’t come up with one thing she wanted or needed. “A few years ago, I wouldn’t even have to think about it,” Jeremy had remarked. “Remember how much she wanted a bread maker?” Jason remembered the many times she’d almost bought one, but balked at the seventy dollars for something so frivolous. They’d ransacked the kitchen and, finding no bread maker, had purchased the fanciest model available.

The gift brought tears to her eyes. To think that, at one time, it was an obsession with her. Owning a bread maker. “Now mine!” she instructed Jeremy.

He lugged out a bulky box marked for David and a small flat one for the Brandts. David grinned from ear to ear at the set of titanium golf clubs, worth roughly their weight in gold. Ginger fanned through the stack of airline vouchers. Though she always paid the airfare when they visited Christy, Shelly wanted the Brandts to know they were welcome to visit as often as they wished and give them the ability to make their own travel arrangements. Christy’s dress box contained a beautiful powder blue Armani gown and matching silk pumps, Jason’s a deep

blue suit and tickets to the opera. Jeremy nodded with appreciation at the elaborate stereo system his box contained.

“And these are from Uncle Dave.” Jeremy distributed the packages. For the boys he’d purchased AAA road policies, covering them in case of auto trouble. For Christy, he’d gone to a craft shop in the city and instructed the salesclerk to fill a shopping cart with anything she’d buy herself. The Brandts received a gift certificate for Oscar’s Steak House, the finest cuisine Sunnydale had to offer.

Shelly lightly fingered the rich texture of the painting. Noting the signature, she realized that he’d planned the gift for a very long time and had pulled quite a few strings to get it. Obtaining a T. Bastedo original was a feat in itself; commissioning her for a portrait, miraculous. The faces of Jason, Jeremy, and Christy smiled at her from the canvas. It’s beautiful, David,” she breathed.

The Brandts gifts were passed out and opened: portable CD players for Jason and Jeremy, a diamond chip bracelet for Christy, a shaving kit for David and a set of romance novels for Shelly.

They sat before the fire, sipping eggnog and inspecting their gifts. Christy lovingly stroked the fabric of her gown; she’d never owned anything so lovely. David hefted the weight of his golf clubs. Ginger donned her necklace and earrings.

“I was hoping,” Shelly broke the reverie, “to have a minute with you alone, Jeremy. I have something to talk to you about.”

Jeremy followed her outside, uncertainly. “Did I do something wrong?”

She shook her head. “My youngest son,” she began fondly. “I remember your first word, your first steps, and your first day of school... And now, your first car.”

His eyes widened as, on cue, David pulled around in the shiny blue Chevy Blazer he’d had hidden in his garage. He threw his arms around her, planting a wet sloppy kiss on her cheek, before moving to the vehicle. David slid over and Jeremy got behind the wheel. They took off down the driveway.

Shelly called Christy outside. “Christy,” she began, “I’m sure you know how important you’ve become in all of our lives. My son has excellent taste.” Christy beamed. “But you also have a great deal of talent and a natural flair for decorating. I’d like you to explore a possible career in interior decorating.” She handed her the appointment card for her consultation with Clark Ashton. Recognizing the name from decorating magazines, Christy gasped.

“And second,” Shelly continued. “I happen to know what you’ve asked for every Christmas, since you were six years old. Santa never came through, until this year.” Christy looked at her, confused. Shelly gently took her by the shoulders and spun her around. Across the lawn, came Marvin and Ginger, each leading a purebred Arabian.

She held her breath as they approached, a perfectly matched set of champion horseflesh. Both pure black with shiny blue-black manes and tails, finely boned heads and heavily muscled bodies. Marvin grinned broadly at his daughter. “Well Princess, it looks like you finally got your pony!”

She patted their graceful necks, instantly falling in love with the ebony beauties. “Why don’t you show Christy the stable,” Shelly suggested, “while I talk to Jason.”

Watching from the window, he smiled, well aware of how much Christy loved horses. “So!” he exclaimed as Shelly came back in. “How’d you smuggle them in?”

“The same way I smuggled in Jeremy’s truck, late at night and delivered to David’s,” she giggled.

“You got something hidden over there for me?” he teased.

“No,” she replied soberly. “I have something right here.” She handed him an envelope. Inside, he found a crisp five hundred dollar bill and a plastic card with the Royale Hotel logo.

After many talks with both Jason and Christy, she knew they were close to consummating their relationship. “The first time,” she explained, “should be very, very special. And the Royale is a pretty special place.” Extracting a small box from her pocket, she held it out to him.

He opened it up to find an exquisite diamond ring, that he recognized immediately. It had hung from a chain around Shelly’s neck for as long as he could remember.

“This ring belonged to my mother, and her mother before that. I always hoped to pass it down to my own daughter. But I never got one, until she was seventeen years old.”

She smiled. “Jason, I love Christy almost as much as you do, and I’d be honored if she wore it as her engagement ring.”

He was touched by the gesture and amazed at her timing. “You are phenomenal!” he fished in his pocket and produced a crinkled sheet of paper. “I was hoping to get your advice on one of these.” He thrust the paper at her and she saw it was the flyer from Jacob’s Jewelers. Several engagement rings were circled in red.

“If you’d rather get something new... I’d understand completely.”

“Are you kidding? Great Grandma’s ring? Do you know how much this means to me?” The fact was, she did know. It was why she’d given him the treasured ring.

“What the hell happened?” he asked when her tears abated somewhat.

“They basically ripped me apart.” She provided her version of the encounter.

“Why would they set up a confrontation on Christmas?”

“They must really hate me.” A fresh wave of tears streamed down her cheeks.

“They’ll come around,” he said reassuringly. “Isn’t anger one of the stages of dealing with grief? I’m almost sure it is. After that, it’s acceptance, I think.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “I read it somewhere. Or maybe Dr. Whelland told me... You know, you’d learn about this stuff, too. If you went to see Dr. Powell.”

“Alex, don’t start! Don’t you think I’ve had a rough enough Christmas?” She wasn’t about to have some lady therapist delving into her psyche.

He had to admit it had been an awful day. His stomach rumbled, reminding him he hadn’t eaten since breakfast. Neither had Valerie, and she was eating for two. “Why don’t we stop someplace nice and have dinner?” he suggested.

Though home to dozens of theme parks and world famous shops, Orlando was dead on Christmas day. Alex stopped at several prestigious hotels, but their restaurants were either closed down or booked up.

Finally they found an IHOP with open tables. They ordered turkey, dressing and mashed potatoes, yet it didn’t taste like holiday fare. Alex realized they hadn’t even exchanged their Christmas presents.

“Merry Christmas, Shelly!” Cathy held her left hand aloft, flashing a diamond engagement ring. Tom stood behind her, grinning broadly.

“You’re getting married?” She hugged her sister happily.

“Yes! Can you believe it? It’s just the best Christmas ever!”

Together, Christy and Ginger had outdone themselves with dinner. They’d chosen a Greek menu: lemon rice soup, Greek salad, mousakka, savlaki and baklava, followed by thick black ouzo for the adults.

Chapter 65

Jeez! Sometimes Capone could be an ass! He'd just chastised her for being off-key. Earlier, he'd thrown a fit when she missed a cue and he continually harangued them to keep things moving. She glared at him angrily, and left the sound room.

He followed her down the hall, calling, "Shelly! Shelly!" while she ignored him. Catching up to her, he grabbed her by the shoulders. She twisted from his grip. "Shelly, what's wrong?"

She turned to face him. "You're so damn anxious to get this album finished, you don't even care what's going on in anybody else's life!"

He looked at her, confused, as she continued to blast him. "I bet you don't even know Erik's parents are in town! Or that Curt's father is real sick! Are you even aware that tomorrow is New Year's Eve?"

"There's something else," he replied, intuitively. "What is it?"

How could she explain the events of last evening? The pain she felt upon receiving her final divorce papers in the mail and the emotional roller coaster she'd been on after Alex's call...

He'd also received his final divorce decree. He spent several minutes at the mailbox, staring at the paper in his hands, and several hours thinking, about his life, his future and his past. That evening, he made the call.

“Shelly, it’s Alex.”

She’d been thinking about him ever since opening the envelope containing her final divorce papers. “Hello, Alex. The boys aren’t home right now.”

“That’s okay. I wanted to talk to you. I got my divorce papers today.”

She waited silently for him to continue.

“I was thinking... I’d give anything to call it off.”

“Alex...”

“No, Shelly, listen,” he cut her off. “I’ll do whatever it takes, to make it work.”

She pictured him hiding in the bedroom, with the portable phone, out of the earshot of his live-in lover. Valerie must be close to her due date; Shelly wondered how he could be so callous. “Alex, we’re divorced,” she answered sharply. “It’s time to move on.”

“It’s not too late to start over,” he insisted. “We could still have a future together.”

“No, Alex. The only future we have together is being friendly for the sake of our sons. Other than that, we should avoid all contact.” She replaced the phone firmly in its receiver.

They were married New Year’s Day, by a notary public in Tampa, with his wife acting as witness. Valerie’s water broke ten hours later. In the labor room, he coached her on the breathing techniques they’d rehearsed in Lamaze classes. “Stage three,” he proclaimed, holding her

hand through the worst of the contraction. “You’re almost there.”

She nodded weakly and braced herself as another wave of pain washed over her. He marveled at her control. Shelly had screamed bloody murder through labor. Valerie bore each contraction with little more than a grunt. At 7:16am, Alexa Nickole entered the world with a gusty bellow.

Irene and Nick were eating breakfast, Brian and his family still tucked warmly in bed. Alex and Valerie were the only St. Johns present to welcome the arrival of their daughter.

Chapter 66

Lorna sat in on their morning production meeting, uncharacteristically silent while Sam summarized their progress and predicted a completion date for the album. Brent laid out preliminary marketing plans.

Afterward, she requested the floor. “You are all aware that Upper Echelon’s contract expires at the end of May.” She looked at each person sitting at the table; several nodded. “At that time, we will not be renewing or renegotiating.”

Brent face registered pure horror. “Why?” demanded Sam.

“Capone has caught the acting bug,” she explained gently. “We’ll be making the announcement later in the week. He’s signed with Tyrone Pictures.”

Clark Ashton looked up as she entered his office. She certainly was a pretty little thing, also very young. But decidedly poised and elegant in the simple black wool dress and pearls that Shelly had lent her.

He motioned her to the seat across from his desk. Without preamble, he spread several photo layouts out on the desktop. “What can you tell me about these rooms?” he asked.

She nervously analyzed each photo. “This room is very warm and inviting, but the white couch is all wrong,”

she began. “This one is well balanced. The picture grouping on the far wall is particularly effective. This one...” She gave a short narration for each of the twelve rooms pictured.

He listened intently, offering no comment as she prattled on. Satisfied that she understood the basic principles of compliment and contrast, he announced abruptly. “I want to see your cottage.” He rang his secretary, instructing her to call for his driver.

She racked her brain. Had she straightened up before she left this morning? She’d been so nervous about meeting with him. She just couldn’t remember.

She exhaled deeply as they entered the living room. The kitchen was neat and tidy, there were no traces of her breakfast dishes. Mr. Ashton looked around critically. “Did you do the Christmas decorating?” he asked.

She nodded meekly, wishing she’d taken them down the day before, as she had planned. But they looked so pretty she couldn’t bear to pack them away. What would a practiced eye like Clark Ashton think of the humble homemade adornments?

He fingered the all white wreath. “Exquisite,” he breathed. “Did you make this yourself?” She nodded again.

He walked slowly through the cottage. Each room was unique. From the small cozy bedroom, packed with antiques and accented with lace panels, to the airy kitchen bursting with yellow chintz and pale blue gingham.

“You’ve done a remarkable job, my dear. I almost hate to redo the place. But I do think we’ll have a grand

time working together on the project and I'm very interested to hear what you have planned."

She was encouraged, both by his tone and his words. "I was thinking that right here would be the perfect place for a window seat," she said, pointing the large bay window in the kitchen. "Something small and formal, maybe in a floral print with lace curtains to match. And here, I'd like to put a chair rail and maybe sponge paint the wall."

She moved through the cottage, describing the changes she'd like to make. He nodded appreciatively. She had a good idea for what would work together. As well as what wouldn't. He was very glad Shelly St. John had contacted him. He'd been thinking, for some time, about taking on an apprentice and eventual partner, keeping his eye out for just the right person. Now it appeared she'd been dropped right in his lap.

"Did you know he was going to quit?" Cathy questioned.

Shelly shook her head. "He had Lorna announce it at a production meeting. Everybody freaked out."

"Tom was devastated," she admitted. "He called him, you know. Offered him everything under the sun to change his mind, but Capone refused to budge."

"Cathy, he's starring with his buddy, Sam Stone, in the sequel to *Chicago*! Do you think he'll give that up?"

She knew he wouldn't. Capone was one of the most power hungry people she knew, not to mention the

vainest. Of course, he'd jump at the chance for the silver screen. "What will you do? And Erik, Curt and John?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "Probably just retire."

Chapter 67

He nuzzled the baby's hair and inhaled deeply. She smelled so incredibly sweet and pure. Balling her hands into tight fists, she yawned deeply. He smiled tenderly, amazed at how much he loved her already. Had it been that way with Jason and Jeremy? He couldn't remember.

Of course, life had been a lot more hectic back then. He'd been working and didn't have time to spend hours staring at a baby as she slept, or just sit, holding her. He realized now he should have taken the time. Nothing compared to the feeling he got just watching Alexa.

He'd taken over the nighttime feedings after Valerie had left her crying too long one night. He meticulously mixed the formula, testing it carefully to ensure the correct temperature, while cradling Alexa in his other arm. He set up a feeding station in the living room: a large rocking chair, stack of blankets and towels, and the stereo remote. Having heard that listening to classical music stimulated an infant's development, he insisted that it was the only type of music to be played in the house.

Valerie was delighted with the interest he took in the baby. She could see they were developing a bond, which spilled over in their own relationship. He seemed to have gotten over his distrust of her, forgiven her for her past. She'd started seeing Dr. Powell, to show him she was serious about making things right with her sons.

Things were better between them than they'd been in months.

Alexa had even patched the rift with her in-laws. Irene was captivated with the child. Her choice of Nickole for a middle name had the desired effect on Nick.

“Can I get your advice on something, Shelly?”

“Sure.” She beckoned him inside. “What’s up?”

“I talked to Adam and Rich today,” David began. “You know they’ll be leaving Evergreen Woods in a couple of weeks?”

“Are they ready? Because I could arrange for them to stay a while longer.”

“No, they’re fine,” he assured her. “Shelly, you wouldn’t believe how much Dr. Kramer has helped them. They’re back to their old selves. Better even, because now they have the skills to help them deal with future problems. And make their own decisions, which brings me to why I’m here...”

She waited as he gathered his thoughts before continuing. “They decided to move out on their own. They’ve asked me to lend them the money for an apartment.”

She digested the information. “What does Valerie say?”

“She’s not happy, of course, but Rich just turned eighteen and Adam’s not far behind. The thing is... do you think I’d be making it easier to push her away by giving them the money?”

Several minutes went by as she pondered the question. “It depends,” she said finally. “Are they dead set against moving back in with her and Alex?” He nodded. “Then give them the money.”

“That’s what I thought,” he agreed.

“You don’t want them moving to some awful place where they could hook up with the wrong people, and end up on drugs all over again. But, David, I wouldn’t mention it to Alex.”

The stretch limo glided to a stop. Monica caught sight of her and jumped out as the driver buzzed the intercom. Shelly laughed as she tugged impatiently at the heavy steel gate.

“You’ll never get that open with brute strength, Monica,” she chided. “Just go over to the intercom box and hit 3-2-3-1 and the number sign. The gate will open right up.”

She immediately called out the numbers to the driver. “Three, two, three, one! And then the number sign!” she shouted. Shelly sighed. Monica had a lot to learn about security. She’d have to get them out right away to change that code.

The gate slid open and the limo continued toward the house. Monica hugged Shelly. “It’s so good to see you again!”

“You too, Mon,” she replied earnestly as they walked up the drive.

“Oh my God! It’s like a fucking mansion!”
Monica gestured toward the house.

She laughed. “You should see David’s house.”

“It’s right around here, isn’t it?”

She nodded. “Right through the back. In fact, I thought you guys might want to stay there. There’s a lot more room.”

“Fine with me,” she agreed.

They met up with her brood, standing beside a mountain of luggage on the front porch. The driver continued to unpack case after case from the trunk.

“What the hell did you bring?” Shelly asked, astonished.

“Well, I wasn’t sure what all you had,” Monica explained. “So I made sure I brought enough toys for the baby...”

But the baby wasn’t a baby any more. She was close to two years old, already toddling around and jabbering up a blue streak. It had been so long since she’d seen her nieces and nephew that she wouldn’t have recognized them on the street. Emily was now seven, a miniature version of her mother. Seventeen year old Stacy was tall, blonde and tan; a true St. John. Mark definitely had the piercing blue St. John eyes, as well as the devilish smile so common in twelve year old boys.

Little had changed about Monica and Brian. Monica had a few gray streaks in her otherwise raven hair. Brian had put on a little weight around his middle. He moved forward to embrace her.

“Good seeing you, Shelly,” he murmured.

“Good seeing you, too, Bri,” she replied. She’d missed them more than she realized. Seeing them now was like finding a missing part of herself. Brian was Alex’s brother, but for eighteen years, he’d been her brother, too. She felt same about Monica. It was like being reunited with lost family.

“Hey, thanks for having the limo meet us at the airport. The kids were freaking out. Mark wants me to buy one for the family car.”

She laughed. “No problem. I wanted to make sure you got here all right.” She ushered them inside and the driver began transferring luggage from the porch to the front entry hall. Brian and Mark assisted him.

Staggering under the weight of a large garment bag, Mark proclaimed proudly “That’s the very last one!”

“Come on,” Shelly invited. “Let me take you on a tour of the house.”

Stacy nodded eagerly. “I was hoping you would say that!”

“And afterward, I’ll take you over David’s. His house is *really* cool.”

“Is he home?” Brian inquired.

“No. He had to work today. But he said he’d be home by about four.”

He nodded. He hadn’t seen his brother in close to two months and was anxious to talk to him about their father.

They were headed to David’s when Christy and the boys got home from school. Christy hugged Stacy,

exuberantly. The girls had been friends and classmates for years. She held up her left hand dramatically.

Stacy screeched. “You’re engaged?”

Christy nodded, flaunting the ring. “Come see my place first,” she begged her. “I’m so anxious to show you what I’ve been working on with Mr. Ashton.”

Stacy looked to Monica for approval and skipped happily ahead at her nod.

Mark stopped dead in his tracks as they approached the racetrack. “What’s this?” he demanded.

“This is the St. John Speedway, Bud,” Shelly explained. “And since you’re a St. John, you have full racing privileges.” She was glad she’d had the forethought to have a crew clear the snow from the track.

His eyes were wide with wonderment. “Do you have any cars?”

She laughed. “As a matter of fact, we do.” She looked to Monica, who nodded.

“Why don’t we take a look?” she invited. He eagerly followed her back to the garage.

“Wow!” he exclaimed over and over, inspecting each car carefully, paying particular attention to a green mustang convertible

“Want to take it for a spin?” The look on his face was answer enough.

They watched as he got the car started down the obstacle course. Shelly could see that Emily was also fascinated by the track. “Do you want to pick a car, Emily?” Shelly asked.

She nodded fervently.

“I’ll help her pick one out,” Brian volunteered.

Minutes later they returned; Emily carrying a yellow jeep and Brian a blue Monte Carlo. “I couldn’t resist,” he admitted sheepishly. Monica and Shelly continued alone.

“You were right, Shell. This house is like something from my soap opera.” She gazed around the lavish sitting room. She fingered the heavy velvet drapes. “It doesn’t really fit David, though...”

Shelly agreed. “Christy’s redoing the whole thing,” she explained.

“Oh that’s right. She’s working with that guy. Mr. Ashley.”

“Ashton,” Shelly corrected.

As they walked down the path, it started to snow lightly. Monica squealed with delight, sticking out her tongue to catch a few flakes on her tongue. “It’s been so long since I’ve seen snow!”

They neared the back end of the racetrack and could see Brian running behind his car, shouting commands. “Hurry up! You’re in last place!” He trailed Emily’s jeep. Mark’s green mustang was half a lap ahead.

Monica turned to Shelly. “When do I get to meet the hunka hunka burning love?”

Shelly raised one eyebrow quizzically.

“Your partner!” Monica elaborated.

“I don’t have a partner. In a couple of months, *Upper Echelon* is history. Capone has taken up acting.”

She said it so calmly. The career that had come at the expense of her marriage was over. Monica wondered

about her future plans. “Are you coming back to Sunnydale?” she inquired.

“No,” she said firmly. “I’m *never* going back to Sunnydale.”

Mark whooped loudly as the green mustang passed the finish line. Brian reached into his pocket and extracted a dollar from his wallet, grumbling at having been beaten on his own bet. Emily called plaintively, “I beat you, too, Daddy! I should get a dollar!”

He handed over another bill. Monica chided him, “Haven’t you learned not to bet with these little hustlers yet?”

“Anybody home?” David’s voice carried over the back yard.

“Out here at the track,” Shelly called in return.

He came loping across the lawn, reaching them in record time. Monica couldn’t help noticing how good he looked. She rarely saw him in a suit and tie and had to admit he was extremely handsome in formal attire. But it was more than the clothes. He had an air of satisfaction.

She knew he’d been promoted since transferring to the New York branch. Shelly had also mentioned that he was in line for another advancement, Director of Marketing. Obviously success agreed with him.

After several more races, David propelled his brother toward the game room. “You think you’re so tough? How about I kick your ass in a game of pool?”

“You’re on,” Brian accepted the challenge. He surveyed the game room in wonderment. “Man! You got the life. Alex is a fool to give this up!”

“You see him much?”

“A lot. Of course, I have to visit him most of the time. Monica won’t let Valerie set foot in our house.”

“Is he doing okay?”

“Seems to be. He really loves that baby - maybe Valerie, too. You know they’re having problems with Adam and Rich?”

He nodded. “How’s Mom and Dad?”

“Not good.” Brian explained his father’s continued memory lapses and periods of slurred speech and his mother’s denial of the symptoms. “I’m really worried about them,” he continued. “If something happened to Dad, what would Mom do?”

Chapter 68

At that very moment, Alex received a call. It was from the hospital; Nick had suffered a massive stroke. With trembling fingers he dialed David's number.

Shelly assisted them in obtaining tickets on the first outgoing flight to Tampa. She saw the grave look in David's eyes and sought to assure him. "Your father is very strong," she said gently. "Plus stubborn as anything. He won't let something like a stroke get him down."

Alex was in the ICU waiting room when they arrived. "It's touch and go," he explained.

Nick had been given the clot busting drug, TPA, in the hope of minimizing brain damage. There was a very definite chance that the blood thinning agent could have the reverse effect and cause more intracranial bleeding.

Monica had gone home from the airport. After getting the kids settled in, she drove to the hospital. She found them sitting silently, shoulder to shoulder, waiting for some news about their father. At the look on their faces, she burst into tears. "It's bad, isn't it?" she sobbed.

Brian pulled her into his arms and buried his face in her neck. "Yes," he whispered tearfully.

She noticed Alexa sleeping soundly in her car seat, which had been placed on the chair beside Alex. "You brought the baby to the hospital?" she asked him incredulous. "Do you know how many germs there are floating around this place?"

“Valerie’s at the doctor. I left a note for her to come up here. I don’t know what’s taking her so long...”

She scooped up the car seat. “I’ll take her home. Stacy can keep an eye on her.”

They continued their silent vigil until the doctor finally came out to update them. Nick was through the worst part, he explained. He exhibited moderate to severe right-sided paralysis, aphasia and possible dysphagia; but he would most likely survive.

“What exactly is dysphagia?” David asked.

The doctor explained that it was difficulty in swallowing, that they may have to place a feeding tube, at least for the time being.

“And aphasia?”

“It’s the inability to speak; or speak clearly,” the doctor informed them.

Valerie closed her eyes and concentrated on the question. “I guess, to be totally honest...” She took a deep breath. “It’s my fault.”

The doctor studied her. Finally they were making some progress.

Valerie was a very complex woman. Was she the calculating bitch? Or the result of a dysfunctional family, living her mother’s prophecy of worthlessness and her father’s unattainable love? She professed a deep love for her children, but also freely admitted that she’d only gotten pregnant to manipulate their fathers.

This was the first time that she had admitted that her sons' estrangement had been the result of *her* behavior. The first time she'd admitted that her behavior had been the cause for any of the past.

Valerie waited for the doctor to comment. After several moments of silence, she continued. "The boys are right. I was a terrible mother to them. They were the best kids, too..." Her eyes brimmed with tears.

Dr. Powell offered her a tissue and she dabbed the corner of each eye. "Sometimes when I met a new man, I would lie about having kids. I would go out with the guy every night for weeks, until all hours of the night. The boys were always stuck with a baby sitter. Or when they got older, alone."

"What happened when these men found out you had children?"

"They usually dumped me. But sometimes they accepted them. Then we'd be like a regular family for a while." Her tone was wistful. "Until they got tired of me." She paused before adding softly, "or I got tired of them."

"You talk about a regular family. What does that mean to you?"

She thought for a moment before answering. "A Mom and Dad that love each other and aren't afraid to show it. Kids that know they're loved and accepted unconditionally. But more than that... That certain spark that you see sometimes. The way the man and woman relate to each other. The way they relate to their kids."

“Is this what you’ve been looking for in your relationships?”

She nodded. “But I doubt I’ll ever find it.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because I haven’t yet. The men I’ve been with... They’re capable of it. I’ve seen it. But not with me. I’m doing something wrong.”

She wanted to shout, ‘Yes, you fool! You *are* doing something wrong. You can’t lure a man away from that kind of relationship and expect to have it for yourself!’ Instead she asked again, “What makes you say that?”

“Because something always goes wrong. We end up hating each other.”

She glanced at the clock on the wall behind her head. They were already running fifteen minutes past her scheduled time.

“Valerie, we’re running into the next hour. I have another patient scheduled for 11:15. But I want you to think about your last statement. ‘You always end up hating each other’. I’d like to explore that further in our next session.”

He held up remarkably well while in the room; but out in the hall, his body was racked with sobs and tears coursed down his cheeks. His father had been transferred from ICU onto the general floor. This, the doctor explained, indicated that he was medically stable.

David wondered what that meant. From what he could see, his condition had not really changed. He

remained confused, unable to recognize his wife or sons. His right arm and leg flopped uselessly if he attempted to move them.

A thin rubber tube snaked from a pump at his bedside into his left nostril. David knew that it reached all the way into his stomach. It was his only source of nutrition. The stroke had impaired his swallowing ability to the point that anything he attempted to eat would have a 50-50 chance of ending up in his lungs.

But it was the look in his eye that brought him to tears. Nick had always been strong and independent, determined to go through life without taking any handouts or asking for help. Now he was completely dependent even for the simplest things. Like eating. And going to the bathroom.

Alex clapped him on the shoulder encouragingly before entering the room. They were only allowed ten minute intervals with him. For a total of thirty minutes each eight hour shift. Irene could stay round the clock, now that he was out of ICU, and had not left the room in more than two days.

Sunday morning, it was decided that Nick was stable enough for discharge. He would be transferred to Sunnydale Rehab and Nursing Center the next day. Alex and Brian would help get him settled in. David had to catch a flight that evening.

He said goodbye to his father with tears in his eyes. Leaning down, he hugged him, laying his head against his chest. "I've got to get some things at work squared away," he whispered. "But I'll be back as soon as I can."

She didn't have to ask how Nick was doing. His expression when he walked through the door was answer enough. She opened her arms to him and he gratefully succumbed to the embrace.

He explained that his father would be transferred to a nursing home the following day and detailed the extent of his disability. He couldn't find the words to describe the look of despair in his eyes.

"I'm going back next week. I just have to take care of some things at work."

"Can me and the boys come with you?"

"Can you get away?"

She snorted. "In a couple months, I'll be out of a job. I'm done jumping through hoops."

"I'm sure Dad would love to see you," he said gratefully, knowing Nick would be especially glad to see the boys.

They arrived in Sunnydale the next Saturday and went directly to the nursing home. It was a sprawling brick building located just two blocks from the beach. The large inviting porch was lined with old fashioned rocking chairs, looking out over lavishly landscaped grounds. Although it was a beautiful sunny day, every chair was empty. They pushed through the stained glass entry doors.

Inside, they were directed down a long dimly lit hall. The odor of urine was almost unbearable, the noise almost as bad. Somewhere a man screamed 'Help me!

Help me!’ A woman they passed chanted ‘mama’ over and over again.

Various types of wheelchairs lined both sides of the hall, each containing the contorted and forlorn body of somebody’s grandparent. Some mumbled or moaned continuously, some reached out to them as they passed, others simply cried pathetically.

Shelly gulped several times and dabbed at the tears that formed behind the enormous sunglasses she wore for disguise.

They would never have recognized him, slumped over in a too small wheelchair, had Irene not been at his side, vainly trying to prop him up with a pillow. Jason gasped at the sight of him. This couldn’t be his grandfather! The pitiful figure before him bore no resemblance to the vigorous man who’d participated in so many batting practices and fishing excursions. The man who beat him in arm wrestling only a few years before!

Irene rushed forward to embrace her son and grandsons; and nodded to Shelly. David studied his father. His right eyelid sagged badly, effectively shuttering his eye. His mouth hung slack, one arm drooped over the side of the wheelchair, his fingers trailing the floor.

His legs were exposed, in the skimpy hospital gown; normally well muscled, they already exhibited signs of wasting. His right foot was twisted at a grotesque angle. It was evident that he did not recognize his visitors. Irene apologized. “Sometimes he just can’t remember a thing. He does a lot better after his therapy.”

He wondered what kind of therapy they were giving him. His father looked to be in worse shape than right after the stroke. They decided to sit in on his session.

It was obvious the therapists were not familiar with his case. They explained they were in the facility on a contract basis and never spent more than a few days at a specific home. The therapy ended after thirty minutes of 'passive' stretching exercises.

When they got back to Nick's room, lunch was being served. No one made any attempt to bring his father into the dining room. "Doesn't Dad have to go for lunch?" he questioned Irene.

He tried not to wince when she pointed out the plastic tubing that emerged from his hospital gown and connected to a tall metal pole, and explained that he was receiving a continuous feeding through a tube that had been surgically inserted into his stomach.

Two burly nurses' aides informed them that it was time for nap and whisked him down the hall and into his room. David tried to convince his mother to accompany them out for lunch. She firmly declined. Extracting a rumpled brown paper sack from her enormous purse, she informed them that she ate her lunch outside on the porch. David argued that hanging around the nursing home all day was not good for her, but she waved away his concerns.

"I don't know how they treat him when I'm not here," she explained, vehemently. "Can't you see that I need to keep an eye on him?"

They reluctantly left her there while they got something to eat. None of them was too keen about having lunch at the nursing home.

Once in the car, Shelly voiced what they were all thinking. “Oh my God, David! We have to get him out of there!” He wondered why his brothers hadn’t done so a lot sooner.

Instructing Shelly to order for him, he went to use the restaurant’s pay phone. When he returned, his expression was grim. “Can you believe it? That place is considered one of the best nursing homes in the area!”

Jeremy snorted with disgust. “We can’t let Grandpa stay there!”

He nodded his head in agreement. “I’ll find something better,” he promised. “If not in this area, then somewhere in the state; in the *United States* if that’s what it takes.”

“Why don’t you bring him home?” Shelly asked softly.

He shook his head. “My mother could never take care of him. You saw how much help he needs.”

“I meant your house. We could set it up like a mini hospital.”

He looked at her in amazement. “You’d be okay with that?”

She nodded. “We could hire therapists, nurses, the whole nine yards. Of course, your Mom would have to come, too. To keep an eye on things.”

Tears welled in his eyes. His mother had never been very nice to Shelly; his brother had betrayed and

divorced her. But still, she was willing to open her house to his invalid father.

After lunch he dropped them off at the hotel before continuing back to the nursing home, alone. His father was still down for his nap, Irene beside the bed, sitting in his wheelchair. He convinced her to leave him for minute to talk. They sat outside on the porch.

“Mom,” he began gently. “I’m sure you can see that Dad isn’t getting any better in this place.”

“He just started his therapy,” she protested. “It takes time.”

“His therapists didn’t know what the hell they were doing! Nobody in this place seems to know what the hell they’re doing. And you know what? This place is supposed to be the best in the area!”

“They do know what they’re doing. His one nurse is just wonderful...”

“She must be the *only* one, then. Maybe I’ll ask her if she wants to move to New Jersey!” Soberly, he added, “I want to take him home, Mom.”

“What?”

“Back to New Jersey. You too. I have this really big house... A mansion, almost. We could set up one wing as a rehabilitation center. Bring in our own therapists. Round the clock nurses.”

“I’m not leaving my house. My church...”

He silenced her objections. “Don’t you see, Mom? The doctor said Dad had a chance at a full recovery. Do you think he has that chance here?”

After several moments, she turned to face him. “Shelly owns that house, doesn’t she? She’d never agree to anything like this.”

He sensed she was softening. “Mom.” He reached for her hand. “Shelly’s the one who suggested it.”

She realized, not for the first time, just how kind hearted her former daughter-in-law was. She would have to swallow a large amount of pride to accept the offer. But it was a small price to pay to get her beloved Nick out of this hellhole.

“How soon could we go?” Simple as that, she had agreed.

“As soon as possible,” he promised. “I’ll have to talk to Brian and Alex first.”

“Your father and I still make our own decisions,” she reminded him. “Besides,” she added. “I didn’t see either of them making any such offer.”

Irene returned to her husband’s bedside, her step a little lighter. David headed to the hotel to make some phone calls.

He’d asked her to stand by in case he needed to use her name for influence, but she needn’t have bothered. He handled each obstacle with the quiet determination in which he approached everything.

The air ambulance had refused to even consider a trip of such length, stating that Medicare would never cover it. He calmly informed them he would be paying up front. And would need next day service.

The medical supply store in New Jersey agreed to deliver anything they needed within twenty-four hours, C.O.D.

The staffing agency had balked at his request. Licensed nurses twenty four hours a day, seven days a week; daily physical, occupational and speech therapy. They couldn't provide that kind of service with so little advance notice. Again, David was gently persuasive and, by the end of the call, was promised the required staff.

He called a family meeting for that evening, at his parents' house and picked up Irene from the nursing home.

"Hey, I didn't know you were back," Alex greeted him.

"I've been at the nursing home. I thought I'd see you there," he explained. He knew that Brian was still on vacation. And with Alex out of work... He figured they'd at least come to give Irene a break.

"I had to watch the baby..." Alex protested.

"Well anyway, I brought you guys here for a reason. I wanted to talk to you about Dad. What do you think about that place he's in?"

"It's kind of rank," Brian admitted, glancing sidelong at his mother.

Alex nodded. "It *is* kind of gross."

"Exactly!" David agreed. "I want to move him out of there."

"We've been through this with Mom," Alex explained. "Every other place around here is just like it. Even worse!"

He looked at Irene in surprise. He didn't know she'd already gone to Alex and Brian with her concerns and couldn't believe his brothers' lack of compassion. "I know," he replied. "That's why I want to take him back to New Jersey."

"I'm sure the nursing homes in New Jersey are no better than the ones here, David," Brian interjected.

"I'm not talking about a nursing home; I'm talking about my house. I want to set him up there. I've already arranged the staff and equipment. He'll fly out there by air ambulance."

Alex interrupted. "Don't you mean Shelly's house? You sure she's going to let you run a nursing home from her house?"

"She's already agreed."

He looked to his mother. "Are you just going to let him take Dad up to New Jersey? You'd never get to see him."

"I'm going with him," she answered simply.

Alex's mouth dropped open. "You're going to New Jersey? To live in *Shelly's* house?"

She nodded. "I think I've misjudged that girl all these years. She took one look at that nursing home and knew it was no place for your father. It's a lot more than I can say for the two of you!"

Brian shook his head, amazed at the turn of events and, actually, quite relieved. He knew that nursing home was a piece of shit. But there wasn't much he could do about it. He'd taken his mother to visit three other homes and found they all sucked. He was in no position to take

Nick into his home. Why not let David take him to Aurora?

Alex, on the other hand, was fuming. “Just what is it about Aurora? Half of my family is running off to live there?”

“Don’t be selfish, for once, Alex,” Irene said sharply. “Think about what this will mean to your father. And then remember, that you can’t stop us.”

He opened his mouth to say something and then closed it again, clenching his jaw tightly. He knew the look of determination on her face and that there was nothing he could say to change her mind.

Brian spoke up. “It sounds like the best thing for Dad. Go for it.”

Alex nodded helplessly. “When are you going?”

A fresh wave of anger washed over him with David’s answer. “Tomorrow.”

“You can’t be serious? Your Mom is moving to New Jersey? Next door to Shelly?”

Alex nodded. “I can’t believe it, either. Apparently, they’re turning David’s house into some kind of do-it-yourself nursing home.” He couldn’t get over the sense of betrayal he felt over his parents going to Aurora.

“How did it happen?”

“I guess they were so disgusted by the nursing home that they couldn’t stand the thought of him being there.”

“Was it that bad?” Valerie hadn’t visited Nick in the hospital; she had certainly never been inside the nursing home.

“I guess it was,” he admitted. “But what do you expect? A bunch of old people sitting around like that? How *good* could it be?”

Chapter 69

By ten a.m. everything was in place. The helicopter would touch down in the hospital parking lot at eleven. Nick would travel from the nursing home to the hospital by ambulance, which was already idling outside.

David consulted the driver and took possession of the gurney. “I told him to wait out here,” he informed the others. “In case we had to get Dad cleaned up or something first.”

No one batted an eye as they pushed the gurney down the hall and into Nick’s room. He was in bed; the room reeked of urine and feces. He ushered the others out and, with the help of his mother, bathed and dressed his father.

He enlisted Jason’s help in transferring Nick to the gurney, strapped him in and started down the hall. A nurse at the station did a double take as they passed. She jumped up from her chair and caught up with them.

“Where do you think you’re going?” she demanded.

“New Jersey,” David replied calmly.

“You just can’t walk in here and kidnap one of my patients!”

“I’m not planning to kidnap him. I’m planning to *rehabilitate* him.”

“Very funny! You just wait right here. I’m calling his doctor! And the police!”

Irene stepped forward. “Listen here, young lady,” she commanded. “I’ve been married to this man for forty-five years. No one is going to accuse me of kidnapping him!”

Their voices carried down the hall, causing the Director of Nursing came to see what all the commotion was about. The nurse was clearly relieved to see her.

“Mrs. Price” she said excitedly. “These people are trying to take Mr. St. John out. They say they’re taking him to New Jersey.”

“We can’t release a patient without a doctor’s order,” the stern faced woman informed them. “We have rules and policies.”

“And we have a plane to catch,” David replied, just as sternly. “Is my father some kind of prisoner?”

“No!” she snapped. “But we are responsible for his well being.”

“How responsible were you a few minutes ago when he was lying in piss and shit?”

Her lips tightened. “We are under liability...”

He cut her off. “I’m willing to sign a release, but it better be snappy. As I said before, we have a plane to catch.”

She nodded. “I’ll be right back.” Her heels clacked as she hurried down the hall.

“Jason,” he instructed. “You bring Grandpa out front to the ambulance. I’ll be out in...” He consulted his watch. “No more than five minutes.”

True to his word, he was out in less than four.

She'd never been on an airplane, let alone a puddle jumper like this. During the flight, Shelly tried to reassure her. "I remember how I used to hate to fly," she confided. "I found that if I sucked candy, I didn't feel as queasy." She offered her a roll of Lifesavers.

She accepted them gratefully, studying her. She looked nothing like the millionaire that she was, dressed casually in blue jeans and a Nike sweatshirt, her flaming red hair pulled back in a ponytail.

Nor did she look like an angel. But to Irene, that's exactly what she was. She had seen that they were in need and had opened her heart to them. Even though she had good reason to turn the other cheek. She had rescued Nick from that nursing home. And, for that, Irene would be forever grateful.

"Shelly," she began, faltering. "I want you to know how much I appreciate what you're doing. I've treated you badly all these years and, in the end, you were the only one I could count on."

"Nobody's perfect, Irene," she said simply. "Including me. You and Nick are my sons' grandparents. And you've been *my* parents for over eighteen years."

Tears blurred the older woman's eyes.

Her jaw dropped at the sight of the house. No wonder David wanted to live here! This was the kind of place people only dreamed about. The thought of living in a house like this only reinforced her choice to come here.

Shelly and the boys headed home to unpack. David took her for a tour, saving the east wing, turned rehab center, for last. He showed her the day room at the end of the hall. Sunlight flooded through the floor to ceiling windows. It would be a perfect place for Nick to take his therapy. The den contained an entertainment center, complete with TV and stereo. She pictured them spending their evenings there together, watching *Touched by an Angel*.

A hospital bed, chair lift, feeding pump and wheelchair had already been delivered. They had been set up in what had been designed as a nursery. The room was bright and airy, large enough to accommodate several active children and their playthings. Or one recovering stroke victim, and the necessary equipment. A small sun porch off the back of the room would serve as the nurses' station.

"And this will be your room, Ma." He opened a door connecting the two rooms to a traditional nanny's quarters: a small living room, kitchenette, bedroom and bathroom.

She looked around her in delight. It was like having her own apartment! And with Nick right next door. She opened the small refrigerator and inspected the gas stove. She could even whip up his favorite meals right here in her own kitchen. For a moment she forgot about him being sick, about the rubber tube that delivered all his meals, one drip at a time.

Shelly knocked lightly on the open door. “The nurse is here,” she informed them. “Her name is Verna. She seems really nice.”

“Good,” David replied. “Did she say anything about the therapists?”

“They’re all set up for tomorrow.”

He smiled. Everything was falling into place. Now all they were waiting for was Nick. He went downstairs to meet Nurse Verna.

The ambulance sounded its horn and David buzzed them in. He met them outside, holding several blankets. Climbing into the back, he tucked the blankets around his father. “It’s a lot colder here, Dad,” he explained.

Nick was worn out from the journey and Irene suggested he go to bed. The ambulance drivers helped get him settled in. Irene fiddled with the bed controls until he was positioned to her satisfaction. He fell asleep immediately. Verna watched over him from her station.

“How about something to eat?” Shelly suggested. “Christy made us a huge welcome home dinner.”

“Sounds good,” David replied. “We might as well go while Dad’s sleeping.”

“Go where?” Irene was reluctant to leave her husband, sleeping or not.

David explained that Christy’s cottage was right there on the grounds and smiled gratefully when she had absolutely no comment about the situation. They informed Verna that they would be out and instructed her on using the intercom system to contact them at the cottage.

Christy hugged her warmly. “Welcome Mrs. St. John. I was so sorry to hear about your husband.” She hugged her again. “But I’m real glad he came here to recuperate!” She ushered her into the small dining room.

“Sit here, Grandma!” Jeremy called, patting the chair beside him. Jason, who sat at her left, squeezed her hand encouragingly.

Shelly helped Christy serve: a delicious pot roast with cream gravy, tiny new potatoes basted in butter and topped with parsley, fresh baked bread, spinach, squash. Irene didn’t know when she’d had such a good meal.

She watched their dinnertime banter. Jason teased Jeremy about a girl that had been calling. Christy playfully punched him in the arm and told him to stop.

“Don’t you abuse my son!” Shelly cried in mock horror.

“Yeah,” Jason taunted. “My *Mom* will protect me!” He winked at Irene. “And my Grandma!”

“The Grandma’s the one I’d worry about,” David warned her gravely. “She pops a mean dishrag!”

“I do no such thing!” she protested indignantly. But couldn’t keep from laughing.

After dinner, they sat before a roaring fire. “Did you see my engagement ring, Mrs. St. John?” Christy held out her left hand for Irene’s inspection.

She clasped the hand of the Jason’s future bride, such a lovely girl. “Call me Grandma, Christy.”

The next morning, Dr. Neil Jones visited Nick. He was a friend of Brent's, and a top Geriatric Specialist. After a lengthy examination, he met with David and Irene.

"Your husband is receiving some powerful mind altering and tranquilizing drugs." He looked to Irene. "Does he have any psychiatric history?"

"No," she replied emphatically.

"So these are not long term medications?"

"No. He only ever took his heart medication. And, lately, a blood thinner."

"Why would he be taking these medications?" David questioned.

"Stroke patients are confused, unable to express themselves appropriately, sometimes they strike out at their caregivers and they frequently cry. This is considered a behavior problem and the patient is usually placed on antipsychotic or tranquilizing medication."

"My husband never tried to strike anybody!" Irene protested.

"I'm not saying he did, Mrs. St. John. I'm just telling you some the reasons the medication might have been initiated. At any rate, I'm going to taper down the dosage over the next week. We should see a gradual improvement in his level of consciousness."

Their first inkling that Nick was coming out of his funk was his sudden interest in the TV set up in his room. He also made his first effort to communicate with Irene, mumbling one word over and over, until she finally made it out. "R-r-r-remote!"

She handed him the remote control and was rewarded with a lopsided smile. Tears sprang to her eyes as he navigated the channels, using his left hand.

He worked very hard in therapy. The Speech Therapist proudly showed them his progress. He could accurately identify eight out of ten pictured objects; up from one out of ten just days before.

And he was talking! Although his speech was slow and slurred, it could be understood if he repeated himself enough times. He was even able to speak a few words to Alex and Brian on the phone. Once he was approved for trial feedings, Irene spent hours in her little kitchen preparing pureed versions of his favorite foods.

Chapter 70

When Tom asked her to meet with him after their recording session, Shelly assumed it had something to do with Cathy.

“I’ve just gone to contract with a very promising song writer,” he informed her. “He’s got some of the finest stuff I’ve seen in a long time. I’ve just got to find the right singer...”

She waited for him to continue. He watched her apprehensively, hoping she’d make the connection. After several minutes of silence, he cried in exasperation. “Shelly, I’m talking about you!”

“Me?”

“Come on, Shelly, you know how talented you are. You never needed Capone in the first place, so why not go solo?”

“What about a band?”

“Curt, Erik and John? They’re anxious to continue work with you.”

“You’ve talked to them?”

“Shelly, I’m ready to go to contract with this. Are you?”

She thought momentarily. “I’ll have Lorna call your office.”

LORI NAUMANN
PRIORITIES

Chapter 71

He settled Alexa on his lap and sat down to watch the game. Valerie passed by on her way to the kitchen, paused for a moment, and then sat down beside them. Stroking the baby's fine hair, she mused. Who would have ever thought she'd have to compete for a man with her own child?

But, sometimes, that's exactly what she felt like. Dr. Powell said it was natural for her to be a little jealous of the time her husband spent with the baby, but encouraged her to join in. Spend time as a family. Sometimes she tried. But sometimes Alex was so boring! All he wanted to talk about was feeding schedules, pediatrician appointments, highchairs... The list went on and on. But it was all about Alexa!

Chapter 72

He stood in the doorway, watching them. Shelly's back was to him. He had a clear view of his father. They were engaged in a fiercely competitive game of gin rummy. Nick grunted as she laid down her cards, chuckling.

She was the only one who didn't let him win; at first beating him every game. But as he progressed in therapy, his game improved. The first time he beat her, he cried with joy. She deftly dealt another hand, carefully placing his into a wooden cardholder that allowed him to play one-handed.

'No... p-p-p-peeking!' he admonished, laughing gleefully.

David shook his head in wonderment, both at the miraculous recovery of his father and, at the woman sitting at the table with him. Irene came up behind him and placed her hand on his shoulder. "He's doing great," she whispered.

"I know," he whispered back. "I'm real proud of him."

She repeated what had become her favorite phrase. "Coming here was the best thing we could have done for him."

He smiled to himself.

“It’s not just the therapy,” she continued. “It’s everything. The love of his family...” she trailed off. They watched Shelly deal another hand.

Nick noticed them in the doorway and beckoned them over. “W-w-on... s-s-s-six... g-g-games,” he crowed. His speech was slurred and awkward, but the words recognizable. “F-f-f-f-fair... a-a-and... s-s-s-square!”

“He cheated!” she protested. “I think that guy at the equipment place sold him some kind of trick card holder. He ended up with the ace of spades almost every game!”

Nick roared with laughter.

Lorna smiled, remembering their first business transaction. Shelly had timidly asked a few questions, but deferred to Alex for the major ones. She'd signed the contract only after he'd given it his approval.

This meeting was an entirely different matter. Shelly took control, voicing the conditions upon which she would accept RJF's offer.

Tom wasn't happy with the stipulations, but reluctantly agreed. Shelly had made it perfectly clear what she wanted from a music career. If they wanted her, they would have to agree to her terms.

“So,” she announced. “I’m back in the music business!”

“They agreed?”

She nodded. She hadn't been sure RJF would comply with her ultimatums: two albums in three years, a brief promotional tour with the release of each demo, no more than twenty hours a week studio time, and on the road no more than two weeks at a time. It was the only way she would return to the business. She studied each of their faces, Jason, Jeremy, Christy David, Nick and Irene. Family, she'd never again take it for granted.

Chapter 73

They studied the subtle differences in wedding invitations, hoping to agree on a style. “I got a call from Capone today,” Cathy informed him.

“What did *he* want?” Tom would never forgive him for turning his back on RJF.

“He wants me to talk to Shelly. He wants me to convince her to marry him. He wants her to move to California.”

“You told him to go to Hell, right?”

“Tom, he really loves her. What if she’s passing up a chance at a happy marriage?”

“She signed a contract with RJF,” he reminded her.

“She’s given up a lot for RJF,” she countered. “I’m going to talk to her. And if she decides that moving to LA with Capone is the right thing to do, I’ll advise her to break the contract.”

Valerie kissed him on her way out the door. “Where are you going?”

“I have a doctor’s appointment. I should be home around two.”

He looked at his watch. “It’s only nine now. How long is your appointment?”

“I had a little shopping to do afterward,” she explained. “You don’t mind watching the baby, do you?”

“Valerie, we planned to take Alexa to the park today. Can’t you give up shopping for once?”

“She’s five months old, Alex! She doesn’t know where she is. Why don’t you just take her into the back yard for a while?”

“Fine,” he replied wearily. “Have a good time.”

She left for her appointment without the slightest remorse. Dr. Powell was her salvation, someone to whom she could bare her soul, someone with insight into her deepest emotions and impulses.

“You’re in high spirits,” Dr. Powell commented. “Does it have something to do with your sons?”

The boys had ‘graduated’ from Evergreen, both earning their high school equivalency certificates. Dr. Kramer helped them find jobs and an apartment in Ocala, about an hour’s drive from Sunnydale. Valerie had been to see them since her last appointment with Dr. Powell.

She smiled broadly. “Things are going great between us!” she gushed. “I did exactly what you said. I begged, not for their forgiveness, but their understanding. I *validated* their pain,” she borrowed one of the doctor’s favorite phrases.

“Good! Now let’s look at how you broke away from your usual pattern in this meeting with your sons.”

“Well, this time I listened, instead of doing all the talking,” she began. “And I didn’t get defensive...”

“I don’t know how every little detail of this wedding becomes such a monumental task,” Cathy

complained. "It took Tom and me over two hours just to decide on the invitations. And you've changed this altar arrangement at least six times!"

"I'm sorry, Sis! I just want everything to be perfect." The wedding would take place in Shelly's elegant gardens, with an outdoor reception on the lawn. The guest list swelled to over three hundred, with Cathy adding names daily.

"Shelly? Do you think you'll ever get married again?"

"I hope so."

"Capone would marry you in a minute."

"What makes you say that?"

"I talked to him. He loves you, Shelly. And he wants you to go to California with him."

"But I don't love him," she protested. "I love David." There! She'd said aloud what she'd been feeling for months, maybe longer.

Cathy had wondered more than once if there was something between them. "You and David? How come you never told me?"

"I never told anyone. Including David."

"Why?"

"Doesn't it seem kind of weird? He *is* my brother-in-law."

"Was," Cathy corrected. "And I think he might feel the same way."

"What makes you say that?"

"I don't know. It's just a feeling. But we have to find out!"

“No!”

“Why not?”

“I’m afraid,” she admitted. “Things are so good they way they are. I don’t want to rock the boat.”

“Shelly, you can’t use fear as an excuse to avoid life. How long can you stand it, having him right next door, watching him date other women? How long before one of those other women nails him?”

“But what if he rejects me? How can we go back to being just friends?”

“That’s why you set up something real subtle. An informal little dinner, just the two of you.” Her voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. “Then, imagine yourself in bed with him,” she instructed. “Your body will give off so many hormones, you won’t have to say a thing. You’ll know whether he’s interested or not, trust me!”

“Which do you prefer?” Christy presented four variations of color schemes she’d come up with for the wedding.

“Which do *you* prefer?” It was always that way with Clark Ashton. He never offered an opinion before hearing her reasons for choosing a certain fabric, shade or arrangement.

“I think the peach and pink are the most striking, especially with splashes of tangerine, here and there.”

He nodded his approval. “That’s exactly what I was thinking, my dear.” Once again, he thanked the hands of fate that had steered Christy Brandt his way. Her

impeccable taste mirrored his own in many areas and she'd opened his eyes to so many new ideas. For instance, never in the past would he have dreamed of becoming involved in a wedding, but designing the floral arrangements, table settings and seating plan for the Meyers-Wilson nuptials was one of the most enjoyable assignments he'd ever had.

“Where is everybody?” He'd come home to an empty house and headed over to Shelly's.

“Well, Christy and Jason took your Mom and Dad to the movies, remember? And Jeremy has a date.”

He nodded sheepishly. “I don't know how I forgot, Mom's been talking about it all week.”

Casually, she suggested they go out for dinner and, for once, didn't care if he had to break a date to spend time with her. They found themselves at Umberto, Aurora's quaint Italian restaurant. It was the most romantic place she could think of. The soft music, intimate lighting and private booths afforded the perfect atmosphere for love to bloom.

After ordering, she concentrated on the strategies supplied by Cathy. She watched as he picked up his drink and visualized his long fingers caressing her breasts. Her nipples hardened. Her mouth grew dry, imagining the heat of his lips against hers. The restaurant ceased to exist as her mind filled with images of them, naked, making love.

She jumped as the waiter set a steaming plate of ravioli before her, breaking her reverie.

“Penny for your thoughts,” David joked.

She smiled guiltily. If he only knew! She wondered if she had sent any hormonal messages his way.

For once, he had no appetite. Even though Umberto served the best lasagna he'd ever tasted, he could eat no more than a few bites. His throat felt constricted; his heart beat irregularly. A fine sweat dampened his back and shoulders. He recognized the signs. He'd always been able to repress those feelings about Shelly. What the hell was wrong with him tonight?

Her foot bumped his, under the table, sending a jolt of burning heat up his leg and into his groin. Her hand accidentally brushed his arm, causing goose bumps to spring up along his spine. His desire threatened to overwhelm him.

He desperately focused his thoughts elsewhere, running the figures of his company's merger with another computer firm over and over in his mind, until Shelly finished eating. Driving home, he paid the strictest attention to speed limits, traffic signs and passing scenery.

She gathered her thoughts during the ride. Was she being too subtle? Or wasn't he interested? She decided to press her luck by inviting him in for a nightcap. He firmly declined the offer. At the door, she could tell by his expression that he was going to kiss her and she parted her lips to welcome his. He dipped his head toward hers but at the last minute pulled away. Before he lost all control.

Shelly got little sleep that night. She lay awake replaying the evening in her mind. It was obvious David didn't consider her in a romantic way. Mortified, she remembered imagining he would kiss her at the door.

“Valerie, you have got to start taking some responsibility for this baby!” he exploded, placing the wailing Alexa in her arms.

“What’s wrong with her?” she questioned. “Why won’t she stop crying?”

“She’s teething! Surely you remember Adam and Rich teething.” He was exasperated. How could she have so little maternal instinct?

“Yeah, I guess,” she patted the baby ineffectively on the back. The truth was; she never remembered Adam or Rich being as spoiled and demanding as her daughter had become.

Sam Forbes had signed on as producer, and Brent was handling marketing. The first album, *Shelly*, wouldn’t be released for at least a year, but a single was scheduled in the next couple of months.

“You know what the meaning of love is for me?” Tom asked; a pun on the single’s title *The Meaning of Love*. “Getting this wrapped up before my honeymoon.”

She looked to Sam, “You think we’ll make it?”

“Sure,” he replied. “No problem.”

“Without going outside twenty hours a week?” she added firmly.

“Well, that might be a problem...” She shot him a look of warning. “But we’ll make it,” he added hastily.

He avoided eye contact when he made the announcement. “Shelly, remember we talked about one of us having second thoughts when I moved in? I know it’s a little late, but I’m having some. I think it’s time I started looking for someplace else for me and my parents to live.”

She stared at him, shocked and ashamed. Obviously David had understood her subtle hints, and maybe even gotten a whiff of her raging hormones. It had been enough to make him want to move.

“Of course we’ll find something close by. And it will probably take a little while to find something suitable for my Dad...” He trailed off. What else could he say? ‘Oh and, by the way, could you please stay away until I’m gone? So I don’t have to fight off the urge to rip off your clothes and ravish you?’

She nodded silently. What had she done?

Irene stared at him, horrified, when he told her his plans. “Move? Why?”

“Some things have come up, Ma,” he said uncomfortably.

“David, you’ve said yourself that living here has done wonders for your father. Please! Don’t let your work interfere with family.”

“It has nothing to do with work,” he explained.

“Then what?” she demanded. “What could make you put your father’s health at risk?”

How did a person explain such a complicated situation? “I’m in love with Shelly,” he confessed, embarrassed. “And I can’t go on hiding my feelings.”

The admission didn't surprise her. He wasn't that great at hiding his feelings, especially from his mother. "So why hide your feelings? Why move away?"

"Ma, she's my sister-in-law!"

"Your brother remarried," she reminded him. "He has no claim to Shelly."

It certainly wasn't the reaction he expected, but, in any case, it didn't matter. "She doesn't see me that way, Mom. I don't want to jeopardize our friendship by letting her know how I feel."

Irene shook her head. Her son was wonderful, mature, intelligent and honorable. But he must be totally blind!

"How'd it go?" Cathy asked excitedly. "Did you consummate your relationship?" One look at Shelly's face turned her mischievous grin into a concerned frown. "What happened?" she asked anxiously.

"Nothing! I did just what you said, fired up my hormones, sent out a few signals. David didn't seem to notice anything different... Then he came over here, a little while ago, and told me he was moving out." Her face dissolved into tears.

Cathy watched her helplessly. She wished she'd never encouraged Shelly to test the waters with David. But she'd been so sure he had feelings for her!

Valerie described her ever-improving relationship with Adam and Rich. The boys were thriving. Though they continued outpatient therapy with Dr. Kramer, it was clear that they'd worked through their problems. They were employed full-time, and both had girlfriends.

"That's one obstacle out of your way," Dr. Powell commented. "Now you should concentrate on your relationship with your husband."

"Oh *that*," she waved her hand. "I wonder if it's worth my concentration." The doctor remained silent, waiting for her to elaborate. "I feel like I understand myself for the first time. Now that I know why I wanted Alex, I'm not so sure I still do."

She'd been afraid of that. In past sessions, they had delved into her pattern of pursuing men she considered unattainable. Once she'd won them over, she quickly grew disenchanted.

As usual, he was up in his wheelchair, waiting for her visit. Verna always made sure her patient was dressed and ready by seven a.m. The morning visits from his daughter-in-law were the highlight of his day.

Shelly found them equally refreshing. Nick awoke each morning with renewed determination to beat the devastating effects of his stroke. He saw every day as the opportunity to get a little closer to his goal. It was easy to get through a grueling day at the studio, after spending the morning with him.

Today was bittersweet, because she knew their visits would be coming to an end. She read the horoscopes aloud, Virgo for Nick and Aries for herself. Nick grinned at the prediction that Virgos would have a very productive day. Shelly sighed at the forecast of romance on the horizon for Aries.

She wondered if David had told Nick about his plans to move, and his reasons for wanting to leave Aurora.

As if reading her thoughts, he spoke up. “D-david... s-s-should... n-n-n-n-not... m-m-move.” He paused, out of breath by the energy expended speaking those four words. “L-l-love... y-y-y-you.”

Her eyes filled with tears. “I love you, too, Nick.”
“N-no... l-l-l-love... youuuu.”

Tears slid down her cheeks. She didn’t want them to leave either.

Nick pounded the table in frustration. “L-l-l-love... y-you... l-l-love... y-y-y-you.”

She couldn’t stand seeing him in so much distress, especially knowing she was at the root of David’s decision to move. Kissing lightly on the cheek, she bid him goodbye and fled. Nick continued insistently, “L-l-l-love... y-you... l-l-l-love... y-y-y-you!”

She heard Irene call out to her, but continued her flight. Gratefully, she saw that the limo was early, already idling in the drive. Inside, plush leather seats enveloped her, heavy tinted glass shielded her from the outside world.

“Damn it,” Irene muttered as the limo sped away. She hadn’t been able to make it outside in time to stop her.

David looked up from the mountain of work on his desk. “Cathy! What a nice surprise!”

“I came to invite you to lunch,” she announced casually. “Are you free?”

Across town, Irene stepped purposefully from the limo and into the lobby of RJF.

“If Shelly sent you to talk me out of leaving Aurora, the subject’s not open for discussion,” he informed her, after they’d been seated.

Cathy put down her menu and got right to the point. “I did come to talk you out of leaving Aurora, but Shelly didn’t send me. And if you tell her I was here, I’ll deny it. Now, I caused this problem between you two, and I’m going to do everything in my power to make it right!”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m the one who convinced Shelly to set up your little date,” she admitted. “She was so worried that making a move would ruin your friendship... But I just kept pushing, and pushing. Because I was so sure you had feelings for her.”

His jaw dropped. “Shelly was making moves? On me?”

She nodded. “She loves you.”

His hearty laugh echoed through the restaurant. “Listen, Cathy, I need to take a rain check on lunch. I’ve got to find your sister.”

“She’s at the studio,” she reminded him, smiling triumphantly. She knew it!

Shelly’s eyes widened to see Irene being ushered into the sound room. “Hold on a minute, guys,” her voice boomed over the microphone. She ripped off the headset and hurried to see what had brought her mother-in-law to the studio.

“I hope I’m not interrupting anything important...”

“Just rehearsal,” Shelly broke in. “What are you doing here? Are you okay?”

“I tried to catch you before you left this morning,” Irene explained. “I have to talk to you.” She looked around the crowded room. “In private.”

The band and crew members took their cue and filed out. Irene wasted no time. “I wanted to talk to you about why my son wants to move,” she began. “But first, I wanted to talk about you.”

Shelly braced herself for a tirade on the depravity of trying to seduce one’s brother-in-law as Irene continued. “In the past few months, I’ve come to know you better than I have in the last twenty years. You’ve earned my respect and admiration, as well as my love. And, to my husband, you’re ‘his angel’. So when I see that my son is in love with you, I am very happy. You understand?”

She shook her head. “Not really.”

“What I’m trying to say is that, if my son would rather move away than tell you he loves you, then I’m here to say it for him.”

“He’s moving *because* he loves me?” Her giggle bounced off the walls of the empty sound room. “I am so glad you told me!”

“So you care for him then?”

“I love him,” Shelly replied solemnly.

Irene smiled, triumphantly. She knew it.

EPILOGUE

An expanded version of the Wedding March had been specially mixed by Sam Forbes, to accommodate their longer-than-usual trip down the aisle. David's breath caught at the sight of his bride.

Shelly tightly gripped an elaborate rose bouquet in her left hand and the shiny metal walker in her right, her steps slow and measured to match Nick's, as he determinedly made his way down the flower strewn path, beside her.

"Who gives this woman in marriage?" the minister asked soberly, at the altar.

"I... d-d-do," Nick answered proudly, clearly overjoyed at the union.