

SANDHAIN publishing Ltd.

MARY EASON

A photograph of a man's muscular arms holding a woman's legs. The woman is wearing purple high-heeled sandals. The man is wearing a watch on his left wrist. The background is dark.

Thirty LESSONS

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Thirty Lessons

Mary Eason

Dedication

To my husband, Monte, for always encouraging me. To my editor, Jessica Bimberg, for opening this wonderful door for me. To all those still dreaming. Don't give up. Keep the faith. Dreams do come true.

Lesson 1: Always have one mistake that lets you know how far you've come in life and one to remind you of how much fun it was getting there.

When I turned thirteen years old, my mother gave me a copy of a book entitled, *Thirty Lessons Every Girl Should Know Before Becoming A Woman*. I thought, okay—Mom's not known for her heart to hearts, which was fine by me. I didn't need to hear her version of the facts of life.

I couldn't wait to be alone with my friends and devour *Thirty Lessons*. So you can imagine our surprise when we cracked open the first chapter of the book and read,

“Lesson One: A woman's place is to be seen not heard.”

I thought o-kay, it's getting off to a slow start. No big deal. By the time we reached Lesson Thirty, I knew we were in serious trouble.

Upon further research, I discovered *Thirty Lessons* had been written in the thirties by a man. Although I would later come to blame *Thirty Lessons* for all my future relationship failures, there was one nugget of wisdom buried within its pages that I have always found to be true.

It's been said, that life is just a series of events with consequences.

On their own, they wouldn't add up to much. But when you put them together, you never know where they'll end up taking you, or what the outcome will be once you're there.

For me, the first event to have unbelievable consequences in my life came in the form of my decision to move to New York City. After the disastrous breakup of my marriage to Dwight Taylor.

For a small town girl from Sweetwater, Texas, moving to New York City was the equivalent of moving to another universe. Everything about the city seemed foreign to me.

I found a job at Martin Publishing in the accounting department of all things, something I could not have been less qualified for had I actually counted with my toes during the interview.

But apparently my new boss, Danielle Kincaid saw something of promise, or more likely desperation, in me and hired me on the spot. Six years later I'd worked my way up the corporate ladder to become Dani's second-in-command.

During this stage in my life, another key event took place. The ending of my yearlong relationship with good old, reliable Harry Davison. Harry worked for Martin as well, in the non-fiction department.

To a woman cheated on by her husband, Harry seemed like a dream come true. Always there for me whenever I needed him to be, but never too clingy or demanding.

Harry had only one flaw. He was boring as hell!

Dani compared him to dry wheat toast. In her opinion, Harry was about that exciting. But Dani's taste in men ran in an entirely different direction. She preferred the challenges of the bad boys. I'd been there, done that.

After Dwight and several other mistakes along those same lines, Harry was... How to put this nicely? Harry would never be the best I'd ever had, but definitely the safest and the most reliable. Harry was comfortable. He would never let me down, certainly never cheat on me the way Dwight had.

At least that's what I believed until two days before my thirty-ninth birthday when Harry returned from a business trip abroad to announce he'd met the girl of his dreams.

This struck me as kind of funny, seeing as we'd been going out exclusively for over a year now. On several different occasions, Harry and I had some serious talks about our future together. I thought *I* was the girl of his dreams.

“Harry, what are you saying?” I asked with an all too familiar stupid look on my face. As I stood in the doorway of my tiny apartment, I couldn’t believe I’d heard him correctly. This was the guy who swore I was a dream come true for him a mere week earlier. Right before he’d left on this trip.

“Paige, I’m sorry. I know how hard this must be for you, hearing it like this. Believe me, I didn’t mean for it to happen. I certainly didn’t set out on this trip wanting it to happen. But I’ve never felt this alive before. I think I love her. She’s the most exciting woman I’ve ever met...um, not that you’re not exciting. It’s just that things happened, and we clicked in bed and...”

At that point, Harry picked up my hit-by-a-truck expression, and decided I was about to get all emotional on him.

“You just met her? On this trip? The one you just got back from?” I asked when I could actually speak again. After hearing the worse possible insult. What was I now? Boring in bed as well?

“Does it matter?” he asked in his best patronizing Harry way.

“Yes—it matters. You’re damn right it matters! I mean, you and I have been together for over a year now. How can you go out and sleep with someone you met on a trip? How could you do that to me, Harry? How could you...”

I wasn’t sure what I wanted to say to him at that point, beyond the fact that I really, really wanted to hit him hard. Knock that condescending smile right off his face.

But before I actually went into action, a little voice in the back of my head told me maybe I’d made another narrow escape. I’d gotten away from Mr. Wheat Toast before I became as boring as he truly was.

“Paige, I’m sorry, but you were stifling me. I mean, could you possibly be more boring?” I think it was at this moment Harry finally realized how close to doing him bodily harm I’d gotten. He was halfway out the door when I slammed it hard on him, thoroughly enjoying the sound of Harry’s painful yelp.

I wish I could say this was the last I thought about Harry Davison, but unfortunately, those nasty parting words of his kept coming back to suggest that maybe all of my past boyfriend mistakes weren't just poor choices on my part. Maybe I was the problem. Maybe I'd somehow become too boring to hold their interest.

I mean, if someone like Harry, someone Danielle dubbed the king of boredom, was telling me this, maybe I did have a serious problem. Certainly more than Harry walking out on me. In fact, maybe I should give up this crazy search for the perfect man before it turned up any more losers.

At this thought, I reached for the pint of Blue Bell Homemade Vanilla ice cream I'd hidden in my freezer.

With spoon in hand, I reached for the phone.

"Do you think I'm boring?" I all but yelled those words at my best friend before realizing the time. Not to mention the fact that this was Tuesday night and Dani always spent Tuesday night "in", which meant in bed with her current bad boy, live-in boyfriend. An investment banker, or something along those lines, by the name of Mark.

"Dani, I'm sorry, I completely forgot it's Tuesday... Go back to doing whatever you were doing. I'll talk to you tomorrow at work."

I didn't wait to hear her answer. I simply replaced the receiver and dove spoon first into the best ice cream Texas has ever produced.

I'd almost finished off the pint when my doorbell rang and I feared a repeat visit from dear old unreliable Harry.

I was pleasantly surprised to find Dani standing before my peephole, holding a large bottle of Southern Comfort.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have called this late. I didn't realize it was so late when I called. What are you doing here anyway? I didn't expect to see you tonight." While I continued to jabber on, Dani pushed me back inside the apartment and locked the door.

She didn't say a word. She simply walked over to my kitchen cabinet and produced two glasses. One of which she poured half full and the other, all the way to the top. Dani handed me the overflowing one.

“Okay, sister—spill it. What happened?”

Danielle Kincaid had to be the most contradictory woman I’d ever met. Not only smart, she was drop-dead gorgeous to boot. And so tall that I’d often asked her on more than one occasion why she wasn’t strolling along some runway somewhere.

Dani had to be one of those urban legends you hear so much about. You know, one of those women who actually did wear a size zero. And yes, they do make such a thing. I’d certainly been shopping with her enough times.

“Spill it, Paige. Why aren’t you out with old what’s his name? I thought you two had a hot...correction, lukewarm date tonight?”

Dani didn’t know how close to the truth she’d hit with that remark.

“I did...we did. But that’s all over now. Harry broke up with me, Dani.” I pretty much wailed those words, only to see her roll her eyes. She pushed me onto the sofa before refilling my now empty glass.

“Good riddance, and congrats on a very narrow escape, I say.” When she spotted my unhappiness she asked, mostly out politeness, “What happened?”

“He told me he found someone else. Can you believe it? Harry found his dream girl. How can he find his dream girl so fast? I thought I was his dream girl. Can you believe he actually had the nerve to tell me *I* was too boring for *him*?” I took another slug of whiskey and looked to Dani for reassurance. She didn’t even hesitate.

“Ol’ boring himself—please! Paige, you were lucky to get rid of him. The guy was all but dead. And of course, you’re not boring. You know that. I’ve certainly told you enough times. The only boring thing about you was the hundred and eighty pound weight you were dragging around. Harry was holding you back, honey. You changed to fit into his world, Paige. Before him, you were such a fun-loving person. Don’t let Harry play with your self-esteem like that. Trust me—you have no idea how much better off you are going to be without him in your life. Besides, the only reason you were with him in the first place was because you’d met a few losers along the way. You’ll find someone who is right for you,

and I don't mean someone tame like Harry. What you need is someone who will set you on fire, melt all your uncertainty away. After all, you have all of New York City to choose from. Don't settle for someone you work with, Paige. I warned you about that. It doesn't work out usually. Believe me I've tried it before. I should know. And you know what they say? Don't...sleep where you work?"

"Yeah, well, you don't have to worry about it happening again, because I'm finished with men! They're all a bunch of losers in one way or another as far as I'm concerned. And don't look at me like that—you know it's the truth. That's why you never let yourself to get too serious about any of them."

Now, had I been thinking clearly and not acting on sheer emotion as well as far too much whiskey, it would have hit me. Dani wasn't agreeing with me. In fact, she had gone a little too quiet. But at the time I thought, okay she's simply letting me get everything out of my system.

"You don't mean any of what you're saying. You're upset. Paige, you know as well as I do you didn't love Harry. Be honest with yourself. You only went out with him because you needed security. A.K.A. boring."

"Yeah? Well he must not be too boring, because he's 'in love'! He's met his soul mate. Oh God, I think I'm going to be sick."

By the time we'd killed most of the Southern Comfort, I was close. The room began to spin and I couldn't remember what I'd been talking about any longer. At this point my good friend hauled my butt off to bed.

When I woke the following morning, my tongue felt as if it were glued to the roof of my mouth with fur on it. It took a whole lot of focusing on my part to make out the clock next to my bed, but when I did see the numbers clearly, I realized I was already late for my busy workday.

I jumped out of bed, a little too fast for my unhappy stomach, and tried to remember what my day actually looked like. Usually, I didn't have anything scheduled before ten, but then it was almost that now.

I dressed in record time, trying to shove the ugly scene from the night before out of my thoughts entirely.

Unfortunately, there was one undeniable fact I couldn't ignore. As Dani had pointed out when I'd first started dating Harry, when you work with someone you date, the breakup just goes on and on and on.

I decided as I rushed out the door to find a taxi, before calling our area secretary, I wasn't going to think about Harry anymore. I'd wasted a whole year of my life on his sorry ass. I certainly wasn't about to put in another minute thinking about the ugly things he'd said to me last night. Dani was right. They needed to invent a new word in order to describe how boring Harry had become.

It took a whole lot of sweet-talking, using every trick in the book, including as much of the southern charm as I could muster, to finally convince our secretary, Ralph Minnows, to reschedule my morning.

"Okay, but you owe me, Miss Texas, and I mean big time. You know I'll have to move those three meetings you have with some very high up muckety mucks this morning, don't you? What's the matter anyway? You and *that one* have too good of a time last night?"

I literally cringed over Ralph's reminder of Harry. Of course, everyone around the office knew Harry and I were seeing each other. I wondered how long it would take before the whole office figured out we were over. No doubt, Harry would be only too happy to tell them his reasons for dumping me.

At that point, I realized that I'd left poor old Ralph literally hanging.

"No. In fact, you might as well hear it from me, but you are the first, Ralph..." I left the rest of that sentence unsaid, allowing Ralph to read whatever he wanted into it. "It's over between us. Harry and I are over. So...well, you know."

"Well, I can't say that I'm not happy to hear it. I know you liked the guy, Paige, but frankly, there was always something a little too shifty about him for my tastes. You know what I mean?"

Yesterday, I would have taken exception to Ralph's comments. But today, well, I happily agreed with him.

"Thanks, Ralph. I'm beginning to think you may be right. But do me a favor, will you? Let's not ever talk about Harry again, okay? All I want

to do right now is forget I ever met him. Which is going to be hard enough, seeing as I work with him. Anyway, I'm almost there. I'll see you in a few."

In the six years I'd worked for Martin Publishing, Ralph had been the department's assistant through all of them. Everyone loved Ralph. But no one, including Dani, was under any false impression the department was controlled by anyone other than Ralph. Not that he flaunted his power. He didn't need to. Ralph could be a force to be reckoned with and the one person around you didn't want to piss off.

So when I walked into the cubicle area Ralph called home, smack dab in the heart of the accounting department, I knew better than to walk past his desk without waiting to hear what he might say.

Ralph glanced up from arguing with someone on the phone and promptly put them on hold the second he spotted me. I don't think he even gave the person time to respond before hitting the hold button and dropping the receiver on his desk.

By this time, Ralph had gotten out of his chair and came bouncing around the area he'd blocked off from intruders to give me a hug.

"I've rescheduled your whole day, Miss Texas," he told me before I managed to dodge the bear hold. I tried to keep the surprise to myself and bite my tongue enough to keep from saying something I would later regret.

"Thank you, Ralph. You're so sweet. This will give me time to get through all of my email."

"Rat's ass it will. You have a one o'clock appointment at Elizabeth Arden. You're getting yourself all prettied up, honey. So don't go into that office of yours and start frowning over a whole bunch of emails and numbers. You need a new look, missy. You're looking a little too frumpy for New York."

Now, coming from anyone else, I probably would have run away crying, but Ralph, well I loved him for his concern and I took every single one of his words to heart.

“I look that bad?” I asked, reaching for my little compact only to have Ralph pass me the enormous hand-held mirror he used to look at himself, sometimes, before answering the phone.

Ralph had read an article somewhere that said if you smiled into the mirror when you answered the phone, all that cheerfulness will be conveyed to the person on the other end. Unfortunately, after about a week of practicing this philosophy, Ralph decided it wasn’t his style. He’d quickly gone back to the old way of doing things. This meant mostly snapping at those who dared to interrupt his day.

One glance at my reflection was all it took. I handed him back the mirror and actually started to cry. I looked terrible. And it wasn’t just because of the tears, and it wasn’t because of all the Southern Comfort I’d consumed last night. I looked bad enough for me to turn to Ralph for help. When had this happened anyway? Where was that adventurous, carefree woman who’d moved to New York six years ago?

“How long?” I asked Ralph and wondered whether I really wanted to hear his answer.

“Long enough!” he said pointedly. Which meant this wasn’t all Harry’s fault.

“I look hideous. I can’t see anyone like this—ever. When is the appointment again?”

“Now, don’t fret, Miss Texas,” Ralph told me in his best soothing tone. But I wondered, as he took my arm and led me away, if it was just because of his concern for me, or was Ralph trying to get my hideous self out of his pleasant environment.

“Liz will get you looking back to your beautiful self in nothing flat. There’s still a pretty woman under all the worry. You need a facial and a little snip on those blonde curls to put them back in shape, and honey, do me a favor and stop wearing those horrible black glasses. They make you look like a schoolteacher, and not in a nice way either.”

Ralph opened the door to my office and walked me inside before gently shoving me into my chair.

“I’m getting you some coffee. You relax and spend the rest of the morning unwinding.”

After Ralph left me alone with my coffee—Starbucks of course—I thought about my life while I tried to open my email as quietly as possible in case Ralph was still lurking outside my door with a whip.

When had my life gotten this off track? I mean, most of the time I loved my job at Martin. But if I were being honest, it was a far cry from my little girl dreams. And more and more lately, I’d thought about returning to my past career.

But in New York, such humble aspirations as becoming a teacher seemed almost as ludicrous as most of my other small town ways. This city was all about success. Teaching, although a noble goal, wasn’t what most people classified as successful.

I had two serious relationships end in failure, not to mention a handful that never got off the ground, to remind me of how far away from my dreams I’d strayed.

By this point, one day before my thirty-ninth birthday, I’d planned on being settled into the perfect career, in a serious-going-somewhere relationship which, as much as I hated to admit it, meant marriage for me.

By my age, my parents had been married for years. They’d certainly known what they wanted from life.

When had I stopped knowing? Was all this confusion because of my breakup with Harry? Or was it a sign of something more serious? Did I need more than a makeover to make *me* over?

Outside my window, a beautiful fall day appeared to be in the works. But inside my little office, it was a dark and cloudy day filled with doubts.

I scanned through the items in my inbox, most of which only reminded me of all the work I should’ve been doing right now. Today, there was the usual assortment of correspondence, but I wasn’t interested.

Why had it taken me until this moment in my life, not to mention the ending of another less than successful relationship with Harry, to figure all this out? Had I always felt this way? Had I only been in denial all these years?

As I sat staring at the email before me, one particular piece caught my attention. Mostly because it was from the boss. And by this I mean the big boss, old man Martin himself. The god very few people were ever allowed to catch a glimpse of anymore.

In the six years I'd worked for the man, I'd never once seen him in person.

I often wondered, and would have believed if Dani hadn't had all her run-ins with him, if the old guy had died a long time ago and no one wanted the news to get out.

What I found written in the one little paragraph was shocking. So the old guy would be retiring after all? It wasn't just another office rumor. It was right there in black and white and to the point. A simple announcement, stating the official facts. Joshua Martin would be gone by the end of the month.

More change was on the way. In my current restless mood, I wondered if maybe this wasn't a sign of some sort. Maybe I needed to look for a career along the lines of my past desires.

Ralph found me still sitting there drumming my fingers on my desk. In his usual blunt way, he simply barged in and shooed me off to my appointment.

"And don't come back here today, Miss Texas," he warned before telling me he'd updated my calendar online. I'd be safe until ten the next morning, when I had a meeting with some folks from the non-fiction department, along with Dani, in her office.

Those words made me stop dead in my tracks before Ralph answered the question I couldn't ask. "Nope, he won't be there. You can relax. Enjoy your pampering, Paige."

Lesson 2: No matter what the occasion always carry a purse that is both stylish and large enough to hide lots of chocolate.

After a somewhat intimidating session at Elizabeth Arden's, I returned to the scene of yesterday's disaster. My tiny apartment had never looked so dreary and I wondered again, why was I just now seeing all of these things?

But I had to admit, while on the inside I might feel like the same old miserable person who'd left the office earlier, on the outside I certainly didn't look like her. I'd made a total transformation.

My skin actually looked thirty-two again—well okay maybe closer to thirty-eight—and my hair, well, it had undergone the biggest change. Normally I wore my naturally curly hair at shoulder length, but today, in the blah mood I'd entered the salon in, I'd found it easier to simply go along when I stylist suggested something a little bit more daring. It worked. I actually looked stylish again. My curls had a brand new bounce to them in their shorter, barely-touching-the-nape-of-my-neck length.

Yes, I looked like a new woman, but everything around me shouted the same old boring, dirty word...routine.

Maybe what I needed was a new apartment closer to work, or perhaps a dog, someone to keep me company since apparently I'd become entirely too boring for the normal male companionship.

The more I considered this idea the more I liked it. I promised myself I would talk to the super and get it cleared. After that I'd buy myself a new partner.

At this point, I began to feel a little more like the old Paige Wilder, the woman who'd come to New York with high hopes and big dreams.

I'd started weeding through the stack of junk mail I received each single day when Dani called.

"Do you feel better today?"

"Yes, a little, and I'm sorry that I cut out on you today. But you can't argue with Ralph."

"Oh please. You know that's not a problem. I actually meant the fact that you'd managed to rid yourself of Harry. You should be thrilled."

As I considered this, it hit me I hadn't really missed Harry very much today. Oh sure, I'd thought about him. A lot in fact. Mostly while envisioning new and exciting ways to extract my revenge on him.

"You know, I don't think Harry was the problem, Dani. I think it was me. I'm in a rut. How did I let myself get to this point anyway? I used to love life. I looked forward to every single day. Now, it's a hassle thinking about what to have for lunch."

"Welcome to single life, Paige. It gets to you after a while. It just took you longer than most to realize it. It must be all that cock-eyed, small town optimism of yours."

"You feel this way too?" I had to admit I never believed Dani capable of feeling this lost. She was the most in control woman I knew.

"Of course I do. Every single woman in the world feels this way at some point. And yes, there are times when it's hard to take, especially when you reach 'that age'."

I knew exactly what Dani meant. In less than six months, Dani would be turning forty—every single woman's nightmare. For most of us, turning forty and finding yourself alone meant settling. You settled for what you were able to land, instead of what you wanted.

"What do *you* do about it?"

"What every self-respecting, single woman in the world does. I go shopping. Get yourself together, kiddo, because I'm coming over and we're going to shop until we can't possibly shop any longer."

I laughed and tried to protest. “Do you know what time it is? What do you expect to find at this hour?”

“Girl, if you have to ask you *are* in a rut!”

After one world class shopping spree, in which I bought far too many pairs of shoes and Dani purchased a new record number of purses, she and I went back to her boyfriend Mark’s apartment to relax and admire our purchases over a glass of wine.

Mark’s apartment was on the Upper West Side. It was clear from every piece of tastefully decorated furniture in the place that the guy was loaded.

“You’re lucky. How on earth did you find Mark?”

Dani, who had more energy than anyone I knew, couldn’t seem to sit still. She’d been prowling aimlessly around the living room before landing over next to the windows. When she turned to me, she gave me that look of hers which told me I’d asked the most ridiculous thing.

“How do you think? He can’t get enough of me, you know?”

I shook my head. “Is that all there is to it? Geez, now I am depressed.” Thus far, at the learned age of almost thirty-nine, I’d found the only thing most men, or at least most of the men I met, wanted from me was sex. Sex made their world go round. But apparently, I wasn’t any good at it. “I’m getting a dog. At least a dog will be there for you when you feel like crying.”

While Dani laughed at this remark, I knew she’d seen my sadness.

“You know what’s wrong with you, don’t you?”

I glanced at her hoping she had some new insightful information that would cure my blues.

“It’s this whole birthday thing. Why do women put so much importance on a number? Big deal, it’s only a number! But, since it’s got you blue, I know exactly what you need. In fact, I have it all planned out. But I’m not going to tell you until tomorrow night.”

At that little piece of news, I closed my eyes in horror. I still couldn’t bring myself to think about the last birthday party she’d thrown for me.

Dani invited everyone—and I mean everyone—she knew to her last boyfriend's place. Unfortunately, in Dani's mind, this meant me and a dozen of her favorite single men. Her entire guest list consisted of men. It was the longest evening of my life and one I'd sworn never to repeat.

"Please...tell me you didn't."

When she spotted my pained expression, Dani started to laugh before deciding to give in a little.

"Relax, Paige—it won't be as bad as you think. But you are going to need to dress up in your very best, and that means you need something new. As it happens, I planned ahead and took care of it for you." She left me staring after her, more confused and twice as uneasy as before.

When she returned a few minutes later, she carried a garment bag with something black inside. She took the plastic off and held up the full-length, *skinny* black dress for me to see.

Rendered speechless by the image of myself in that little black dress, I shook my head. There was no way I'd be wearing that thing anywhere. It looked way too slim and it definitely was missing most of its back.

"Uh-uh," I protested as she pulled me to my feet. Dani wasn't put off.

"Uh huh..." She held the dress out to me and pointed to the bedroom. Go. Try it on."

Now me being her humble little slave did exactly what she asked me to do. The second I saw myself in the mirror, I felt like a very risqué version of Cinderella. No way was I leaving the room in this, much less going out into the world dressed like this.

"Oh my God, you look fabulous! Just like a princess." Dani stood behind me assessing me down to my toes. "All you need is some sexy shoes for the length to work but luckily, I convinced you to buy those little strapless ones."

"Dani, I can't go out in public with half the back missing out of my dress!" I tried to meet her gaze in the mirror and actually get this point across, but Dani had a stubborn streak. "I can't."

"Not only can you, but you will, because we're going some place magical tomorrow night." I think she spotted the emergence of my small

town roots. “Don’t worry. I’ll be right beside you, princess. You’ll come here after work, so I can do your makeup, give you all the details. And we’re leaving work early tomorrow. I’ve already had Ralph take care of it.”

As hard as I tried, those were the only hints Dani would give me. When I caught a taxi home, I felt more restless and uncertain than ever before. And just as positive Dani could keep the men of the world, every single one of them. I’d get myself a nice little dog and live happily ever after. Just like the real Cinderella probably had.

* * *

After the morning from hell, interrupted by a call from the parents in Florida, I couldn’t have felt less like Cinderella if I’d actually turned into a pumpkin.

My parents, after almost six years of touring round the country in their RV, had found themselves a nice little house along the beach outside of Miami. The house had three bedrooms, one of which subbed as my father’s office.

You see, Dad had it in his head he was going to write a book. We never managed to get him to tell us what the book would be about. He would only tell us it was going to be the next blockbuster and I’d publish it for him.

“Honey, happy thirty-ninth birthday! I can’t believe my baby is turning thirty-nine today. And still living on her own, in New York City.”

My sweet mother, Rebecca Wilder, always dreamed of living in New York. In Mom’s mind, it was like living in a sophisticated fairy tale world all the time. I didn’t have the heart to tell her nothing could be further from the truth.

“Hi, Mom, what are you and Dad doing this morning?”

“Your father is listening in as well, honey. We’re on our way to our morning walk along the beach, but we wanted to call and wish our favorite daughter happy birthday first.”

This had been my mom's favorite joke for years, what with me being an only child and her only daughter and all. Mom told this joke on every single one of my birthdays.

"Hi, Dad. You two still enjoying Florida?"

"Oh, Paigie, you bet we are. But I'm sure it is nothing compared to your life there in New York." My father, John Wilder, worked hard all his life as a plumber in Sweetwater. Dad made a very nice living for his little family. My mother never had to work a day in her life. But she did play at it. This meant Mom volunteered at my school functions. After I became too old to want to hang with the parents any longer, she'd gotten herself a little part-time job selling cosmetics at the Estee Lauder counter in the local mall. In Mom's mind, she was a professional beauty consultant. I wondered what she'd say if she could have seen her little girl before her makeover yesterday?

I sat listening to my mother prattle on about their life in Florida when Ralph came in carrying a huge bouquet of flowers. This gave me a good excuse to end the call.

"Who are they from?" I wondered if maybe Harry had come to his senses. Not that I wanted Harry back, but his words still stung. And I couldn't get them out of my mind. In fact, I'd been planning my revenge ever since he dumped me.

"From me—who'd you think, Miss Texas? That loser ex of yours? Please!"

"No. They're beautiful, Ralph. How'd you know I loved lilacs?"

He gave me a look as if to suggest no matter how much I tried to deny it I'd thought exactly as much. But Ralph forgave me anyway.

"Are you kidding? I know everything there is to know about you. And some things aren't very pretty." Ralph handed me an extra large cup of Starbucks House Blend along with a piece of Italian Cream cake.

"You're too good to me, you know? Are you available?" I grinned wickedly at him and saw Ralph's usual scowl distorted into happiness for a second, before the old prickly guy returned.

It had to be the hardest thing in the world getting a glimpse of the sentimental side of Ralph. But I knew it existed. I'd certainly felt it enough.

"Sorry, sister—you're not my type. I don't go in for small town blondes under five feet tall."

"I happen to be five-foot-three, for your information. And I'm not small town anymore."

No one in the office had ever found the nerve to ask Ralph about his preference in companionship and he'd certainly never volunteered a thing.

"Uh huh—maybe using the Hicksville measuring system. Anyway, doll, your calendar is light today, at your boss's request. You only have a couple of appointments. Enjoy."

A couple of my coworkers, along with Dani and Ralph, took me to lunch and indulged me in entirely too much champagne. By the time we returned to the office, we'd had one of those two-hour lunches.

At four o'clock, Dani appeared in my doorway pointing to her watch. "Let's go, Paige. It's going to take me the rest of the afternoon to get you presentable."

On the taxi ride over to the apartment Dani shared with Mark, I tried again to get her to give me some idea of what I'd face tonight. But Dani wasn't ready to give anything away yet.

"You'll know soon enough. Don't fret."

Don't fret? I focused hard to make sure this was actually coming from my friend and not my mom.

In the apartment, she shooed me off to shower while she made us a little something to take the edge off all the alcohol she promised we'd be consuming. We sat giggling like two little girls at a slumber party while she did my hair and makeup.

By eight, we were both dressed to the nines. And I felt more than a little uneasy about my slim-fitting dress without a back. Not to mention the heels I'd let Dani talk me into buying. They were four inches at least. It was hard enough to get around on them, coupled with the fact that I

couldn't take anything bigger than a baby step in that dress... Well the night had all the makings for the worse disaster ever.

Dani grabbed a couple of light wraps for us, handed me a bag so tiny I barely had room for my house key, while promising to bring the rest of my things to work the following day. She carried something hidden behind her back which only made my anxiety grow.

"Okay, where are you taking me and what have you got there?"

Dani didn't answer right away. She simply smiled very mysteriously before locking the apartment. "You'll see soon enough, sweetie."

Inside the taxi, we jostled along city streets until finally coming to a stop in front of one of the most expensive hotels in the city. I'd only been by this place on a couple of different occasions. But tonight the hotel was all ablaze.

I turned to Dani. "Why are we stopping?"

"We're going to a party, princess. A masquerade ball fit for Cinderella." Dani actually had the nerve to laugh at my shocked expression.

"What masquerade party?"

"The one inside this hotel."

"Do you even know whose hosting this party?"

"Sure I do." She named off one of the most talked about men in all of New York City. A wealthy man who made his fortune several times over on Wall Street.

"You know this person? They actually invited you to this party?"

By this time, I had a bad feeling about the whole thing. Somehow, I knew nothing can be further from the truth.

"No, that's why we're crashing it."

I wanted to cry. Right here in front of this ritzy hotel. This was not how I've envisioned spending my thirty-ninth birthday—locked away in a jail cell somewhere.

"I'm going home." I leaned forward to tell the cabbie where to take me when Dani stopped me by pulling me along with her.

"Now listen here, Paige Wilder," she began before remembering the cabbie listening in on our conversation while waiting for his money. Dani paid the man and sent him on his merry way.

"All of your life you've played it safe. You've done exactly what's expected of you, and you've put up with a lot of shit from people because of it. Namely men who didn't deserve you. You let yourself get involved with the king of boredom because you'd been hurt in the past. Well, no more. Life isn't safe, Paige. Not if it's worth living.

"It's time you started having some fun before you shrivel up and become another Harry. Tonight, you and I are going to smile and walk into that hotel there and we are going to have the time of our lives. Which will include drinking entirely too much and hopefully, if we're lucky, getting you laid." She stopped for a moment to give me time to recover.

"I want you to go in there and forget about all your inhibitions for one night." Dani handed me a small, black velvet mask and put one on herself. "You can be anyone you want to be tonight, Paige. Be someone who has the time of her life."

Two days ago, I would never have let her talk me into walking through that door. But tonight at thirty-ninth years old, unattached, and coming off a bad breakup with a guy who'd told me he pictured me more boring than I imagined him to be, well, I'd become restless and more than ready for something different in my life.

Dani and I followed a group inside and somehow managed to get past the doorman without getting caught.

What we found there was nothing short of a fairy tale.

The place was like something from another world, filled with people who obviously knew how to live life to its fullest. A waiter offered us champagne right away, which we accepted willingly. Cristal. Only the best, of course.

"This is the way to live, isn't it?" Dani whispered as I looked around the room with my mouth standing wide open.

"I love it!" I told her over the noise of the crowd. "I absolutely love it! Thank you, Dani."

"I knew you would. You needed to stop looking at yourself the way you were. You *are* fun, and exciting, and lucky to be free of Harry."

I smiled at her. Dani was right. What did I ever see in Harry except security?

"You're right. But thank you for making me see it."

"Come on, let's mingle." She gave me a little push into the sea of people surrounding us. This was the last time I saw Dani.

As I walked around the room filled with beautiful people, I found myself relaxing for the first time in weeks.

All my worries seemed to disappear with the music and champagne. I danced with every single man who asked me and sampled foods the old Paige would never have been interested in before this night.

And then I spotted him. Across the room—all of my fantasies come to life.

I stopped dead in my tracks when the most gorgeous man I'd ever set eyes on actually looked at me! Although most of his face was covered in a mask similar to mine, what I did see I definitely liked.

When he seemed to smile just for me then came slowly to my side, I thought *no way!* I looked behind me to see if maybe some stunning female specimen might have captured his attention but there was only a slightly middle-aged man.

As much as I hate to admit it, if there had been any means of escape open to me, I would have taken it. Because you see, something about this man reminded me of all of my past mistakes.

Without so much as a word, he swept me into his arms and we danced away to an intimate corner of the room. I never left his arms that night.

Just before the clock struck midnight, the next fateful chain of events took place which would later prove to be the most life-changing of all. I didn't even hesitate when he asked to take me home. The man had the sexist voice.

When he asked my name, I felt the first pang of uncertainty return. I mean, what exactly did I want from him beyond the obvious? If we shared personal details about ourselves, wouldn't it kill the fantasy? Still, what did it hurt to tell him my first name.

"It's Paige." He didn't volunteer his, which was okay. I didn't need to know his name for him to fulfill my fantasies.

In my apartment, we stood facing each other in the darkness.

"Do you want me to leave?" he asked, sounding infinitely seductive.

"No."

He took a step closer. "Do you want to know my name?"

I tried focusing on what he said, but it was hard because, I wanted this man like crazy. I just didn't want to have to get to know him first.

"No..." Behind the mask, he had the most amazing blue eyes. A perfect match to the most amazing man. "No, I don't need to know who you are."

The color changed slightly with my answer. I'd displeased him. He would be accustomed to women wanting to know everything about him.

"What do you want?"

"I only want sex. I don't want to know anything about you. I don't need to know who you are. I want you to be my fantasy. I'm not interested in reality at the moment."

This probably didn't make sense to someone like him, but in my current state of mind, reality sucked. I didn't want or need a relationship with him. I'd get a dog for companionship. I only wanted him to touch me. Was that too much to ask for crying out loud?

"What about what I want?" He challenged softly. He clearly didn't understand the program yet. He was here to fulfill my fantasies tonight. That's it. My birthday present to me. I'd never see him again.

"I don't care what you want."

His anger became easy to read, even through the mask.

In the back of my mind, my thoughts went back over all those warnings my mother drilled into my head as a child. You know the ones about never talking to strangers.

For the first time since walking into the hotel tonight, the old Paige returned to remind me of how much trouble I might be in by inviting a stranger into my bed.

He seemed to read all of my doubts right before I could voice them and took the decision from me. With a single tug, I fell into his arms again. His lips were hard, demanding—guaranteeing me a night to remember.

His mouth moved slowly against mine, creating a delicious awakening deep inside my frozen body. Something I hadn't felt with Harry. I stopped resisting the moment his hands slipped over my body, reaching past the walls I'd erected to protect myself from being hurt. I couldn't stop my response to those hands. No way!

He smiled against my lips. It was every bit as sexy as his kiss.

"Wait." I tried to think beyond the moment. Beyond the fact this was the man of my dreams, kissing me the way I'd only dreamed of being kissed.

"Shh," he whispered, his hands following the lines of my body, gliding across the edges of my breasts and past the curve of my hips. He cupped my bottom, bringing me closer his full erection. Oh my God, it was huge and it was all because of me. Thirty-nine-year-old me!

I thought about protesting for about as long as it took him to carry me to my bedroom and remove all of my clothes—we left the masks on at my request because I didn't want to blow this fantasy.

"God, you're beautiful," he whispered with a hint of unsteadiness. The room around us filled with the sound of our labored breathing. "You have no idea how much I want you."

His words thrilled and repulsed me all at the same time. What had gotten into me? This wasn't me—no matter how much I tried to convince myself I only wanted sex without any emotional attachment. Casual sex had never been my style.

His lips trailed warm, hot kisses across my ribcage to my navel before dipping inside. A shudder of raw desire pulsed through my body. *This wasn't so bad*, I told myself. *I could do this. I could have sex for sex alone.*

It became almost exhilarating, not having to worry about what to say, or how I looked lying naked in the most vulnerable of positions for any woman, much less a woman who'd just turned thirty-nine. I'd never see this man again. Why not go for it? Let him fulfill my fantasies.

The feeling of my every desire, filling my body with his, took away the last of my doubts.

Oh yeah, I was definitely cool with sex without attachments.

I lost count of the times we made love that night but somewhere before dawn I finally slept.

When I awoke the next morning, my fantasy was about as over and done as my thirties.

Lesson 3: Everyone makes mistakes but only a fool repeats them.

For the longest time after I'd actually forced my eyes open the following morning, I still couldn't move. My body ached in ways that reminded me of every single place I'd been touched by my fantasy. I might be alone, but that didn't stop me from blushing like crazy as I remembered all I'd done the night before.

I couldn't believe the restless way I'd behaved. Who was that woman? I'd also been the cautious one. What had happened to cause me to behave the way I did last night?

Something told me it was a good thing I'd never see the guy again, because there was no way I be able to face him after what happened between us.

Not that I needed to worry. I'm sure he probably thought I was a hooker or something.

Somehow, I managed to drag myself from of bed and dress before downing more coffee than I ever remembered drinking in a lifetime.

Halfway to the door I spotted the note on my bed.

A single piece of paper, written in handwriting I didn't recognize, thanked me for the time of his life. I covered my face with embarrassment all over again.

I wanted to die. Prayed that no one, especially my parents, would ever have to know how foolish I'd been.

Of one thing I felt certain. Dani had definitely made up for the year before. My thirty-ninth birthday would be one for the record books.

Something to look back on, blush like crazy, and maybe even smile a little over someday.

Unfortunately, I believed it had also sealed my fate as an unmarried woman. After this guy, no other man was ever going to come close to that fantasy.

When I reached our office building, I took a quick look at myself in the window to make sure, at least on the outside, I didn't have some sort of proof of my behavior. Like a crimson letter or something equally condemning tattooed across my forehead.

As I walked inside, I expected everyone to stop and stare and point, but it was business as usual at Martin Publishing.

Only dear, sweet Ralph saw the invisible proof. He'd always been a little too good at reading me.

But this morning, as much as he was interested, there were bigger fish to fry.

"You're late, Miss Texas. And you have a meeting in ten minutes. There's not much time to brief you." Which meant give me the latest gossip. Apparently had to be big if Ralph was forgoing my interrogation.

I didn't care less about office gossip at the moment, but was glad to not have to explain the scarlet letter.

"Give me the condensed version," I told him as we walked into my office. I dropped everything, my purse included, on the floor.

"The old guy announced his official replacement today."

I hate to say it, but it took a while in my current state of sexual confusion for it to click as to whom Ralph was referring to.

But when it did, he had my full attention. "Who?"

"Well, who do you think? His son, of course! Jude Martin? You know, the one who's been MIA for a long time now, working over in the London branch."

I reached for the folder for the meeting I'd arrived late then left the office with Ralph at my heels.

“Rumor has it, the son doesn’t want the job, but the old guy didn’t give him any choice in the matter. And let me tell you, Paige, there are some nasty rumors going round about Junior.”

We’d reached the conference room by this time and I turned to ask. “What rumors?”

“Never mind—we’ll talk later. Do your thing, Miss Texas.” And with that little tease, Ralph walked away leaving me speechless.

Fortunately, in the heated meeting I walked in to, there was little time to worry about what the new guy would be like.

As always, when it came to talking about individual departmental budgets, people got defensive. When their overuses were pointed out to them, they got down right nasty.

Luckily, I had Dani’s support to settle the matter.

After the poor slups left, Dani was all questions.

“What happened last night?”

“I don’t want to tell you,” I hedged. I didn’t want to think about what I’d done last night, much less talk about it. I couldn’t and continue to work without walking around red in the face all day.

“That good, was he?” Dani read everything into my embarrassment.

“Yes, but I still don’t want to talk about it.”

“When are you going to see him again?” Dani continued, definitely wanting to talk about it.

“I’m not. I never plan to see him again. And how do you even know there was a him?”

“Because, Paige, there was no way I’d leave until you found someone to take home. Lucky for you he came before I resorted to finding someone for you.”

When we reached Dani’s office, I plopped into my usual chair and put my head in my hands.

“Oh, I’m so embarrassed! I can’t believe I let you talk me into going to that party in the first place. And I certainly can’t believe I acted the way I did.”

Dani was laughing hard enough at my pained expression she almost didn't hear Ralph's knock. Not that it mattered. Ralph didn't usually wait for such formalities as being invited inside an office. He simply barged in.

"What's wrong with her?" he asked Dani before announcing she needed to be in the big guy's conference room in half an hour for the official announcement.

"She had sex last night with a stranger. Apparently it was good." Dani told him as if she were merely reporting on the weather.

"Dani!" I practically yelled, only to find she wasn't listening. Dani scanned through email for more information on the announcement.

"Well, good for you, Miss Texas." Ralph patted my arm then simply walked away without asking any details, surprising both Dani and myself.

"God, I hope this new guy isn't going to be a pain in the butt." Dani rolled her eyes. "There are at least five emails already from other department heads about him. I have a feeling this is not going to be a pleasant meeting."

I wasn't sure what she meant by pleasant, but at least her attention was off me and my sins.

"As much as I'd like to get all the details about last night, I've got to go. Liz from the Foreign Acquisitions office wants to speak with me before the meeting about that financial statement you sent her." Dani stood and walked to the door.

"But I do want to hear all about this mystery guy. If he's capable of making you react the way you are right now, he must be something indeed. And I want to hear all about it."

She left me sitting alone in her office, vowing never to talk about what happened to Dani or another living soul as long as I lived.

By the time I'd successfully dodged both Ralph and Dani for the rest of the day, all I wanted was to slip away for a while and buy that future companion for myself. Unfortunately, I would not be this lucky.

I'd shut down my computer and started gathering my things, when my door burst open and Harry practically fell into my office, followed closely by Ralph

"I tried to stop him!" Ralph told me angrily.

For the first time since my little dumping, I faced Harry. At one point in my life, I'd been sure Harry was the one I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. Now, I couldn't imagine what I'd ever saw in him.

Harry was average looking at best, and let's face it—lousy in bed. But again, just about everyone in the world was lousy compared to my fantasy guy.

Against my will I remembered the way he'd felt last night and starting blushing all over again.

"Its okay, Ralph." I smiled.

Ralph spotted the color in my cheeks and returned my smile before glaring once again at Harry. "Some people have all the nerve," he murmured before leaving us alone. But not before opening my door as wide as it would possibly go. I couldn't keep from laughing at that protective gesture.

"What's wrong with him?" Harry seemed totally perplexed by Ralph's behavior.

I'd known Ralph and Harry never quite saw eye-to-eye. Now I understood why very few people liked Harry. At the time, I'd been too convinced I loved him to see the truth. Harry wasn't very likeable.

"He doesn't like you, Harry. Now, is there something you needed to talk to me about? Because as you can see, I'm on my way out," I said as politely as possible, only to see Harry's eyes narrow at my new attitude. Harry wasn't expecting this from me. He imagined I'd be devastated. I wasn't. This intrigued him.

"I wanted to make sure you were okay. And to apologize for the way I handled things the other night. I realize I should have handled things differently. But I want you to know, I never meant for you to get hurt."

For a moment, I almost felt sorry for him. Until he smiled. Harry's attempt at seducing me.

In the past, it'd always worked. Now the new, restless, fantasy-driven Paige only found it slightly pathetic.

At the emergence of the smile, another thought occurred. Perhaps Harry's new romance wasn't quite as he'd expected.

"Harry, there's no need to apologize. You did us both a favor, actually. I should be thanking you. We were all wrong for each other—I see that now. You were right. This is for the best."

Again, the smile, but I saw right through it. I knew the real reason Harry was here. He wanted to woo me back.

The very thought of going back to that had me fighting back nausea. Without a doubt I knew I'd never go back to Harry.

"Paige, you and I, well, we have a history together." Ever-so-slight pause while Harry tried to perfect the smile. "Maybe we shouldn't be too quick to throw it all away. I mean, maybe we should think about us some more. You know I care about you, don't you? And I believe you care about me as well."

I knew I had to put an end to this, for the last time. Otherwise, I'd never be free of Harry.

"Harry, I'm sorry, but I *don't* feel that way about you. I don't feel anything. No, that's not true... I guess you were convenient for me. I see that now. I realize it probably wasn't fair to you. I'm sorry, Harry, but I don't want to try to work on us. And I don't care what type of relationship you think you want to have with me. It's best if we don't see each other outside of the office anymore."

Harry appeared too stunned to speak for a moment. This was not his meek little woman from the past. The one who all but worshiped him. How had I ever allowed myself to become that person?

I watched Harry without emotion as he tried to speak but couldn't. He simply turned and left my office, slamming the door behind him. An inept attempt at having the last word.

For the first time since our relationship ended, I felt the weight of a hundred and eighty pounds of boring boyfriend leave my shoulders. I actually grinned from ear to ear as I walked past Ralph.

* * *

Unfortunately, my newfound inner strength dwindled when faced with returning to my little apartment and the unmade bed to remind me of all my illicit mistakes with fantasy guy.

Instead, I took myself off to the pet shop to buy my future life partner.

It hadn't taken as much convincing as I'd expected to talk my super, Mrs. Delaney, into agreeing to one small dog. Turns out, she was a pet lover from way back.

With a whole lot of difficulty, I found my perfect mate. A tiny little pug puppy I fell in love with the second I picked him up. And just as quickly, I knew his name would be Sam.

After I'd purchased every possible treat Sammy would need for his new home, we made our way to my apartment.

Suddenly the world didn't seem quite as dark or lonely anymore. I believed I could even face another day in New York with Sam by my side. Surely nothing I'd done the night before had been so terrible.

At least this is what I thought, until I walked into my bedroom and saw the state of affairs in there. I spotted the note from my fantasy guy, thanking me for having sex with him, and I cringed all over again, before stripping the bed clean.

It would be useless to try and wash my sins from those sheets. There would be enough laundry detergent in the world to get rid of those reminders. Instead, I dumped them in the trash and out of my sight for good.

Past mistakes gone, bright, happy future with Sammy ahead of me.

It took a long time before I managed to get my new friend settled in for the evening. But after Sammy slept peacefully in his bed, I unplugged the phone to prevent my old friend from calling to get all the juicy details.

I sat alone well after midnight, lights off, puppy sleeping, trying to wish away this crazy longing inside of me.

God help me, I wanted my fantasy to come back like crazy. I'd be happy living in a fantasy world for as long as he wanted to come to me.

It was in this wishful state in which he found me again, sitting on my bed, and wishing.

The second I spotted him, it hit me how pathetic I'd become. Apparently, I'd actually left my door unlocked hoping he would come right on in and do what I wanted him to do. Exactly as he doing right now.

I found myself both surprised and more than a overwhelmed to see the man who'd been in my thoughts throughout the day in my bedroom once more. I still didn't know what he looked like beyond the shape of his body.

I should have been insulted when he simply waltzed through my unlocked door and into my bed, but I wasn't—not even close. I wanted him every bit as much as I had the night before.

He stood looking at me until I couldn't meet the raw desire in those blue eyes any longer. Not that it mattered. He knew exactly what I wanted.

We didn't speak at all. We made up for the lack of words in every single touch, every kiss and every intimate embrace.

When I awoke again, it was sometime before dawn and found him gone, I wasn't sure if he'd actually been there or if he'd simply been part of some desperate fantasy on my part. Until the exhaustion of my body told the truth. I literally ached from the uncontrollable abandon of our lovemaking.

But in the light of day, my fantasies were beginning to worry me.

I mean, might this the first real sign I might be losing my mind, if I would let just anyone into my bed? Not to mention leaving my door unlocked—in New York City of all places. The guy was a stranger I knew absolutely nothing about, other than the fact that he went to rich society parties and was unbelievable in bed. Not much to know, surely, about

someone I trusted with my life? He might be Jack the Ripper for God's sake.

Once I'd taken my little puppy for a short walk to take care of his business, I decided it was time to take a break from mine.

I wasn't feeling too good about my actions this morning, especially after last night. In fact, I might have been coming down with something.

At this point, I did the one thing that always made me feel better when I felt this confused. I called in sick, took my new friend and my small, slightly used car from its parking spot at the garage, and left the city.

Running away to my little haven of Stormyville, Vermont always helped me to step away from my problems. Today, I needed Stormyville more than ever.

Very few people knew about this habit of mine, with the exception of Dani. She'd long ago become my confidant. She knew almost everything about me. Even more than my parents did. Dani would know where I'd run to. I spent the entire day with Sammy, dodging Dani's calls and trying to put my life back into prospective.

Sammy and I let ourselves get lost in the charm of the small village I'd discovered on one of those first runaway trips.

Dani and I had even taken a vacation together here once, several years back, before our work schedule got too crazy.

Stormyville was one of those quaint New England towns.

I hadn't told anyone, not even Dani, but secretly, I'd decided when I grew tired of the New York single life, Stormyville would be the place I'd want to live.

There was a small school in the center of the village where I'd watched the children playing in the schoolyard on several different occasions and thought, *yeah, I could live here.*

A few trips back, I'd done something that later would come back to haunt me. I walked into the school and applied for a job there.

Another event, in a string of what would soon seal my fate.

The older woman in the office told me there were rarely ever any openings at the school. But she'd keep my resume on file for a while, just in case.

Today turned out to be one of those glorious September days in Vermont. You know the kind. Where there's enough autumn in the air to bring imagines of Halloween carnivals and pumpkin carvings. All the small town stuff loved as a child.

When I finally headed back to the city, it was late in the day and I'd become more restless than ever before.

I knew I wouldn't call Dani when I got to my apartment as she'd asked me to do. I wouldn't catch up on all the emails waiting for me back at the office.

I was going home to wait for my fantasy to return.

At this point, I wasn't sure whether I prayed that he would show and fulfill my every desire or that he wouldn't and I'd seriously consider that move to Vermont.

As sad as it was to admit, the only real thing keeping me grounded in New York was the promise of his return.

Lesson 4: Never interrupt someone when they are paying you a compliment.

When I walked into my office the following morning, I still didn't have the answers to those questions, but I hadn't been disappointed the night before either. My dream lover had been there with me throughout the long night.

I tried to convince myself what I had with him might be a good thing. Maybe this wasn't such a strange relationship after all. I mean, it had worked pretty good for me thus far. Did I really need to know any of the details of his life? I think not. Who cared if I hadn't discovered his name, or where he lived, or whether or not he might be married. Those were all insignificant details, weren't they? He was good—no, he was great in bed. That's all I needed in my life right now.

I'd actually begun to feel content and defiantly satisfied by my newfound lover. Maybe I had unknowingly stumbled onto the true secret to relationship success. I had someone who made me happy in bed, and I didn't have to deal with any of his faults.

I'd almost been able to convince myself I believed all those things, until the questions came from all those who knew me the best. Starting with Ralph.

"I don't know what you've been up to Miss Texas, but that's definitely not Elizabeth Arden's work. You look fabulous, like..."

I knew exactly where Ralph was heading and decided I didn't want to be his next topic of office gossip.

"Never mind. What's my schedule look like?"

Poor Ralph. This had to be the first time ever he wasn't able to get the goods from me. He looked almost insulted.

But I think he also understood now was not the time for questions. Ralph simply handed me my calendar before dropping a bombshell on me.

"You have a ten o'clock conference call with the new boss, Miss Texas. You probably should get that freshly, 'screwed' look off your face, otherwise Junior's gonna hear it in your voice."

This stopped me from retreating to my office.

"What? Who? You mean the big boss, Junior Martin? What does he want with me?"

"Jude Martin. And I don't know, maybe he's heard your reputation is currently leaning towards loose."

"Ralph!" It was payback for keeping secrets from him, but still.

"I don't know what he wants with you, honey. I wish I could tell you more. All I know is his henchwoman called yesterday while you were doing whatever it is you've been doing lately. I managed to keep the woman in the dark until today, but no longer. She took the first thing I gave her on your calendar for this morning."

"Is Dani in? Maybe she knows something more about this?"

"Uh-uh, doll. Dani's out with the flu, or whatever you've had lately. She doesn't know a thing about it."

"I'm sure it's something she should be handling. Maybe its been shuffled my direction by mistake?" I asked hopefully before dumping my stuff in a chair.

I quickly searched through my emails looking for some clue, possibly even a hint from Dani, but found nothing. Glancing at my watch, I saw that I had exactly ten minutes to find something before I faced Jude Martin's questions without a clue.

"Don't think so, Miss Texas. No, the henchwoman specifically asked for you. Never mentioned Dani at all."

This had me even more frustrated.

“Are you sure, Ralph? What would the new guy want with me, anyway? How does he even know I exist? I’m just a flunky.”

“Don’t know that either, honey. But if you don’t get your act together soon, you’re not going to make a very good first impression on him, now are you?” I took another peek at my watch as my private line buzzed and Ralph and I both reached for the receiver at the same time.

Suddenly I found myself nervous. My hands were actually sweating. I waited while Ralph answered the call and did his best to sound pleasant before handing the call over to me.

“Ms. Wilder, thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I understand how busy you must be with Dani being away from the office.” A decidedly masculine and somewhat familiar voice spoke against my ear. Where exactly had I heard his voice before?

My imagination, perhaps? Or maybe my fear working overtime? Maybe I’d simply remembered all those things I’d been doing lately.

I’m sure somewhere in the moral conduct code of life, I’d broken every single one of the rules listed there.

“Um, you’re very welcome, Mr. Martin.” From all the pictures I’d seen of the older Martin, I knew he was short, balding and more than a little plump. I found myself wondering what Junior might look like? Did he live up to his voice?

“Ms. Wilder?”

I came back to reality in an instant when I realized I’d actually been daydreaming.

“I’m sorry?”

“I said I’m sure you’re wondering why I asked to speak with you, aren’t you, Paige... May I call you Paige?” Was it my imagination or was he finding me a little too amusing for a simple business call?

“That’s fine,” I said absently while trying to understand why my name, coming from a man I’d never spoken to before should sound familiar.

“Good. Relax, Paige. I’m not firing you. In fact, Dani speaks very highly of your work as do several of your co-workers.” This got my attention fast enough.

“I’m trying to touch base with all of the middle management team members this week.”

Jude kept me on the line for another half-hour, asking enough questions to leave me with an uneasy feeling my future at Martin Publishing might actually be in serious jeopardy.

By the time Jude told me he had to join another meeting, I wanted to cry from relief.

The second I ended the call I buzzed Ralph.

“Well?” He hit me with the first question before I managed single word.

“Come to my office.” Protocol aside, I didn’t have time to be nice. I was in serious trouble.

The official office pecking order runs something like this. Ralph was Dani’s assistant...technically. Afterwards, his services fell to me as the second-in-command. Whatever was left over went to the others to fight over.

Today, with Dani not in the picture, I needed Ralph’s help more than ever.

“Okay, tell me everything you know about this new guy?” I all but screeched at him, thoroughly trembling in my new three-hundred-dollar black Manolo patent slingback pumps. Jude Martin sounded as intimidating as he did sexy.

“That bad? Oh lord...what have you been up to, missy?”

“Ralph! I haven’t been up to anything. But something’s definitely going on that’s for sure. Tell me what you know.”

“Well, it isn’t much, but I Googled him.” He told me while he shooed me away from my computer in order to type in Jude’s name while adding, “All I know for sure is the youngster, and I call him that because he’s twenty-seven, twenty-eight tops, didn’t want the old man’s job at all.

But apparently the old guy didn't give him any choice in the matter. I'm sure because he's the old guy's only natural child—there are a couple of step kids from a later marriage floating around I believe, but they don't talk to the old guy, and definitely have no interest in following his footsteps. Too busy spending his money, if you ask me."

At my impatient stare, Ralph put his personal opinions aside. There were only a few pictures of him, mostly showing Jude Martin from a distance on the arm of a beautiful woman. This guy didn't look anything like his old man. He appeared to be well over six foot, with dark hair. I couldn't see any of his features, but he seemed to be built beautifully, possessing one of those tall athletic bodies which could be so deceiving. Perfect for, well...best not to go there with Ralph sitting at my computer watching my reaction.

"Anyway," Ralph relinquished my chair and continued with his summation, "the old guy must have threatened to write Junior out of the will or something to get him back from London. Rumor has it Junior was getting through an ugly divorce and already sowing some wild oats when the old man called him back. None too happy to be back in the states, from what I hear."

Jude Martin had been married. This surprised me. I wouldn't have pegged him for the marrying kind.

"Tell me about the business? I don't care about him personally."

"Uh huh. You'd be the first woman in history to feel this way. I love you, honey, but you're not that special." Ralph glanced my way, saw my reaction and decided he'd gone too far.

"Everyone around is being very tight-lipped about the biz stuff. Which is strange, considering the old guy pretty much worships his creation and all. But there's some nasty rumors floating around."

"What type of rumors?" I asked, dreading his answer.

"Only there may be some major downsizing going on in the near future—and I mean major. Like getting rid of several departments!"

The manager in me wanted to remind Ralph spreading rumors of this magnitude would do even more damage and cause unnecessary panic.

But the girl who'd just got off the phone with the very disturbing Jude Martin was in shock. That girl's mouth was standing wide open.

"It can't be true, surely? I mean, business is thriving. I've seen the numbers. Those are simply rumors, Ralph."

"Well, maybe, Miss Texas, and I certainly hope you're right, but I'm polishing my resume...tonight."

I spent the rest of the day, trying to make amends for my previous lack of enthusiasm at work. I mean, it might not be my dream come true as far as jobs went, but it did pay the bills and kept Sammy and me in food. And more importantly, it kept me in the city, seeing my fantasy. If I were forced to walk away from New York, what would I do about him?

The very thought and my reaction to it scared the living daylights out of me. I buried myself in emails and financial statements until late in the evening. I couldn't bear the thought of walking away from the fantasy.

Ralph finally poked his head in at seven to tell me he didn't care how long I planned on staying he had somewhere else to be.

"Ralph, I'm sorry. I never meant for you to stay this late. If you can wait a second, I'm leaving as well. I'll go with you."

The minute I reached my apartment, I forgot all about the problems in my life. I took Sammy outside for his evening walk and I waited for my fantasy to return to me.

* * *

Right on time, and exactly what I didn't need in my life clouding my rational thought, my fantasy came into my bedroom. And for the first time since discovering him, I wanted to know more about him. I actually wanted him to talk to me.

"Tell me your name," I said once I managed to breathe normally again, after he loved me and lay holding me close.

Each time he touched me, he had the unnatural ability to leave me wanting him even more.

"I thought you didn't want to know anything about me? You only wanted the fantasy, remember?"

"I don't... I didn't, you're right. I don't care who you are."

The sound of his familiar laughter made me wonder who he left me for each night.

Was there someone waiting for him now? Was he married? Did he do this sort of thing with other women?

"I think you should to leave," I told him when that painful image hurt too much to consider. I tried to push him away but he didn't let me. He simply held me tighter.

"You don't mean that, Paige. You like this little arrangement of ours every bit as much as I do. You don't want any commitment."

"Get out," I said, loud enough for Sammy to come to my defense. The little dog let out a low growl followed by a slightly less forceful whimper.

To my horror, my dream lover got out of bed.

At this point, I tried, I really tried to let him go, but I wasn't that strong.

Instead, I said the words to bring him back into my arms, but left me fighting back tears until at last I slept. I wasn't ready to lose him yet. In fact, the thought scared me to death.

Of course, I knew I played a very dangerous game with this man, one which promised nothing but pain. But for the life of me, I couldn't walk away from it, or him. I was in too deep already.

I'd promised myself I would stay awake until he left me and follow him. I would discover where he went when he left me. But it never happened. The guy was too good at what he did.

Instead, I awoke before dawn with the same aching feeling throughout my body. My fantasy lover had touched every part of me once more. But this time, this night, his touch went all the way through to my heart.

Lesson 5: Judge success by what you had to give up in order to get it.

While I might not be willing to give up my dream lover, and nothing would change the way I felt, I could at least confess what I'd been doing to someone who would know how to give me some good advice. Someone who was an expert in the field of men.

Dani was one of those people constantly running on a kind of nervous energy which usually had her in the office every morning before seven.

She'd told me once that she used this quiet time to prepare for the day.

Today, I found her at exactly seven-oh-five, and I hit her with my problem shortly after. But not before asking the polite thing of how she was feeling.

"Okay—I wasn't sick. I wanted to take the day off and spend it with Mark."

Now, had I been functioning correctly, I should have realized this was totally out of character coming from Dani.

Dani didn't need any touchy-feely relationship stuff. She used men the way they'd been using women for centuries. Dani was tough and unemotionally, not your typical girly-girl.

"But I'm thinking you're not here, especially at this hour, to ask me how I'm feeling? What's going on with you, Paige? You look terrible."

At those typical Dani words, I confessed everything.

"I don't know what to do, Dani. I'm in way too deep with this guy already."

“Oh Paige. How did you let yourself get involved in something like this?” She quietly handed me a tissue, because I’d started bawling like a baby at this point, before closing the door on our “strictly private” conversation.

“I don’t know,” I wailed, burying my face in my tissue. “I don’t know how it happened, but I don’t want to end it. I think...I think I may actually have feelings for him, Dani.”

Even through my tissue buffer there was no mistaking her groan.

“Oh Paige. If you weren’t so upset, I’d kick your butt right now.”

“Well thanks a lot!” But at least I could finally meet her gaze again.

“Well, it’s what you deserve, for sure! Okay, let’s think about this? You don’t know anything about him, except the fact that he’s good in bed. But you told him you didn’t want to know anything about him, right?”

“Yes,” I muttered before going back to the comfort of my tissue.

“And you like this guy?”

I glanced at her suspiciously. I knew what she meant. How could I be this naive, to think I’d fallen for someone I’d only gotten involved with in the first place because we’d hot sex together?

“Yes.”

“Girlfriend, wake up! Stop trying to label what you feel for him and simply go for it. No one says you have to be in love with a guy to sleep with him. You have what every woman wants. Someone who does it for you sexually, but doesn’t hog the covers. Why not keep doing what you’re doing and see what happens? Who knows, the two of you will get sick of each other. Maybe you won’t even want to know who he is.”

For the first time, I considered a future with my fantasy under the terms Dani outlined. Did I really, really want to know who he was? What if he was just another boring Joe-blow like Harry?

Wasn’t the only real thing I found exciting about the guy, well beyond the obvious sexually attraction, the fact that I didn’t know a thing about him? Dani was right. I liked the guy now because he was a fantasy. I

didn't want to know anything about the real man I'd been sleeping with so that he *could* fulfill all my fantasies.

Now that I thought about it, I had the best of all worlds. I mean, Someone to have a good time with and fulfill my needs physically. I had Dani and my other friends to talk to, and Sam for companionship. What more did a gal need?

"You know you're right, Dani. What am I getting so worked up about? This is the perfect arrangement. The last thing I want is to be tied down to some guy and his opinions. I got rid of one of those. Thank you. I knew you of all people would have the right answer. You've certainly made it work in your own life. You enjoy them before getting rid of them. I want to be more like you."

If I'd been thinking clearly and not thrilled to have finally pigeonholed my relationship with the fantasy, I would have noticed that Dani wasn't actually agreeing with me.

In fact, she wasn't able to look me in the eye anymore. There was something almost sad about Dani today. Something that if I were being honest, had been there many times in the past, but I'd simply chosen to ignore it.

In my current state of denial, I didn't understand Dani's sadness, but I believed nothing would faze my steadfast friend for long.

I left Dani without ever questioning the little niggling of doubt in the back of my mind. I went about my day, throwing myself into my career with a new fervor, while avoiding the man on the top floor like the plague. No need to complicate my life any further. I certainly had no desire to destroy my newfound utopia by throwing another problem into the mix.

I did my job during the day and lived my fantasy each night, never realizing the chain of events I'd set in motion the fateful night of my birthday would soon determine my downfall.

* * *

Even as I lived each day in this dream world existence, there still remained the smallest amount of regret inside me which made me wonder why I couldn't have it all?

Didn't other women have the whole nine yards? The career, the husband to come home. The family. Why was I willing to settle for my fantasy-no-attachments relationship? And was I content to stop hoping to have it all entirely?

I wasn't as tough as Dani, even though I tried to pretend differently. I knew I couldn't be happy with simply physical satisfaction for long.

But for the moment, I was determined to give it a go. I pushed aside the need to ask my dream lover questions and tried to pretend it didn't matter when I woke alone in bed each morning. He was with me each night. He fulfilled my every need, sexually at least. But the coldness of the bed beside me each morning told me it wouldn't be enough for long.

It grew harder each time to be with him and not want more. Somehow, I managed to force those feelings aside every single time they came to the surface, but it had stopped being physical for me a long time ago. And the future had already begun casting its spell on my present state of mind.

Each morning I dragged myself into the office drained from my night in fantasyland only to be faced with the reality of the day. Another meeting, another impossible deadline, another day filled with wondering how much longer?

How much longer before the dream became a nightmare and my fantasy left my life for good. And because of this, I found myself slowly evolving into someone I didn't recognize anymore. I might still believe myself capable of having and controlling it all, but I wasn't dealing well with any of those things.

I became irritable with everyone around me, including Dani and Ralph and one day I went too far. I all but yelled at dear old, saved-my-butt-more-times-than-I-could-count Ralph and just about lost his respect and my best friend's in the process.

This happened when we were knee-deep in yet another attempt at reducing the budget for the now notorious Jude Martin.

It was late one evening, almost eight, and we'd been at it most of the day when I finally lost it.

All I thought about was how pathetic our efforts were. We'd been trying to decide on a nickel here and a dime there, and Jude Martin didn't care less about what we were doing, or what might happen to any of the people on his staff.

The guy didn't even want this job. What did he care if we were one step away from cutting some very important budgets, which meant possibly letting go of some valuable people in the process.

At this point I decided if he didn't care, why should I?

I got to my feet and went to get more coffee when Ralph made some off the cuff remark which struck me wrong.

Something along the lines of how antsy I'd been for hours now, unable to sit still for more than five minutes at a time. All true but unfortunately, the final straw for me.

"You know what, Ralph, I'm sick of those kinds of remarks. In case you've forgotten it, I am your boss! Dani may be in charge, but you answer to me as well. And you don't know what's going on in my life, in spite of what you think. If you don't mind, in the future would you keep your opinions to yourself?"

Even as I said those words, I regretted them. What had gotten into me? I was taking my personal frustrations out on Ralph of all people. The one man I did trust.

I saw Ralph's hurt reaction as well as Dani's shock, and then I lost it. For someone who was supposed to be in charge of her life, I'd behaved totally crazy.

"Oh Ralph, I'm sorry." Before I knew what I was doing, I knelt in front of him. "I don't know where that came from. I'm sorry, Ralph. Please forgive me."

Before my good friend and my best guy came to my comfort, the phone buzzed in the conference room we were using. Somehow, Ralph

managed to unpry his fingers from mine to answer it, while Dani gave me the full force of her angry glare.

“Oh God—it’s the big guy. He’s on his way right now to talk to you, Dani, about this budget crap.” Ralph looked as if he were searching for somewhere to hide.

Dani slowly let go of her anger and nodded. “It’s okay, Ralph. It’s late and you’re both tired. Both of you go home. We’ll start again tomorrow okay.” Ralph and I didn’t hesitate. I gathered my things and waited for Ralph to do the same before we headed for the back entrance stairwell like two kids cutting school. Ralph slipped through the door first. I glanced back over my shoulder in time to see Jude Martin close Dani’s door. He said something to her that I didn’t catch but they both laughed. The sound of his laughter seemed vaguely disturbing and definitely familiar. It struck an uncomfortable cord within me as the elevator doors closed and I descended into my own personal hell.

Lesson 6: Know how to fall in love without losing yourself.

One night my fantasy took on a new twist. My lover did not arrive at his usual appointed time, leaving me to wonder if the last night I'd spent in his arms would be the last time I'd ever hold him close.

As I lay in bed alone not wanting it to be it true, I wondered how it was possible to miss someone this much when I didn't know anything about him. My mind went back over every single second of our last night together.

Our conversations were never more than a few words, mostly passionate, enticing words uttered while locked in each other's arms. Had I said something during this time to make him suspect my feelings weren't strictly sexual anymore?

Not since the one night when I'd asked him his name had I ever attempted to learn anything personal about him.

I still tried to convince myself I didn't care about him at all. I could stop being with him at anytime. It was only a physical attraction, nothing more.

Unfortunately, my heart was not going along with the plan.

It kept reminding me no matter how hard I tried, I wasn't the type of woman to have casual sex.

Somehow, I must have drifted off to sleep, after finally forcing myself to come to terms with the truth. Whatever strange connection existed between us might be over.

I wasn't sure when he actually came to me but I knew the second he took me in his arms the right thing for me to do would be to turn him away.

I couldn't do the right thing.

I let him make love to me once again, while everything about him felt familiar. Too familiar. The second he joined me in bed, I became aware of something vaguely unsettling about him. Almost as if I knew him beyond this intimate relationship we shared together.

That thought alone should have been almost enough to force the words from my mouth I should have been asking from the beginning. Back when I'd started this dangerous game we were playing with each other.

But the words wouldn't come until it was much too late for me to escape this relationship unscathed.

After we lay exhausted in each other's arms, I bit my tongue to keep from asking him where he'd been tonight.

"How's Sammy?"

I'd been almost asleep when he whispered those words against my hair. How did he know the name of my dog?

"What did you say? How did you know Sammy's name? I never told you?"

"No?" The fantasy in my arms wasn't the least bit thrown by my question. He smiled against my hair. "It must be on his tag."

I accepted his answer without question. This much had certainly been true enough. I'd bought Sammy his heart's every possible desire and insisted Sammy have a tag with his name and my contact information on it. In case, Sammy somehow managed to escape from the apartment all by himself through three deadbolts.

I'd become a paranoid pet owner. I couldn't imagine myself as a parent. I'd probably give the poor kid all sorts of complexes not to mention ulcers.

What I should have been asking was when exactly he'd had the time to read dear old Sammy's nametag, since we were pretty much tied up most of the night with each other and Sammy was scared of his shadow. He'd found himself a nice little hideout during those first few nights. Even I didn't know where he escaped to.

But for the moment, I was a woman obsessed with a man I didn't know and quickly losing more than just my physical self to him.

I ignored all the warning signs foretelling the events to come until it was too late for me to escape them without damaging my heart.

* * *

The next morning my two friends met me at the elevator door with questions of their own.

"Okay, Miss Texas. You've got some 'splaining to do." Ralph took me by the hand and ushered me into my office with Dani following on his heels.

Once Dani closed the door, Ralph handed me my morning coffee and the two of them waited for me to spill my guts.

"What? What are you talking about, Ralph?"

"Oh, can you believe this?" Ralph threw his hands into the air and turned to Dani as if I'd gone and lost my mind.

As I looked at the two people who knew me better than I knew myself at times, I begin to think they might be on to something.

"Dani, talk some sense into this girl," Ralph exclaimed.

"Paige." Dani ignored Ralph's outburst as she forced me into my chair. "I think what Ralph means is have you taken a good look in the mirror lately. You're not yourself."

"I'm fine. I wish you and Ralph would stop worrying about me." The moment the words left my mouth I regretted them. At this point, I noticed the expression in her eyes which had me wondering if something was going on in my friend's life I didn't know about? I'd been wrapped up

in my own fantasy world that I'd all but lost track of what was going on in Dani's private life.

"Dani, is something wrong?"

There was a sadness about Dani that only confirmed all of my fears. Something was dreadfully wrong in my friend's world life.

I reached for her hand but Dani merely shook her head. She didn't want to talk about her problems.

"I'm fine. And we're not talking about me. I want to know about you. Ralph and I are worried about you because we care about you. What's going on, Paige? Is it the fantasy man from your birthday? Is he the one making you act this way? Paige, please tell us what's wrong."

"I don't know... I don't know what's wrong with me anymore, Dani. And I don't think anyone can help me. I've let things go too far."

I found two sets of troubled eyes watching me. It was then that I told them everything.

"I should be lucky enough to find a man like that," Ralph said, blushing all the way to his roots.

"You can have him. Because I think he's going to be my downfall."

"Oh, Paige. I'm sorry I ever took you to that party. I should have never told you to get laid. I mean, you're not the type to have a casual affair. It's not in you, is it, honey?"

Dani handed me my tissue box as the tears I'd been close to for days finally came.

"You're right. I had to be crazy to start this whole thing. I should have never slept with him the first night. I guess it was the breakup with Harry, turning thirty-nine—everything. Now I'm in too deep. I don't know how to break it off. I don't even think I want to."

I saw poor old Ralph's shocked expression. For the first time ever, I think he was speechless. This was not what he was expecting from me. Ralph still believed I was that small town girl from Sweetwater, Texas.

"I'm sorry, Ralph. I'm sure I'm disappointing you. And you probably don't want to hear any of this. Maybe you should go?"

Ralph didn't know what to do for once. He might be shocked by my less than normal, good girl behavior, but he liked a good piece of juicy gossip as well as the next person. He didn't want to miss a thing.

Dani turned to him as if she'd almost forgotten he was there. "It's okay, babe. I'll fill you in later."

"Dani!" I protested without any real conviction. None of us had secrets from Ralph. He was the one who kept us all in line.

"Okay, but I'm holding you to that."

After Ralph left us alone, Dani took his chair. "What do you want to do, Paige?"

"I don't know. I don't want to end it with him. Is that crazy, or what? I mean, I don't even know anything about him, including his name, but I feel something for him. That's crazy, right?"

"No," she admitted after a moment. "It's not crazy, Paige. You've given away part of yourself to the man. It's not crazy. But maybe its time to discover something more about him. I hate to be the voice of doom, and you know how much I love it when a woman finds a man that satisfies her, but you don't know the guy. He might be the worst possible person in the world. If you're going to keep fu...being with him, I think you need to know *something* more about him."

"What if he isn't willing to tell me? I don't think he wants anything but sex from me either. I tried, once, to ask him his name. He made it obvious he didn't want to tell me. And I'm pretty sure he's hiding something. And you're right, I'm almost certain he'll be the worst possible guy for me."

"Then stop it, Paige. Before its goes any further. You have to stop this thing before you get hurt. More than you will be right now," she added when she saw my expression.

"It's hard, but if he doesn't want the same things you want, it isn't going anywhere anyway and you're going to be hurt. End it Paige...tonight, today, before it goes any further. If he won't talk to you about himself, end it tonight. And get the locks changed on your door."

Dani's words finally forced me from the fantasy world I'd existed in for days and back to reality.

I had to either stop seeing the guy cold turkey, or I had to redefine the relationship to something I could live with.

"You're right, and I will, I promise. I'll talk to him tonight. I'll settle things between us once and for all. And if he doesn't like it, he can get lost."

Dani smiled, gave me a hug and left me to my day. But unfortunately for all of my brave words, I still didn't know if I had the guts to do what was best for me. It was going to take everything inside of me to get through this thing still standing.

By the time I'd collected myself enough to face Ralph again, I discovered he'd reorganized my entire day, which gave me time to restore some order to my tear-stained face.

For the rest of the morning, I sat in my office and tried not to think about my fantasy. I knew if I sat all day thinking about him, I wouldn't be able to go through with what I needed to do for myself tonight.

By mid-morning, I'd gotten through all of my correspondence and was starting to prepare for the first meeting of the day, when Ralph burst into my office.

"The big guy's looking for you!" he announced before shutting the door and looking around my office as if he thought "the big guy" might already be in my office.

"What are you talking about? What big guy?"

Ralph gave me a look as if to say, too much sex had obviously taken away my ability to think clearly.

"*The* big guy? Jude Martin? He's had his henchwoman call at least a dozen times already wanting you in his office. What do you want me to tell her?"

"What does he want with me?"

Now, Ralph was probably the last person I needed to be asking this question. He threw me one of his all-suffering looks as if he were dealing with someone extremely slow in the head.

“You tell me, Miss Texas? Maybe he’s got the hots for you. Have you been doing something with him as well?”

This didn’t paint a very pleasant picture, even for me. But it did start me to wondering.

What did Jude Martin want from me? I wasn’t anybody. Certainly not worthy of triggering his radar.

Since he’d been around, I pretty much looked like death warmed over every single day. Every single one of my thirty-nine years showed. No, I would not be the type of woman the great and powerful Jude Martin would give a second thought to.

“I haven’t been doing anything with him, Ralph. I don’t know what he wants. But I don’t want to talk to him either. Can you get me out of it?”

Normally, I would never have asked Ralph to do such a thing. I mean, not only did it paint me as weak and definitely a coward in his eyes, but also by dodging the boss this way, I’d set a very bad example for Ralph as an employee.

Unfortunately, today was not the day for me to worry about setting a good example. Today of all days, I wasn’t strong enough to face Jude Martin.

“Sure...I’ll invent some excuse. Say you went home sick. Stay in your office for a while.”

For the first time, I felt bad about asking Ralph to lie for me. “No, I can’t ask you to do that. Besides, I have all these meetings in the afternoon.”

“Don’t worry, Miss Texas. Let me handle the henchwoman. But you have to promise when this is all over, you’re going to give me the goods. And I mean all of it. Start to finish.”

I never questioned Ralph’s ability to accomplish the impossible. Somehow, he was able to keep Stella, Jude’s henchwoman, in the dark about my whereabouts for the rest of that Friday. But he warned me

right before he left for the day, she'd insisted he put me on Jude's schedule on Monday morning first thing, which meant eight a.m. sharp.

This gave me the weekend to decide what I to do next. Ralph would back me up, no matter what lie I decided to tell.

I hugged him so tight I believe Ralph about lost consciousness for a second or two.

Once he finally recovered, in his usual sarcastic way, Ralph reminded me of the favor I owed him. I promised the minute I knew, he would be the first to hear.

When I unlocked the apartment, my little puppy greeted me, along with the unmade bed reminding me of what I'd promised myself I would do tonight.

By midnight, I believed I was ready to confront my fantasy, thanks to a couple of shots of some very bad whiskey.

I sat waiting for him in my bedroom and tried not to think about the way he'd loved the night before.

But when my dream lover came to me, as hard as I tried, I couldn't say the words, couldn't ask the questions I needed to ask, and I couldn't send him away.

I let him make love to me and I hated myself even more.

As I lay in his arms, exhausted from his touch and emotionally drained from the battle of will I'd fought with myself, I couldn't stop the tears.

He hesitated for a second. He seemed surprised by the sight of my tears then he turned me to face the questions in his eyes I couldn't begin to answer. I shook my head. I knew where I stood with him. I'd known all along. He wanted my body, not my heart.

Lying next to him, looking into those blue eyes, I said the words I would come live to regret.

"Don't go. Please, don't leave me tonight." Even as I spoke my thoughts aloud, I felt weak and helpless. Unable to control foolish emotions.

“Shh...” he whispered tenderly against my hair. His gentleness became my undoing. The soft stroke of his hand brushing away my tears made them all the more difficult to control.

As I drifted off to sleep, I could almost swear I heard my dream lover tell me everything would be okay.

Lesson 7: It's important to have one friend that can make you laugh as well as let you cry.

I awoke the following morning to the gentle caress of a hand against my bare skin.

This must only be the remnants of my fantasy, I told myself sleepily, because it was clearly daylight and my fantasy would have left me hours ago.

As I searched behind me, expecting to find only the cold bed, but instead my hand met the warm, living flesh of my fantasy here with me in the real world.

I turned quickly around, shocked fully awake by the sound of his laughter, only to find that I couldn't move. I couldn't believe my eyes.

My fantasy had now turned into an ugly nightmare. The man lying next to me was none other than my boss, Jude Martin. My twenty-eight-year-old boss!

I couldn't speak, couldn't bring a single coherent thought from my mouth. Not that it mattered. The way he looked at me told me words would not be necessary.

As I struggled to grasp what was happening, my mind suddenly felt like as if it were caught in a fog of events that left me unable to believe what was right there in front of me.

"You look surprised." Soft, seductive words came from the most incredible lips. He smiled at my shocked expression.

“What...what the hell are you doing here? What do you think you’re doing? Get out!” I somehow managed to speak again.

“Don’t you remember? You invited me, begged me to stay with you last night. I’m not going anywhere, Paige.” As he spoke, Jude moved closer.

I tried putting as much space between us as possible, without actually leaving the bed. After all, I wasn’t wearing a thing and he was my boss.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“I’m...” Looking into the blue eyes of my fantasy turned reality, I found I couldn’t breathe properly. “I can’t do this. I can’t do this, Jude. You should have told me. I can’t believe you didn’t tell me. I can’t believe it’s you.”

That last part I added in a rush as he pulled me closer, his hands doing dangerous things to what was left of my composure.

“I tried to tell you. But you kept avoiding me. Refusing to talk. How was I to know you hadn’t guessed the truth? I assumed this was some part of your fantasy?”

Jude stopped when I tensed. He’d come close to the truth. I had been playing in fantasy land.

“You didn’t know...” he said slowly in wonder.

For a long time, I couldn’t manage a single word. I felt like a complete fool. “How long... How long have you known?”

“Since the beginning,” he acknowledged.

He closed the whisper of space left between our bodies, his hand moving over my breast, stroking slowly. I caught my breath, bit hard into my lower lip, but I couldn’t stop my body from responding to him. My nipple hardened beneath his expert touch.

There was something almost twisted about being touched by Jude in this way and being forced to admit I didn’t have a clue who was making love to me all of those times.

“How could you not know? Who did you think was making love you all those times?” he whispered against my lips.

I couldn't breathe over the racing of my heart. My last coherent thought disappeared the moment his lips replaced his hand against my nipple.

“Tell me, Paige.”

I couldn't.

“Suit yourself, but you know you will. You are going to tell me everything, Paige. One way or another.”

Jude stopped talking. Instead, his lips demanded responses. They found mine once more. For one split second, I tried to resist him. He simply laughed at my efforts. It wasn't long before I struggled to touch him as well. To be closer. I couldn't get close enough to him. I couldn't reach his heart.

This time when Jude made love to me, it was different as if the last of the secrets between us had disappeared. But it didn't matter. His touch drove me wild with desire. Maybe I was the twisted one.

Jude and I spent most of Saturday in bed and I didn't care about anything but being there with him. The few conscious moments I did have I actually remembered my poor little companion who probably needed to be walked not to mention fed. Jude told me he would take care of it. I let him because I couldn't leave the bed in front of him.

I didn't actually become aware of anything much until late Sunday morning.

I missed the sound of the shower running completely and the fact that Sammy was barking at the top of his little voice. Nothing brought me from my exhausted sleep but the smell of fresh brewed coffee coming from close by.

“Good. I thought maybe I'd killed you.” Jude sat close to me. I ignored his words but took the coffee he offered.

“You're leaving?” I tried to keep the disappointment out of those words, but I wasn't very successful at it. Jude probably wouldn't believe it, but I wasn't the kind of woman he thought.

I couldn't look at him. Instead, I pretended to be engrossed in my coffee, which in part was the truth. It was the only thing keeping me focused at the moment. Unfortunately, the sound of Jude's confident laughter did terrible things to all my concentration.

"I have to, Paige. I have a meeting in a few hours and I have to go home to change before going into the office."

"It's Sunday..." I reminded him, trying to keep my voice steady. "Why don't you tell the truth?" I still couldn't look at him because frankly I didn't understand this disappointment I felt.

Maybe it was in learning my fantasy was as real as any other man I'd met. Maybe it was because the fantasy had turned into an ugly nightmare. Jude Martin was not fantasy material in my book.

"Yes, I do realize it's Sunday, Paige. I still have a meeting. But I'll be back tonight."

At these words I felt sick.

He noticed my reaction. "I want to take you to dinner, Paige. It's time we stopped playing games and talked to each other, don't you think? But in the mean time..." He took my coffee cup from my unresisting hands and forced me to look at him. "In the mean time, you need to eat something and get some rest. You look tired, Paige."

And just like that, with a simple little kiss on the lips that didn't resemble any of the passion we'd shared before, Jude Martin left me alone.

For longer than I can remember, I sat watching my bedroom door hoping... Well, part of me hoped I'd seen the last of him, while still another part prayed I hadn't.

I sat in bed, wearing nothing but a sheet and cried into my cold coffee for what seemed like most of what was left of the morning. When I walked into my tiny kitchen to the enthusiastic yelps of Sammy, I found Jude had made me Starbucks coffee, ignoring my old standby of Folgers. He'd also bought fresh bagels from the corner deli. This I didn't understand at all.

With Sammy happy and secure in my lap, I sat drinking coffee as if it was about to be outlawed, eating a bagel loaded with cream cheese and contemplating my sanity.

How was it possible for someone, no—correction, a thirty-nine year old woman who knew how to survive in New York to get herself involved in such a unbelievably dumb situation? With her twenty-eight-year-old boss to top it off?

What had I been thinking that first night anyway? And for the life of me, why hadn't I noticed all the signs that were clearly there?

Jude Martin was the living, breathing image of my fantasy, right down to the same startling blue eyes. There probably wasn't another guy in the world, much less New York who had the same shade of eyes, not to mention such a beautiful body. Why hadn't I noticed any of those things before?

Because, I had been living in a sexual haze for weeks since meeting him. Nothing would have gotten through to me.

Unfortunately, there would be no ignoring the truth now. So what was I going to do about it?

One thing for certain, I would not sit around my apartment all day and think about him. No way. I did not intend to spend another minute of my life in fantasyland.

Instead, I took Sammy for a long walk in the park and tried to decide what my next move should be.

I sat on my favorite bench, watching Sammy chase a squirrel and contemplated my new reality. I no longer called it a fantasy. I'd gotten my answer at last. I now knew the name of my dream lover.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't make the decision to end this thing between Jude and myself. I guess part of me was still clinging to the fantasy.

But in truth, I still knew very little about the real man behind my fantasy. And I didn't know what I should be doing or asking. The only thing I knew for certain was that I wasn't ready to face the reality of Jude Martin again today.

So I did the only thing I could think to do in a situation that was way over my head. I turned to my best friend for help.

Dani didn't ask any questions, although I knew she was dying to. Of course, I'd eventually answer them all. When I called her I believe Dani read all of my fears in the things I couldn't tell her yet. She simply told me to pack a bag and come spend the night with her.

One hour later, when Dani opened the door to Mark's swanky apartment and got a good look at me, she took Sammy from my unresisting arms and ushered me into the living room where she sat me in front of the fire.

"Wait here," Dani told me before leaving me alone for a moment.

"Where's Mark?" I hollered after her.

Dani returned a short time later without my puppy and carrying a bottle of wine.

"That's the last thing I need right now."

"Sorry, doll, but it's exactly what you need. Take a sip. Now, tell me what happened."

I did exactly as she asked. But it was not an easy thing to do.

"Well, I know who my fantasy guy is." I told her slowly, glancing from the fire to see I had Dani's full attention.

"Okay, I'll bite...who?"

I closed my eyes then slowly said his name aloud. "Jude Martin."

At that moment, I believe I had accomplished the impossible. I'd actually surprised Dani Kincaid.

"Jude Martin. Our Jude Martin? The boss Jude Martin? Our twenty-eight-year-old boss Jude Martin?"

I nodded.

"Oh my God, Paige. Okay, you'd better tell me everything."

For the next half-hour, I did exactly that. I told Dani every little detail about how I'd discovered the truth, leaving no detail out, because I needed her help.

“Wow,” she breathed when I’d finished. Unable to sit quietly next to me any longer, Dani prowled around the living room, repeating that same sentiment over and over again.

“Wow!” she said once more with a nervous little giggle.

“Stop saying that and tell me what I should do?”

“Are you crazy? I say go for it. The guy’s obviously great in bed...” She caught sight my shocked expression and tried to curb her enthusiasm.

“Hey, you’ve been through a lot lately. And discovering all this is probably the biggest shock of them all. Maybe you’re right. Maybe this isn’t the type of relationship you need to be in right now, Paige. I mean, you’re not the type who can remain unemotional about a relationship.”

“Dani, that’s not it. I won’t let myself get attached to Jude—I can’t. I won’t go there again. And I can’t see him anymore either. I can’t even look at him anymore. After everything we’ve done together, and believe me there’s been plenty, I don’t think I can face Jude ever again. I may have to leave town.” This was certainly true enough. Just talking about Jude had me blushing like a schoolgirl after her first romp in the backseat of her date’s car.

Of course, Dani saw all this and tried not showing me how amusing she was finding my situation.

“Paige, don’t be ridiculous. You two are both adults. If you want to have a sexual relationship with someone, what’s stopping you?”

“Me! I’m stopping me! I don’t want to go through another dead end romance with another wrong guy. And that’s all it would be and you know it. Trust me, we both know how this story ends. I’ve been there too many times in the past. It’s not a good ending.”

“You may be right about Jude. I can’t see him settling down either. Especially now, after coming off a divorce, not to mention all the pressures of the company. It’s bad timing all the way around,” Dani said in her usual to-the-point way. But still, I hated hearing those words, even if she was right, which I knew she was. Jude Martin might not be like all the other loser boyfriends I’d had in the past. At least not as far

as class and attraction went. But he was still a man who didn't want a commitment.

"No, you're right," I forced out. "He's not the kind of guy to want anything more serious than sex with me or any other woman for that matter. And as much as I might want to be like you, Dani, I'm not the kind of girl to have frivolous relationships anymore. I'm sick of them, in fact. It's not me. I don't have it in me anymore. I want something to mean something. Oh, I'm not talking about marriage. I don't see myself going through that again. But I would like to someone I could connect with on more than one level."

I think it was at this point in which I fully realized something was wrong with Dani. In my need to solve my own problems, I realized I hadn't been much of a friend to her.

"Dani, what is it?" When she didn't answer, I asked, "Where's Mark?"

Dani sank slowly in front of the fire at my feet.

"I asked him to spend the night with a friend. I thought you'd want it to be just the two of us."

"Tell me what's wrong, Dani," I insisted. From the evidence of tears left on Dani's face I knew it must be bad.

"Nothing...not really. No, that's not true. I don't know... I guess I'm beginning to realize some things about my life as well. Things I don't much like. I've always tried to be this carefree, love'em and leave'em kind of woman, or at least that's what I told myself. Now, I'm not sure anymore? I don't know if it's because I'll be the big four-oh-my-god in a few months, and I've started to look back over some things in my life and wonder if maybe its time to make some changes, or if I only feel this way because of Mark."

"What do you mean?"

"Trust me, of all the people in the world for me to want to be in a serious relationship with, Mark is not the one I'd have picked. I mean the guy has an even bigger history than I do."

I forgot all about my problems when I spotted Dani's tears. Dani never cried. She was as tough as any man. Dani always seemed to know

what she wanted from life, and she went after it with a passion. What was responsible for this major change in her now?

“You think you’re in love with Mark?” I asked slowly. “How does he feel about that?”

“He doesn’t know,” she told me and laughed as if a little unsettled by her admission. “And yes, dammit I think, no I know, I love him. Isn’t this the most pathetic thing? I mean, think about it. Mark is guaranteed to leave me high and dry. His track record alone says this is the only thing that can happen. After all, his longest relationship before me lasted six months. We’ve been together that long already. I don’t know what to do anymore, and it’s killing me. On the one hand, I want to tell him how I feel — hell, I want to scream it to the world — but on the other, well, I’m afraid when I do, it will be the end of us. And I’m not sure that I can take that just yet.”

“How do you know for sure, Dani? Maybe he feels the same way about you?” I said, taking her hands in mine. I didn’t believe a word of what I’d said, but Dani was hurting and I wanted to comfort her.

“No, he doesn’t, and you want to know how I know? It’s simple. Mark told me he never falls in love. He was honest with me, right from the start. At the time, I thought great, I never want to fall in love either. Mark said this last relationship, the six month’s one, ended because the girl got too possessive. She wanted him exclusively.” Dani spotted my surprise and added, “Don’t look so shocked, Paige. Mark and I have always had kind of a silent agreement we would see other people. In the beginning, I thought it was great. The perfect relationship, in fact. Now, well, he’s been it for me for a long time now. Since...since I realized I loved him.”

“Oh, Dani. Are you sure? I mean what if...” I couldn’t finish those words. Dani’s expression said it all. She didn’t believe there was a future for her with Mark.

“I’m positive. Trust me, I wish I weren’t, but I am. I’ve been doing some soul searching of my own. You’re not the only one, you know. In fact, I’ve been checking on my options for a few weeks now. The day I

called in sick—I did the worst possible thing. I slept with another guy. Not because I wanted to, but because I had to put something between myself and my feelings for Mark. Needless to say, it didn't happen the way I wanted it to. The way I'd hoped it would. I actually felt guilty. Me... Guilty? Can you believe that?"

"No." I tried to smile. This woman had slept with more men than I'd come in contact with in my lifetime. And that's just since I'd known her. Dani was my hero.

But she was hurting, and I didn't know how to help her.

"I wish I could say something, anything to make it better for you Dani. All I've done is cry on your shoulder when you needed me. I'm sorry. What are you going to do?"

"Stay with Mark until I can't stand it any longer. Then move on. I mean this is New York, right? Anything is possible, if you believe it can happen. Who knows, maybe I'll be the one chance in a million. Maybe I'll change Mark's mind."

"Oh, Dani, I wish I'd known what you've been going through. I wish I hadn't been preoccupied in my own problems and blinded to yours. Is there anything that I can do?"

"You can offer me a couch to sleep on when I need it. You can try not to repeat my mistakes. You can stop looking to me for answers because I don't deserve it. I'm such a phony, Paige. I've tried to pretend all of my life I was this tough, in-control woman of the world. But the truth is nothing like that. I'm just as scared as you of being rejected, of trusting someone enough to love. Of being hurt. In a way, I guess this is my own fault. Don't be like me, Paige. Don't try to be tough. Follow your heart. Because, whether or not you believe it, you have a good heart."

"Dani, you know you can always stay with Sam and me. But as far as Jude goes, well, I don't know. My track record when it comes to guys is terrible. My judgment sucks. And Jude doesn't exactly strike me as the type of man who's going to want anything more from me than the rest of them did. What a pair of fools we are."

“That’s women for you. None of us is too smart when it comes to the men in our lives. We follow our hearts and look where that gets us? I take it you don’t plan on keeping your dinner date with Jude tonight? You’re avoiding the subject since you walked in.”

“No, I can’t, Dani. I’m not ready. I don’t think I can go through another bad relationship. I don’t have it in me anymore.”

“Okay, let’s make an agreement right now. Let’s not talk about men anymore today. I mean, we’re two very successful women. Who needs them, especially when we have Sammy? Look, I have an idea. Why don’t we go over to that pizza place you love so much and get some greasy pizza and beer. We’ll forget all about Mark and Jude and any of those other mistakes in the past, at least for tonight. We’re two single women out for some fun in the best city in the world for fun.

And for the rest of the evening, we did exactly that.

But as I lay tossing and turning in Dani’s guest bedroom, I couldn’t bring myself to trust what my instincts were screaming to me loud and clear.

I might not have it in me to survive another bad relationship, but I would see Jude again. That is if, by standing him up tonight, I hadn’t finished it for him. I’d see him again, because like it or not, he was still my fantasy.

Lesson 8: If you play with matches, you'd better be prepared to deal with a few fires.

When I walked into my office the following morning, I knew only one thing for certain. I wasn't keeping my eight o'clock appointment with Jude and didn't care what it cost me.

When Ralph pointed out the obvious, at exactly eight-oh-five, I only rolled my eyes and shook my head. No way—not going to happen in this lifetime.

When my nine o'clock meeting arrived in my office, I pretty much figured *okay, I'd done it*. I'd pissed him off completely, and I'd never see him again, except for when he fired me, maybe.

At exactly nine-fifteen, those words were proven wrong when my office door was thrown open and the object of my fantasies walked in, startling all three people seated in my cramped space.

Behind the obviously angry Jude, even though, to his credit he did seem to be trying hard to control his anger, dear old Ralph was busy waving his hands at me, trying to convey he'd at least tried to prevent this disaster from happening.

But nothing short of tackling the guy would have stopped Jude from accomplishing this quest.

"Where the hell were you last night?" While Jude might be doing his best to control his anger, those words didn't hold back any of what he was feeling at that moment from the people watching our little drama unfold.

"I'm in a meeting," I ground out, sounding a whole lot more in control than I felt. I trembled in my new cinnamon suede boots.

“Leave us alone,” Jude told them all very calmly. No one seated in my office was going to come to my defense and disobey a direct command from the boss. Three people scrambled over themselves to do as he asked.

“How could you do that? Do you have any idea what you’ve done? This little scene will be all over the building by lunch.”

“I don’t care. Get your things. We’re leaving. Since you’ve refused to do this the easy way, we’ll continue to play games. But I’m warning you, Paige—don’t go too far. You can come with me now willingly, or you can just come. It’s up to you.”

A thousand different answers flew through my mind, but after another look at Jude’s determination, I decided it would be foolish to push him now.

I grabbed my purse and slammed the desk drawer closed hard enough for him to realize my anger, which only managed to provoke a faint smile.

Oh yeah, he knew exactly what my thoughts were and he was finding it very amusing.

I think Jude half expected me to run once we were out of the office because he took my hand and never let go of it.

We made our way past Ralph, who couldn’t look me in the eye, past the subtle sound of doors closing, reminding me everyone on our floor heard our exchange. I cringed at the thought. I wanted to crawl into a hole somewhere and never to emerge again.

Inside Jude’s car, I sat silently fuming. His only reaction to my anger was an occasional questioning glance thrown my way as he maneuvered the car through the congested traffic of the streets until we emerged on the outskirts of town heading in the direction of Southampton.

Southampton?

“Where are we going?” I finally forced myself to ask when he showed no sign of cluing me in to this little piece of information.

“Some place where we can talk away from all those prying ears. Some place where you can’t run away from me again. Why don’t you relax, Paige, we’ve got all day.”

“No, we don’t. I have a calendar full of things I’m supposed to be doing today and I’m sure, since you are the *boss*,” yeah I actually emphasized the word to leave little doubt how I meant it, “you must have things to do as well.”

“Not anymore.” He appeared unmoved by my sarcasm. “The only thing I have to do today is you. You’re it. You are all that’s on my calendar.”

Those words, coming a little too close to the place my straying thoughts were wandering, had me embarrassed enough to keep my mouth shut for the rest of the way to wherever it was he was taking me.

Unfortunately, the farther away from the city we went, the more I started to worry. Where exactly were we going? Surely not...

“Tell me where we’re going, Jude?”

Jude smiled at me. “I thought you didn’t want to talk to me?”

At the reemergence of his smile, I shut my mouth. It was best this way, really. I was furious with him and needed to stay that way. Jude’s smile made it hard to remember my anger.

I sat quietly watching the light activity taking place along the road leading to the Hamptons.

I kept silent when Jude turned off the shady, tree-lined street onto a deserted cul-de-sac, and then to a private drive leading to an enormous two-story house.

Somehow, I managed to keep from showing Jude how impressed I was with the place. At least, right until the moment we entered the house and I looked around completely captivated by it.

At this point, I tried to counteract my small town girl wonder with some more anger. I stood rigidly in front of him as he closed the door and turned to face me.

“Come. Sit. I’ll make you breakfast?”

Jude watched me a little too closely as I made my decision. I decided it was time to put an end to this mess I'd gotten myself into once and for all.

"Don't bother. I'm not staying." I started for the door but Jude was too fast for me. He reached me before I made it to the door. I knew the second he touched me the fight was over. I wasn't going to refuse this guy anything. I didn't want to. I was crazy about him.

Before either of us fully realized what we were doing, we were in his bedroom, touching each other as if it was the very first time.

Afterward, as we lay in each other's arms, exhausted once more, I finally became aware of a few things.

One, I'd just broken my promise to myself. I'd given in to Jude Martin again. I'd let him take me off without as much as a fight and I had virtually no idea where I was. And two, I still wasn't able to define what was happening between us. I didn't know what I wanted from him or from this relationship. I didn't even know if I wanted a relationship with him.

"Come downstairs, Paige. Let me make you breakfast, and we'll talk about all those things that are troubling you right now."

Jude didn't wait for me to consider what he'd said. He simply left me alone.

When I managed to actually get out of bed, I took my time before facing him again. I looked around the room which was decidedly masculine and tried to decide what this meant. I knew Jude had been married and divorced. But that was about all that I knew about my boss-slash-lover, except the fact that he was over ten years younger than me.

Was this house a new acquisition? Or had he shared it with his wife?

Outside the bedroom, a whitewashed deck overlooked the Atlantic Ocean. The view beyond the deck was breathtaking.

I found Jude in the kitchen actually making me breakfast.

The second I walked into the room Jude's full attention was on me. The look in his eyes told me he was remembering the passion we'd

shared with each other just moment before. This man was very dangerous to my self-control.

“Come sit down,” he told me quietly. And me, being at a loss for what to do, did exactly as he asked of me.

I looked through the wall of windows that faced the ocean and thought how lucky Jude was to be living in a house like this with such a spectacular view to look at each day.

Jude handed me coffee and set a plate of French toast in front of me before sliding into the chair next to me. Far too close for comfort.

“Aren’t you eating?” I asked nervously.

He watched me for a minute longer before answering. “No, I ate earlier. And I happen to know you don’t normally eat breakfast, which is a shame since it’s the most important meal of the day.”

“How did you know that?” I asked to cover my embarrassment at him actually knowing this much about me.

Jude gave me a look that told me how foolish he considered my question.

“Paige, I’ve been to your apartment more times than I can remember, and there’s never anything to eat there. Believe me, after... Well, let’s just say, I know.”

I untangled my gaze from his with difficulty, focusing on the view before me instead. “It’s beautiful here. You must hate to leaving it each day. Do you actually drive into the city every day?”

I think at this point, he realized my need to go slowly.

“Sometimes, but I don’t mind the drive. You see, I love living on the beach. This house has been a part of my family for years. My parents lived here until they divorced and I rather took it over from there. Eat your toast, Paige. They’re getting cold.

“And, to answer your question, I sometimes stay in the city. If I have to work late or if I have other...commitments, such as you, I have an apartment in town that I use. That was where my father lived until recently. That is until he retired from the business and was remarried,

for the third time, and moved across the continent to San Francisco. It's only me now."

I forced myself to eat a few bites of the French toast he'd made for me, but I was too nervous to taste a thing.

"Paige, I know you're scared. You don't trust me, and you're right—we don't know each other very well, beyond the obvious. But I think, even you can't deny that you're as attracted to me as I am to you. Paige, I don't want to walk away from this—whatever this is. And I don't think you do either. Do you?"

In answer, I simply nodded. He was right. I didn't want to walk away from Jude.

"Tell me about the boyfriend."

"No." This was the only thing to pop into my head in answer to that request. "That's not something I want to talk about."

"No? Okay, I'll tell you what I know about him." That brought my attention back to him. "Oh yes, I know quite a lot about you, Paige."

At those words, I couldn't sit quietly next to him any longer. I stumbled to my feet and put the distance of the table between us.

"Why didn't you tell me, Jude? Why didn't you answer any of my questions when I asked you? You told me you didn't want to have any type of relationship with me beyond physical. Why the sudden change of mind and what am I supposed to think?"

Jude reached for me before I moved away. "I know what I said, Paige, and I'm not going to lie to you—I certainly don't understand this. I'm not even sure I like it." He stopped when he saw my reaction to those words. He couldn't have hurt me more had he actually told me to get lost.

"Paige, this is as unexpected for me as it is for you. All I can say is when you walked into that hotel the night of the party, I knew you were going to be different. Even before I touched you the first time, I knew. I guess what I'm trying to say is I can't tell you where this is all going between us. I can't make you promises. All I can say is I don't want to walk away from you. Let's give this a chance. See what happens. Who knows?"

When I still didn't answer, Jude tried again to convince me that he meant all those things that he was telling me. "If want to know about me, I'll tell you. I don't want to keep secrets from you. But I need to hear about you and Harry as well. That's only fair." He took me hand. "It's a beautiful day outside. Let's take a walk. We can talk while walking just as easily."

Outside, the ocean crashed against the shore making conversation hard to hear, not that it mattered. I was with him. I walked quietly beside Jude and waited for him to say something. But I wasn't nervous anymore.

"You want me to start?" When I simply nodded, he smiled. "I thought so. Okay. I'll tell you everything about me, about my marriage, even though there are some things I'm not very proud of. You see, I'm not the kind of person who's good at marriage. I learned the hard way. I got married after graduating from the university because I thought that was what was expected of me. Lisa and I didn't have a clue about life or marriage or what we wanted from ourselves, much less each other. The marriage ended before it began. I think we both realized early on what we felt for each other was physical, certainly not enough to make a marriage work. She wanted things I didn't. Things like kids. She hated living in the London. She missed her family terribly. I couldn't go back to New York, or my father. We were divorced after only a few years. Lisa moved back home to be with her family. I haven't talked to her since. And since the divorce, I've avoided any type of serious relationship, especially marriage."

Jude glanced at me and saw the hurt I wanted to deny. "I'm sorry—this isn't what you or any other woman wants to hear from a man, but it is the truth."

"You're wrong, Jude. You see, I've been married as well. I wasn't good at it either. And I don't want those things from you or any other man." The look on his face told me he didn't believe me and I couldn't blame him. After all, what woman wouldn't want to be married to Jude Martin?

"You don't believe me..."

“It’s not that I don’t. It’s just, well, I guess its been my experience most women, no matter how much they try to deny it, want the whole marriage, commitment, family thing. It’s not possible with me. I know my faults. I could never make it work.”

“Maybe the women you’ve met in the past, but not me. I’ve done the whole marriage thing already. I guess it’s not for everyone. I’m not even sure I want to have a serious relationship with anyone, especially with you.”

He stopped and looked at me with a seriousness in his blue eyes I’d never seen before. “Why not with me?”

“Jude, I’m thirty-nine. I’m over ten years older than you. What do we possibly have in common?”

“Oh, I think we work pretty well together, Paige. And age is just a number.”

I closed my eyes in frustration. He didn’t understand. “I’m not talking about sex, Jude. I may not want a serious relationship, but I have to believe there’s more to life than good sex. And you, well, you’re still young. You might change your mind. Someday, you may decide you want children of your own. Someone to carry on your family traditions.”

“I won’t. I’m not the father type. After witnessing my old man’s way of fathering, I don’t think I’d be good for any child.”

As I listened to what Jude told me, I knew I’d been right about him all along. He was definitely one of the wrong ones.

“I don’t think I’m father material. I guess, I don’t have it in me.” He slowly shook his head. “Okay, enough about me. I want to hear about you. Tell me about the boyfriend.”

To any other woman, the slight touch of jealousy in Jude’s tone would have been thrilling. But for me, after having all of my worst fears confirmed by the things he’d said, I knew my fate was as good as sealed. There would be no happily-ever-after ending for Jude and I.

As hard as it was, I told Jude everything about my relationship with Harry.

I purposefully told Jude the reason why Harry and I didn't last because I wanted him to know how badly I'd been hurt. How much I needed to be a part of something that was normal for once. Something that was leading somewhere other than the bedroom.

I needed Jude to know I didn't want to play games anymore. And even though I might not be willing to admit it to myself, and certainly not to him, I wanted a serious relationship, at least as serious as I'd let myself accept at this point in my life. And I knew Jude wouldn't be the one to offer it to me.

"Harry was a fool. You know that, don't you? There's nothing boring about you. Not even a little bit. You were lucky to get rid of him though. And I was lucky you did. If Harry hadn't been such an ass you wouldn't have given me the time of day. I can't even imagine what my life would be like if I hadn't."

I wanted to believe there might be some hope for us, but I knew the truth. Jude had told me as much. He wanted to have a good time with me. He wasn't looking for anything more. And as much as I tried to convince myself this was what I wanted as well, I knew for me it would always be a lie.

We spent the rest of the day talking about our pasts. Jude told me about all the places he'd traveled through the years. London had been his last stop before returning to the states to take over for his father.

It was late when I finally realized I'd given away far too much of myself to him.

"I should go. I need to check on poor Sammy. He's been alone all day."

I think Jude realized this was just an excuse, but he didn't argue.

"Okay, let's go back to your apartment, check on Sammy, and afterwards I'm taking you to dinner."

I let Jude stay with me once again, like all those nights before, but this time it felt different. Tonight, I knew something about the man in my arms. He wasn't a faceless fantasy anymore. Jude Martin had become my flesh and blood reality. At least for the moment.

And right or wrong, he was everything I'd ever wanted. Fantasy, reality...present.

Lesson 9: When someone asks a question you don't want to answer, simply smile and remain mysterious.

I'd returned to my apartment to find more than a half dozen messages from Dani and even a couple from Ralph.

Jude smiled as I played them back. "They're worried about you. Isn't that what friends do?" he added when I'd rolled my eyes.

"I know, but you have no idea how persistent they can be. This is only the beginning. I don't know how I'll face them tomorrow."

Jude took me in his arms. "You'll be okay. They're your friends. They'll understand."

The next morning it took every ounce of strength I managed to muster up to walk back into my office and face the questions I knew would be waiting for me there. As we stood outside the side door entrance, I still didn't know what to tell my friends about yesterday. How could I explain to Dani I'd gone against everything I believed in? Including the fact that I knew Jude would hurt me.

Jude pulled me against him and kissed me. "Don't worry. Everything will be okay—you'll see. I'll call you later, okay? Right now, I have to go face some music of my own, namely Stella. She's going to eat me alive for running away like I did yesterday."

That at least produced a smile in me, which I suspected was the whole purpose. Somehow, I couldn't imagine Jude Martin not commanding respect from those around him. Especially his assistant.

With one more kiss, which left me wanting more, I said goodbye to the man of my dreams and went inside to face the questions I knew would come from my friends.

Starting with Ralph.

The second I stopped at his desk and he spotted me, I knew I owed Ralph some explanation. After all, I'd disappeared without so much as a single word of explanation, leaving Ralph to fix my mess.

"Hi." I managed a smile while trying not to laugh at his dumbstruck expression. Ralph didn't know where to start the questioning.

"Why don't you come to my office? We'll talk there."

For the first time since I'd known him, Ralph did exactly what I asked without giving an opinion.

He handed me the calendar which had nothing scheduled until early afternoon.

"Thank you." I acknowledged his efforts and smiled when he handed me a cup of coffee.

"I wasn't sure you'd be in today." He took his usual seat across from mine. "I mean, I thought maybe the big guy had killed you after yesterday."

"No, as you can see I'm still alive."

"Uh huh. Well, I'm not sure about that. You know you—"

I didn't allow him to finish. "Owe you? You're right. I owe you a lot, Ralph. Okay, here goes, but let me say before I even begin, I of all people understand how crazy this is going to sound."

For the next fifteen minutes, I tried to find the best way to tell the person who'd saved my butt more times than I cared to remember about a relationship I didn't understand.

"So you see, I don't know what I'm doing anymore. In fact, if you tell me I'm crazy, I'll certainly agree with you."

He'd sat quietly listening while I talked, which in itself should have been my first clue of how unbelievable my story truly was.

“You’ve gotten yourself into one hell of a mess, Miss Texas. That man’s trouble for you. I saw that the second I saw the sparks fly between the two of you. As my dear, sweet mother—God rest her soul—always loved to say, there are lasting relationships and there are sparks. In the end, you have to know if you’re willing to burn yourself up for someone, or let go of yourself in little pieces over time. I’ve always found pieces are easier to give away than everything at once.”

“I’m heading for trouble,” I told him quietly. “But have you ever been in a relationship you know is all-wrong for you and yet you can’t give it up? That’s how this feels. I know we’re not going anywhere. There are too many red flags. Jude told me he doesn’t want a serious relationship or kids. Someday, I want those things, but not right now.”

“Oh please!” Ralph saw right through my lies. “You are so homey, it hurts. You’d sell your soul to have those things. Stop lying to yourself.”

Ralph spotted my hurt expression. “Paige, listen, I’ve been where you are. You may not believe it by looking at me, but I was once involved in a relationship that was all fireworks. We couldn’t get enough of each other. In the end, it burned itself out and we hated the sight of one another.” Ralph didn’t miss my reaction. Those words hurt like hell to hear, but they weren’t any great surprise. He was trying to warn me of my future.

“When you’re caught in the middle of something as consuming as what you’re involved in now, it’s hard to believe it will happen to you. But it does, honey. Most of the time it does. All I’m saying is don’t give up too much of yourself for that one. You see, there are parts you can’t ever get back again.”

As much as I wanted to cry, I wouldn’t let myself. Not in front of Ralph. Instead, I simply hugged him and asked if Dani had arrived.

“Yep. In fact, she asked me to tell you to come see her when you got in. She’s worried about you too.”

“I know. I’ll go see her right now.”

Facing Dani’s questions was harder still because I believed her failed relationship with Mark would be a carbon copy of my future with Jude.

I knocked once then stepped inside. Dani took one look at me and knew the truth.

"Come, sit down." She waited for me to take a seat. "Paige, you know that you and our boss are going to be the talk of the office for quite some time to come after yesterday, don't you?"

"Yes. I can only imagine what's being said."

"Oh, trust me, it's all that's being talked about." After another searching glance at my quivering bottom lip, seemed to weigh her next words more carefully. "I promise I'm not going to preach, but you know you're heading for trouble, don't you? Please tell me you know this thing with Jude won't last."

For a long time, I couldn't speak. Dani's expression told me she knew things. Things I didn't want to hear. I nodded.

"You probably don't want to hear any of what I'm about to say, but I'm going to tell you just the same because I want you to know what you're dealing with. In many ways, you're still that small town girl who first moved to New York all those years ago."

"What are you trying to say, Dani? Just tell me."

"I did some checking on our boss. Do you know anything about his past?"

"Yes, we talked quite a lot yesterday. He told me he's been married before. And that the marriage ended soon after it began. I know he's not interested in anything serious."

"And you're okay with this?" Dani asked incredulously. She didn't believe me. Not that I could blame her. *I* didn't believe me. "Even if this were all there was to it, that's bad enough. But there's more. As I said, I did some checking. I have a friend at the London office. Jude has quite a reputation with women, Paige. Even before his divorce there were rumors flying around the office about Jude seeing other women."

"You're right. I don't want to hear this." I covered my face with my hands.

"But you need to, if you're going to continue to see him. You should know what you're facing. What the future will hold for you."

“Dani, you don’t know if any of those things are true. It’s probably just gossip. You know how people talk,” I interrupted, angry with myself because I believed what Dani said was true.

“No, you’re right, I don’t. And my friend certainly didn’t interact with Jude all that much. It may all be an elaborate story. But I have to believe some of it is true. My friend told me Jude’s wife was the one to file for divorce. There were rumors she’d had enough. Paige, he’s gone through more women than most celebrities.”

“You know what, Dani, I realize I’m in over my head, but I don’t care. Maybe Jude is going to be my fling. I’m still young, right? I certainly have a few good times left in me before I settle for someone boring.”

“If that were true, I’d say great—go for it. But I know you, remember? You’re not the type. Stop kidding yourself. I didn’t tell you any of these things to hurt you. I only want you to be careful. Especially since you care about Jude already. You do, don’t you, Paige?”

I looked her in the eye and tried my darnedest to lie. I couldn’t.

I did care about Jude. Certainly more than I wanted to. I’d cared for him even before I knew his name. When he was still my dream lover. There would be no turning off those feelings now. I was in this thing until the bitter end, however soon or however tragic that ending might be.

“Hey, who knows?” she said. “Maybe you’re going to be the one to change all that? Maybe, you’ll be the one to bring Jude Martin to his knees for a change. For all the women of the world who’ve been treated badly by men like Jude. Do us all proud, Paige.”

Dani at least succeeded in making me smile. But I wasn’t fooled by her false enthusiasm.

“You don’t believe that any more than I do.” I tried to sound in control. “But let’s talk about something else for a change. I’m sick of thinking about Jude.”

“Don’t let him hear you say that.” When I started to protest this point, she held up a hand, “Okay, what do you want to talk about?”

“You. I want to talk about you, Dani. How are you doing?”

“Oh God, do we have to? I’m probably the worst person in the world to be giving you advice. I’m living a nightmare of my own creation. Things are terrible, just terrible between Mark and me. It’s gotten bad enough for me to question everything he does. I’ve become your typical suspicious hag. Looking through his things and expecting to find another woman. Finding her.”

“Oh, Dani—no. Mark’s seeing someone else? Is it serious or...” There was no easy way to say it.

“I don’t know. But it’s killing me, and I’m destroying what’s left of our relationship because of it. All I know is I can’t do this anymore. I can’t be in love with someone and not be completely in love with him. And Mark doesn’t want that.” Dani stopped mid-sentence when I began to cry.

“Paige—what is it?”

I wanted to tell her how sorry I felt for her. I wanted to be the friend Dani needed me to be. But in truth, her story only reminded me of my own fate. This would be my future.

“I’m sorry,” I said when I managed to speak again. “I could just kick Mark for you.”

“Yeah, I know. Me too. But what are you going to do? I mean, we make our own fate, right? This has been coming for me for a while. Who knew I’d be the type of woman to fall in love? Go figure.”

“Is there anything I can do? Besides offer you a bed and a place to live if you need one?”

Dani smiled. “You can listen to me complain like you’re doing right now. You can not repeat my mistakes. You can figure out this whole confusing thing called love for me.”

When I left her office, I couldn’t tell her I’d never be able fulfill those promises. Dani’s fate was mine. I was following her same path to destruction, only I knew it and I still wasn’t strong enough to stop it. I wouldn’t get over Jude without losing parts of myself.

But none of these truths stopped me from being thrilled when the object of my torment wanted to speak to me later.

Jude was in between meetings when Ralph buzzed me to let me know he was holding for me.

“Hi.” The seductive way he said it had me struggling to sound unmoved. “How goes the inquisition?”

“It’s all over with but the stares, I think. How’s Stella treating you?”

The sound of Jude’s laughter melted away the remainder of my reservations. “Still mad, but at least she hasn’t walked out on me yet.”

I closed my eyes and wished I could be stronger. Why couldn’t I want what Jude wanted from this relationship?

“Come have lunch with me?”

Even before he finished, I was trying to think of some reason to refuse. “I can’t. I’m pretty busy.”

“That’s too bad, because you have an appointment in my office at twelve. I’ve had your assistant reschedule your day. Don’t be late, or I’ll send Stella after you.”

Before I had the chance to refuse, Jude hung up. I glanced at my watch and realized it was almost noon now. Did I dare stand Jude up again? I debated this with myself right until the time I stepped off the elevator and faced Stella’s condemnation.

“Oh, Miss Wilder. Mr. Martin is expecting you. Please go right in.” She wasn’t fooling anyone. She’d sized me up from my hair, which no doubt was in its usual disarray, to the outfit I’d selected because it was the first thing I’d found in my closet which didn’t require ironing, to my shoes, which didn’t quite match my outfit.

In Stella’s mind, I’m sure I’d become the equivalent of office whore.

At the moment, that’s pretty much exactly what I felt like.

I knocked on Jude’s door, heard his sexy voice inviting me inside then closed the door on Stella and her judgment.

“You came,” was all he said when he saw me standing before him.

“Yes. Did you think I wouldn’t? I mean, well, you are my boss.”

Jude saw all my insecurities. He got to his feet and came round the desk. Close but still not touching me.

“Is this why you think I asked you here? To be bossy?”

No, I didn’t think that at all. But I certainly didn’t know what was going on anymore, especially inside my head. Jude closed his eyes for a moment, then took my hand.

“Paige, I want to be with you. I never wanted to leave you, but unfortunately I do have a company to run. I want us to have a quiet lunch together and talk about us. About anything but work.”

He stopped in front of the small table placed in front of the windows. Jude had ordered a picnic lunch for us.

“When is your next meeting?”

I was tempted to tell him right now. The small piece of rational Paige still left urged me to break it off before I gave him the opportunity to hurt me. But the woman who would do anything for one more moment with Jude was the one to answer. “Later this afternoon,” I admitted.

“I think I like Ralph.”

“Trust me, he doesn’t like you.” Even as I said those words, I watched the amusement leave his eyes

“Why is that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do...”

“Because he thinks you’ll hurt me.”

“Is this what you think as well?” Jude asked quietly.

“Yes. Yes, I’m almost certain of it, in fact.”

He pulled me into his arms and held me close. “Paige hurting you is the last thing I would ever do. This isn’t some kind of game we’re playing with each other. While I don’t know where all of this is heading, I want you to know I would never deliberately do anything to hurt you.”

At that moment, looking into his eyes, I believed him. But Jude would hurt me someday. Because he didn’t know how not to.

“If you want me to leave you alone, I will,” he added seriously.

I think he understood our future, just as I. But Jude was leaving the decision to me.

“I’ll walk away, right now, if that’s what you want. I’ll never see you again.”

The very thought hurt to consider. Instinctively, I knew this was what I needed him to do.

“Yes.” Somehow, I managed to push him away before I had the chance to change my mind. “Yes, that’s what I want. I don’t want to see you again, Jude.”

I wanted to believe the hurt in Jude’s eyes. But I couldn’t trust I possessed that kind of power over him.

I left his office before I lost my courage and went back into his arms.

With my head held high, I walked past Stella, with all of her judgment clear in her expression. I ran down all eleven flights of stairs to the second floor restroom where I cried for more than an hour.

Lesson 10: Know how to ask for what you want in a way that makes it likely you'll get it.

When I finally returned to my office, it was to no new voicemails, no emails. No communication at all.

And there at last, in the worst possible way, he'd proven to I *was* different from all the other women in his life. I meant something to Jude because he was doing what he believed was best for me. He was leaving me alone.

The rest of the day ground by in a blur of endless boring meetings, tedious phone calls and my best attempt at dodging the office gossips.

I immersed myself in each of these tasks with more enthusiasm than necessary while trying to deny my pain.

Once I was sure no one else was still around, I finally allowed myself to let go of the tight control I'd been holding over my emotions for most of the day.

It was in this state of weepy despondency that my past caught up with me. Harry found me sitting with my face buried in my hands, crying like a baby.

"Paige? Are you okay?" The unwelcome sound of his voice forced me look at him.

"Harry—what are you doing? You... Yes, yes, I'm fine. You shouldn't be here." At the first hint of sympathy from Harry, I fought to control the tears.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you, but, well, I don't know. I guess I hoped I'd find you working still. Can I talk to you for a second? I know what you said the last time we were together, and believe me I understand. I'm not trying to get back together with you. I blew any chance I had. But you and I were friends for a long time before we became a couple. Can I talk to you as your friend?"

I didn't trust this new approach from Harry not to be another ploy on his part. But at the moment, I needed something to take my mind off Jude.

I motioned for Harry to sit.

"Paige, I treated you terribly. Believe me, I realize what a fool I am. I don't know what came over me. You see, I'd just met this girl. I guess she appeared different from most of the women I found myself attracted to. Kind of wild and carefree. I guess I thought...wow. This is what's missing in my life. But as you can probably guess, it didn't last. She only wanted to have a good time. And I realized I'd begun looking for an excuse to end our relationship. Not because I wanted to, really. I think I got scared. I saw my future, kids and all. I guess I got cold feet for a second or two. But I've realized that is what I wanted all along. It just took me a while to realize it."

"Harry, you and I would never have worked, don't you see? You want the whole family thing. You just don't want it with me."

I watched as he stammered to recover, searching for some lie to tell me, before I stopped him.

"It's okay. I'm actually grateful to you for doing what you did. Even though at the time, I have to admit it hurt like crazy to hear the things you said. You see, you made me realize that *I* don't want those things. You and I weren't right for each other, Harry. We were friends in the beginning. We should have left it that way. We made a mess of things by trying to be more than friends."

"Maybe you are right. Although honestly, I'm not sure I'm not still in love with you."

“Harry, if you aren’t sure, you don’t love me. But I shouldn’t have said I didn’t want us to see each other anymore. After all, we had a good friendship in the beginning...before. Maybe if we try we can get it back and forget about all the rest of what happened between us.”

“You mean it? Because I want to try as well. I’ve missed you. And it looks as if you need a friend right now. What do you say? Are you doing anything tonight?” When I shook my head, Harry added, “Want to go grab some dinner and talk?”

And just like that, Harry was back in my life again. But this time I knew what I did and didn’t want from the relationship.

Harry and I went to dinner at a small pub close to my apartment I’d first discovered a few months after moving to New York. Once I’d found the nerve to venture into the city.

Tonight, the place was pretty much empty. It was still too early for the party crowds and a little too late for the old married folks.

On this particular fall night in New York City, the earlier rain helped keep the streets empty. Which turned out to be perfect for Harry and me. Two people who weren’t sure where they fit into each other’s lives just yet.

After we’d ordered dinner, he asked the one question I’d known would be coming.

“Is it true?”

I didn’t even have to ask what he meant. I knew I’d become the talk of the office by now.

“Not anymore.” I tried not to show how much those words hurt to say.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I ended it with Jude today.”

I told my old friend everything, and I mean everything, about my relationship with Jude Martin. Some of which was obviously hard for Harry to hear.

“Wow. I think I’m shocked. No, actually I’m blown away. None of this sounds like the Paige I know. Am I responsible for this? Did those things I said to you force you into this relationship with Jude Martin?”

“No! Oh God, no, Harry. This has nothing to do with you. The truth is I don’t know what it was but I wished it had never happened.” I closed my eyes for a second and forced myself to ask him the question I needed to know. “How bad is the office gossip anyway?”

Harry didn’t want to tell me the truth, which meant it must bad.

“Bad...”

“Let me have it. I need to know, Harry. Dani and Ralph won’t tell me.”

“Only that you and the boss are having yourselves one hell of a hot and heavy affair. A couple of people even go so far as to speculate that maybe you’re having sex in the office. On old man Martin’s desk no less.” Unfortunately, once Harry finished, I wished I hadn’t been so curious.

“Oh God! How am I ever going to live this down? I’ll have to quit. I mean, how can I face all the looks I’m sure I’ll be getting. Not to mention, how hard it’s going to be watching Jude with another woman. Which I’m sure is bound to happen at any time now. I mean, I told him I didn’t want to see him again. I’m such an idiot, Harry.”

“You’re not an idiot. And I think I understand how hard it will be for you. You think our breakup has been any easier for me? I’m trying to be supportive, Paige but to be honest it hurts to think about you with another guy.”

“I’m sorry, Harry. I guess I never thought it would bother you. But you’re right. Maybe, there are some things we shouldn’t talk about with each other. Good grief, look at the time! I had no idea it was this late. I need to get home to my puppy.”

After we paid our tab and walked into the crisp rainy night, Harry took my hand. “Why don’t you let me walk you home at least? It is late, and this isn’t exactly the safest neighborhood.”

Normally I’d have protested any type of protective gesture from a man. I’d lived in this neighborhood for a number of years now. I knew everyone for blocks around. As an independent woman I didn’t need to

lean on any man to make it in this city. But tonight, I needed a friend. And I was postponing the inevitable.

Going home to an empty apartment with no possible hope for the return of my midnight lover, and no future with the boss I'd walked out on earlier today. I'd grown restless again. The last thing I wanted was to be alone.

Harry waited while I unlocked the apartment door. It took everything in me not to invite him in.

As much as I might not want to be alone, I knew I couldn't encourage Harry. I didn't feel that way about him anymore. I owed it to our budding friendship not to blur those lines again.

"Are you sure you want me to leave?" he asked, reading my doubts.

"No, but I can't go back to our past relationship again."

"I know. You can't blame a guy for trying. I still want you, Paige. I'm such an idiot for hurting you. But I don't want to lose you from my life, either. You're too important to me. If friends are all that we can be for each other, I'll take it."

After Harry had left, I took Sammy for a short, walk mostly because I still couldn't face my bedroom again. I showered and got ready for bed but knew I couldn't sleep in my bed.

Of all places, I felt Jude's absence the most there. I regretted my decision even more, although I knew it was the right one to make. Instead, I lay down on the couch and tried to push aside the memories of all those nights I'd spent with him.

It was there, in such a desperate state, that he came to me.

Whatever happened, happened. I couldn't let him go again. Not on my own accord.

When he found me, Jude simply lifted me in his arms and carried me to my bed.

I waited while he undressed and came to me, and I couldn't send him away. When he took me in his arms, I couldn't keep from crying because I hated this weakness in me.

“Don’t cry. Paige, please don’t cry. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be here. I know what you said—what you want. But I can’t do either of those things. I can’t let you go. I don’t know what’s wrong with me anymore. I don’t understand any of this. I only know I can’t let you go. I’m sorry. This isn’t fair to you.”

As hard as I tried, I couldn’t answer him and I couldn’t stop my reaction to his words or his touch.

I lay in his arms tired and filled with questions, and yet still unable to ask a single one of them.

“Say something. Tell me what you want?”

Jude forced me to look at him. But I merely shook my head and held him tighter.

Whatever happened, happened.

Lesson 11: Open your arms to change but don't let go of your dreams in the process.

The following morning I awoke with my usual exhaustion, but I wasn't alone in bed this time. Beside me, my fantasy, my mistake and my downfall all rolled up in one very alluring package.

For once, I left the bed before Jude, who appeared to be out cold.

I dressed and made coffee and yet still no sound from the bedroom. I took Sammy for a short walk and returned to find Jude standing in my kitchen drinking my coffee.

We faced each other across the room, neither of us knowing what to say to the other. All the old familiar longings were there in our eyes for the other to see.

"I have to go. I'm running late already, and I have a meeting in half an hour." I didn't wait for him to answer. I simply turned away, busily gathering my things to cover my confusion when his words stopped me.

"Paige, I'm sorry. I know this is hard for you. You need reassurances I can't give you. I only know I don't want to walk away from you. Whatever is happening between us, I don't want to leave it. And I think you feel the same way too. It's hard, especially after what you've been through with Harry. It's hard for me, as well. But let's not let our past mistakes destroy a good thing, okay? Let's give this, whatever it is, a fighting chance."

There at last, standing in my tiny living room, I got it. What had been hard for me to believe in the past. Jude was just as thrown by what was happening between us as me. And just as powerless to stop it.

I forced myself to face him again. "You're right. I don't want to walk away from you, either. But I don't think I can stand to be hurt again. You can't promise you won't hurt me. I don't know how I feel about that, Jude. I don't know if I can do this again."

"I know, baby. Trust me, I feel the same way." Slowly he came to me and tucked a strand of my hair back behind my ear. "But I want to try. I have to, because God help me, I can't let you go."

I started crying again, and I hated him for making me feel this way. And hated myself for giving into my desires.

Jude said something under his breath before gathering me close. "Don't cry, Paige. I'm sorry, I know this is hard, but we'll figure it out together. Stop running away from me, okay?"

I wanted everything from him, but I'd accept what he would give me.

"I can't make you any promises either. But I'll try."

I felt him smile against my hair. "That's all that I can ask you to do. Don't give up on me, okay?"

"I'll try. But I want to slow things down between us. We're moving too fast. There's enough obstacles as it is between us, with the whole age thing, and the fact that you're my boss," I added when he wanted to protest. "Can't we slow things down a bit?"

He groaned pitifully, but he was still smiling when he looked at me again. "We can do whatever you need to feel comfortable with us, Paige. But I have to tell you it's going to be hard. I'm crazy about you. In case you don't see this yet, you drive me mad just looking at you."

Overwhelmed, I pulled away and started for the door when he caught my hand. "All right, I get it—you've got to go, but at least give me a kiss."

"No. No, I can't, because it won't stop with just a kiss and you know it...and I have a meeting in thirty minutes, Jude."

"Okay, okay," he said, holding up his hands in mock self-defense. "This will be my first step in constraint. I'm letting you go peacefully, even if I don't like it. Besides, I need to run to the apartment and change before I head in. Stella will no doubt be furious with me by now. I'm sure I'm missing all kinds of meetings, myself. But it was worth it. I'd do just

about anything to be with you, Paige. I was afraid you'd never let me near you again after what you said yesterday," he told me with more sincerity than I'd seen in Jude before. "You have no idea how hard I fought coming over here last night. But I couldn't do it. And I've never felt this way about any other woman before you."

Somehow, I managed to leave for work while practically floating on air all the way into the office.

I ignored all of the warning signals going off inside my head, reminding me of Dani's advice only yesterday. I ignored my own uneasy feeling telling me that while I might not want to believe what Dani said there had to be some truth in them.

I pushed aside all of my uneasiness about the future and walked into my office, smiling like a woman in love and on the brink of disaster.

"Well, to what do we owe this pleasure? On time and actually smiling? I'm impressed."

"Ralph—don't start, okay?"

"You get things sorted in your head about that man?"

"Yes." I grinned a little wider.

As I left Ralph watching me suspiciously, I swear I heard him say, "Uh huh, that will be the day."

I breezed through my day still soaring on my cloud of happiness while the world around me trudged on in slow mediocre steps.

Didn't matter. I was a woman crazy about the man she was with, and I no longer tried to deny it.

My euphoria lasted until around mid-day when, after waiting patiently for Jude to call, there was still no word from him.

I waited around long after everyone else in the office left for the day, but still no call. No surprise visit. Only a silence which spoke louder than any of Jude's words.

At this point, in an act of total defiance on my part, I did something I couldn't even begin to explain to myself. I called Harry.

“How about you come see a movie with me tonight?” The words left my mouth before I even had a chance to consider I might be playing with Harry’s emotions. I truly wanted to be friends with him. But was I encouraging other feelings in him?

“Hey, what are you still doing at the office this late?”

I decided the best answer was to be as evasive as possible. “Oh, you know, just catching up on some stuff. What do you think? Want to grab some dinner before the last show?”

“Sounds good to me. Why don’t I meet you at our restaurant in an hour?”

Our restaurant? Warning signals were literally screaming in my head when I answered. “Good. That will give me time to let Sammy for a walk first.”

Ignoring every single one of my apprehensions, I had dinner with Harry. We went to a movie I would normally have cared less about seeing to allow myself time to take my mind off my disappointments.

After Harry left me at my door, everything I had been trying hard to ignore all evening, came rushing back to remind me, I’d been a fool to trust Jude Martin.

When my alarm clock sounded the following morning, I wasn’t any closer to understanding what was happening between us than I had been the night before. The only thing I truly knew for certain was I couldn’t go on this way much longer.

Unlike the day before, this day was the longest day of my life. More times than I cared to remember, I picked up the phone to call Jude, but slammed it back in place again.

I made it halfway to the top floor before I lost my courage. I couldn’t face the fact that maybe I’d been wrong to trust in Jude. Maybe, all those terrible things being said about him were true? Was this back and forth confusion part of the game he played with all women?

By close of another business day, I’d pretty much decided whatever I thought was going on between us wasn’t.

Harry stopped by on his way out to see if I wanted to something that night, but I didn't feel much like company.

A short time after Harry's departure, my elusive lover found me.

"You're still seeing him?" Jude's anger brought my attention from of the financial report I'd been pretending to review to my open door. He looked at me as if I'd just killed his cat.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Him...Harry Davison? Your ex-boyfriend? You're still seeing him, aren't you? Is this why you haven't bothered to call me in two days? I guess you've been a little too busy. And here I thought I might be rushing you. I guess you weren't ready to let go of your other boyfriend yet. You haven't ended it with him, have you? You're still playing games."

Jude turned to leave when I finally managed to say his name with enough desperation to make him stop and turn back to me.

"Well? What were you going to say? That it was all a mistake? That you never meant to hurt me?"

As he continued to watch me, I did what I'd gotten famous for with him. I cried. I hardly recognized myself anymore. As a woman crazy about this man, I was becoming quite the sentimental fool.

Before I covered my face with my hands, I saw Jude's reaction to my tears. I don't know if he believed me or not, but my tears had the power to do what my words never would.

Jude knelt in front of me before taking my hands away from my eyes.

"What is it, Paige? Why are you crying, and what the hell is going on with your ex?"

"I'm not seeing Harry again, at least not the way you mean. Harry is my friend...was a good very friend before we started dating. We're just friends, Jude. Not that it's any of your business, and why do you even care?"

"What? You can't be serious. Paige I thought we went over this already? I told you I'm crazy about you. I don't want to walk away from you. Doesn't this give me some rights?"

"Then why haven't you called or..." I almost asked why he hadn't come to me last night.

"You told me you wanted to go slower. We were moving too fast. I wanted to do the right thing by backing off a bit. Silly me, I thought you'd actually let me know when you were ready to see me again. But apparently this isn't the case."

At Jude's confession, I began to feel a bit like a fool. I pulled my hands from his and tried to cover my embarrassment with anger.

"How was I supposed to call you? The only number I have for you is the office number. You want me to ask Stella if I can talk to you?"

"Yes."

I had to focus hard just to see if I'd mistaken the gentling in his tone.

"In fact, that's was exactly what I hoped you'd do. I asked Stella to find me if you called no matter what. You can't imagine how funny she must be finding this situation. Me being crazy about a woman who basically ignores me and all."

"I wasn't ignoring you. I just...I didn't know what to do, Jude." He smiled and I went into his open arms and held on tight.

"Okay, I think maybe we'd better clear up a few things between us, don't you? Will you have dinner with me tonight? I promise its only dinner. We can go somewhere quiet and talk. And I'll give you all of my numbers. I don't want you having any excuse not to call me again."

The poor guy had to practically pry my arms from around his neck, but I don't think he minded. He waited patiently while I got myself together enough to be presentable to the outside world.

Jude took me home and walked Sammy while I changed.

The quiet little restaurant he chose turned out to be an expensive one I'd only read about in the *Times'* restaurant review. This quaint little bistro made it to the top of the list of hottest places to dine in the city. Both Dani and I been debating on spending a good day's pay just to try it.

Jude was apparently well known. We were shown to a nice little table tucked away in the corner without a second thought to the line behind us.

After we made our dinner selections, I waited for him to say something. Instead, Jude found a piece of paper and wrote some numbers on it before handing it to me.

“That’s every single number I know, including my father’s in California, and I never visit my father’s. You have absolutely no reason not to be able to find me again. Unless of course, you lose that piece of paper.”

I found myself smiling at his indulgences, but my current happiness didn’t quite kill the inevitable doubts. Jude might be out of this world charming and know how to say all the right things, but he still wasn’t a man I could grow old with.

“Am I forgiven for upsetting you and making you cry?” he asked when our meal arrived.

“Yes.” I *really* tried to keep a certain amount of emotional distance from him, but it was hard when he was this charming.

“So how do we do this? Do you want me to sweep you off your feet? Do we date for a while? Tell me what you want, Paige? Because I don’t want to make any more mistakes with you.”

I didn’t know how to answer him. I wanted him to tell me there was some kind of hope for us. I didn’t want to be another one of his lovers. I wanted something close to the fairy tale. But I wasn’t going to get any such assurances from Jude.

“I don’t know what to say. I don’t know where we’re going, either. What do *you* want?”

“Me? Well that’s simple enough. I don’t want to play games anymore. I want you to move in with me. Right here, right now. Tonight. I want to wake with you in my arms every single morning, and I want to fall asleep with you each night by my side. To be honest, I don’t want to play the dating game with you. I just want you. All of you. I want us to make

dinner together, walk along the beach, fight and make love together. That's what I want. Where does that fit in with your plans?"

I think my mouth probably dropped a mile. I wanted to tell him, all those things sounded way too close to the commitment he was determined to avoid and everything that I'd ever dreamed of sharing with him.

But I couldn't say any of those things because I was crying again.

And Jude, being the ever-charming gentleman, pulled me into his lap, right there in the middle of this very expensive and trendy restaurant, and dried every last one of my tears.

"Does this mean you're happy or sad? Or do you just want to kick my ass?"

"It means I'm happy...very happy. But I don't—" I'd come close to telling him I didn't trust any of this to last beyond the night. But I couldn't voice my fears. I tried to be the live for the moment kind of woman he wanted me to be.

"Will you move in with me?"

"Jude! You can't be serious. What about taking things slow? What about getting to know each other better? What about my apartment? There's Sammy and..."

I couldn't think of anything else, but I knew there had to be more. *Plenty* more.

"What about them? Those are just things. We can work through them, together. Let's start tonight. Come stay with me at my apartment in town tonight. We can go from there."

Against every single one of my reservations, I packed some clothes, brought Sammy and his things with me, and spent the night with Jude. And we both knew it wasn't going to be just for the night.

To anyone watching this crazy love affair of ours unfold, I'm sure this would be the worst possible move for me. I almost pictured Dani asking me if I hadn't learned a thing from her disaster with Mark.

But at the moment, I didn't care. I was crazy about Jude. No, I was more than crazy, but I couldn't admit it.

I told myself that I'd handle it. I'd learn how to handle it.

Because unlike all of those happily-ever-after tales I'd read growing up, our fairy tale would be nothing short of hell on earth.

Lesson 12: Always have something fabulous to wear when the man of your dreams wants to meet you in an hour.

I woke the following morning to my newfound status in life as the live-in lover of Jude Martin.

Once my dream lover left for an early morning breakfast meeting and I dressed for work, I wasn't sure how I felt about being Jude's live-in lover.

After Jude lay sleeping next to me on my first night in his bed, I made myself a promise that I was determined to keep, no matter how much they cost me. Somehow, I'd learn to be strong emotionally. I wouldn't give Jude the opportunity to hurt me.

But now, alone in a strange apartment, I wasn't sure I even knew how to find my way to work from the apartment. So much for being strong.

I'd reached the panic stage when Jude called.

"I'm sending my car service over to pick you up in half an hour. Will this give you enough time?"

"How did you know?"

"I figured you might be feeling a little lost right now."

"Thank you." Jude's consideration for my feelings left me speechless.

"I took Sam for a walk already. So he should be good for a while," Jude continued when I didn't say a thing.

"Okay..."

"Everything all right?"

I nodded because I couldn't manage a single word.

"This is a little strange right now, isn't it? We'll get through it. Just don't run away again."

"No, I won't. And yes, everything's fine. It's just... Well, you're right. This is different."

"Yes, but good. Look, sweetheart, I have a busy day, according to Stella. Personally, I think she's still punishing me, but that's another story. I guess what I'm trying to say is it looks like I'm in meetings until after ten tonight. I'm sorry. It looks like you're on your own for dinner."

Again, I struggled to speak, because Jude just called me sweetheart.

"Sure, this will give me time to get some of my things from my apartment. I'll be fine."

"Well, that makes one of us. I won't be. I'll be missing you, but I can't piss Stella off again. I'll give you a call later then?"

"Sure." As hard as I tried, I couldn't seem to come off cloud nine. I strolled to a stop at Ralph's desk and gave him my brightest smile, to which he simply shook his head and mumbled something about the calm before the storm.

Dani found me immersed in another financial report. She looked terrible.

"What is it? Dani, what happened?" I asked anxiously while shelving cloud nine for the moment. I'd never seen Dani look this lost before.

"Mark and I had a huge blow out last night. I spent the night in a hotel. It was horrible! I spent the whole night crying like a fool and praying he'd call. Needless to say he didn't."

"Oh Dani, why didn't you call me? You could have crashed at my place."

"I tried, but you weren't home. Where were you last night, anyway?"

For the moment, I decided it was best to gloss over my recent change in living address. "Out with Jude."

By this point, Dani had pretty much lost track of my on-again-off-again romance with Jude. She simply nodded, assuming it was on again.

“What happened, Dani? What brought this all on?”

“Oh, the usual stuff. Mark had been gone all night with another woman. You know, ‘just keeping with the agreement’. I asked him where he’d been and he told me it wasn’t any of my business. The fight was on from there. I told him I wanted him to stop seeing other women, and Mark told me to go to hell. He actually said, ‘If I didn’t start acting like the old Dani, we’d need to have a serious talk about our future together.’ He told me I had become too possessive. Can you believe that? A man telling me I’m being too possessive. I mean it’s almost comical, considering. How many times in the past have I tossed one of them over for the very same reason? This has to be some kind of universal justice, or karma, don’t you think?” Dani tried to smile.

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. I can’t go back yet. For the life of me, Paige, I don’t think I can continue to accept this type of a relationship anymore. I just can’t. I guess I’ll be hotel bound for a while until I know what I’m doing.”

“No—you won’t. You can stay at my place.”

“No, that’s awfully sweet of you, but your place is a little too small for the two of us.”

At this point, I knew it was time to tell her the truth. “Not anymore. I’m moving in with Jude. Actually, I moved in with him last night.” I stopped, waited for her reaction and saw all of it, right there in the fear in her eyes.

“I know what you’re thinking, and I’m sure you’ll be right, but I can’t help it. I just can’t.”

Slowly, Dani nodded. She of all people understood. We were in the same boat.

“What a pair of fools we are. Okay, I’ll take you up on the offer, but just until I figure out what I’m doing. I’ll stay at your place, but I’m paying rent, and if you ever...well, you know.”

Oh, I understood only too well. Dani was telling me if, and more likely when, things fell apart for the final time with Jude, I could always come back home.

“Good. You want to grab some dinner later? It’s been forever since we’ve done anything together.”

“You’re right. I can’t even remember the last time. Was it your birthday?” At the mention of that fateful night, Dani grew quiet. “Paige, would you mind coming with me to Mark’s apartment later. I need to get some of my things. He’s working late tonight. We won’t run into him.”

I’d never heard this much uncertainty coming from Dani. I reached for her hand and tried to be the type of friend she needed me to be.

“Of course not. I need to get some things from my place as well, and Jude’s working late tonight. It’ll be just us gals. This will give us time to talk.”

After Dani left, I tried to push aside the uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach guaranteeing I was watching my own future unfold right before my very eyes. Unfortunately, those feelings of doom stayed with me throughout my day.

When Jude called later in the morning to tell me he missed me and ask how my day was going, I found myself telling him everything about Dani and Mark.

I think he understood what I couldn’t actually say.

“That’s not us, Paige. What you’re thinking is not going to happen to us. I’m sorry about your friend. I’m glad you’re offering her a place to stay. But I have to confess, I have other reasons for being thrilled about this piece of news, as well. This means you can’t run back home whenever you get scared. You’ll have to stay and talk to me.”

“I guess it does,” I said, loving everything he told me.

At that moment, with those promises still ringing in my ears, I almost believed what he’d said.

Almost.

“Look, I have to go.” His sexy voice lowered into a whisper. “Stella popped in to give me one of her looks. Which translated means, I’m nothing like my father and I’m running late. Between you and me, I think she was in love with my old man. Anyway, I’ll call you later this evening.

I should be home around eleven. You and Dani have a nice time. I'd say have fun, but I don't think that will be the case."

"No. I feel horrible for her, Jude. It's hard to be happy when your best friend is hurting. I don't know what to do to make it better for her."

"You're doing exactly what she needs you to. You're being there for her. Sometimes listening to a friend's troubles is all that you can do."

Dani and I left the office only to find Barry, Jude's driver, waiting to take us anywhere we wanted to go.

"I think I love your guy already," Dani told me. "Mark never would have considered little things like how I'd get home with an armful of clothes in tow."

We went back to Jude's apartment, as I still called it because I wasn't ready to admit I was sharing it with him just yet. I was trying to be true to my promise not to fall in love with Jude.

After we took Sammy for a short walk, Dani suggested we have dinner in.

"I don't think I want to go to a crowded restaurant. I've been in the dumps all day. I'm afraid I'm going to be truly lousy company tonight, Paige."

"Dani, would you stop it? I've certainly been lousy enough company myself lately. You want to go over to your apartment first?"

Dani busily roamed around the living room of the apartment, but I didn't miss her reaction to those words through the reflection in the window. There were tears in her eyes.

"Oh Dani—I'm sorry. Is there anything I can do? You want me to go beat him up for you?"

"Yes...no, I don't know. I want Mark to feel the same way I feel about him. Can you make that happen? Can you make him love me, Paige? Wait—don't answer that. What I want is impossible. Mark isn't capable of loving me or anyone else."

"Dani, have you told him how you feel about him? I mean who knows? Maybe he'll start thinking at least."

"No." She laughed bitterly. "Oh no, that will never happen. All it would do is finish it for good. That's where we're heading, Paige. But I'm not ready to walk away from him just yet. God, I hate that I love him. This emotional stuff is pure hell."

"Yes, it is. Come on, let's go get your things moved over to my apartment and get you settled in. We'll come back here and kill some wine."

Barry was kind enough to lend us his services for the evening. He even volunteered to carry Dani's things to the car. I think he understood what we were doing and was being extremely sweet to Dani.

"Can you give us a few minutes, Barry?"

"No problem, Miss Wilder. Call me when you're ready and I'll come help."

In Mark's apartment, Dani seemed unable to move. "You want me to get your things together while you wait here?"

She nodded, fighting back tears. "There are only my clothes in the first closet to your right, and a few things in top drawer of the chest. Oh, wait, there's some things in the bathroom..."

"Don't worry—I'll find everything. Dani, do you want to leave Mark a note? I think you should let him know how to reach you at least?"

Again, that nod. Dani looked lost. I went to her and hugged her tight.

"Everything is going to okay, Dani. You'll see."

Then I found the note Mark had left for her.

"You want to read it now?"

"I don't want to read it at all. Throw it away, Paige. I can't read it."

"Dani, you can't. Whatever he has to say, you need to know. You want me to read it for you."

"No! I mean it, Paige! I want you to throw it away!" She took the note from my hand and threw it in the trash. "I don't want to know what it says!"

"Okay, I understand, but I still think you need to leave him something to let him know where he can reach you. I'll be right back."

I left Dani alone, staring off in space, my heart breaking for the girl who'd always been so strong and independent.

Dani had dumped more clinging boyfriends through the years than I remembered. But she was hurting, and I couldn't do anything to help her through the pain.

I called Barry when we were ready to leave. He helped me get Dani's things as well as Dani back to the car.

"Did you leave the note?"

"Yes, but I don't know why. It won't matter to him. We both know that. He'll probably throw it away. I guess we're a lot alike."

"Or maybe he'll read it and call you. Maybe the two of you can finally talk about your feelings with each other. You don't know what might happen, Dani."

"Oh yes I do. And I bet Barry here does as well. Don't you, Barry? Tell me, Barry, why is it men can't settle down? Maybe you can answer the question for me. Are you married?"

"No, ma'am."

"Why is that?"

"Haven't met the right woman yet." He smiled at Dani in the rearview mirror and I had to fight to keep from being amazed. Dani was too upset to see it, but Barry was blown away by her.

"And what is the right woman, Barry—in your opinion?"

"Oh, someone strong and independent. Someone who can stand on her own, but needs me just as much. Someone like you." Again, that little smile. The poor guy was all but gone already.

Barry helped us take Dani's things to my apartment, but she had no interest in unpacking at the moment.

"I'll do it later," Dani dismissed. "I'm sure I'll have plenty of time, since I won't be sleeping tonight. Come get your things together, Paige. You promised me some of Mr. Martin's very best wine, remember? And I'm holding you to that promise."

* * *

By the time I'd sent Dani home that night with Barry's help, she was feeling no pain, thanks to the effect of several glasses of wine. But I couldn't help but feel a little guilty, I'd let her convince me not to go with her. I made Barry promise to call when she was safely in the apartment.

When the phone rang at almost nine, I figured it would be Barry.

The sound of Jude's voice, when I least expected it, forced me to face my own problems. After all, I'd just moved in with a man I barely knew.

"Hi. What have you been up to that has you sounding panicked?"

"Nothing, it's just, well, I thought you were Barry. He's supposed to call when he gets Dani home safe. Where are you?"

"My meeting finished earlier than expected and it occurred to me you and I haven't actually been dancing since the night we met. I think its time to change all that, don't you?"

I forgot all of my fears for Dani, as well as my own doubts. I forgot the future, and the fact I probably didn't have one with Jude. I forgot all of those things, because I only wanted to be with Jude Martin.

"Yes."

"Do you still have that dress?"

"Yes."

"Put it on. I'll be there in half an hour."

"I'm not wearing the mask," I told him with a smile.

"You don't need to anymore. I know what's underneath."

Jude unlocked the door half hour later as I put the finishing touches on my makeup. When he stepped into the apartment, I forced myself to go to him.

I wasn't sure why I felt this nervous. After all, Jude had seen me in this dress before. He'd seen me in a lot less for that matter.

When I walked into the living room and he spotted me, I knew exactly why I'd felt this way and what had changed. I was crazy about him.

And if Jude's reaction right now was anything close to how he felt, then he was as lost as I was. The wariness in his eyes told me Jude wasn't accustomed to reacting this way about any woman.

"I hope you didn't have your heart set on going dancing tonight," he murmured. "Because I don't think I can wait that long. And I don't think I want to have to worry about all those other men looking at you tonight."

I didn't care where we went as long as he kept looking at me like that.

Jude put on some slow bluesy music, then we danced close, the way we had that first night.

And just like that first night, the night he'd become my fantasy for the first time, Jude Martin showed me in all the right ways why the flesh and blood man was better than any fantasy I'd ever created in my dreams.

Lesson 13: Know when to read between the lines and when to believe all that you hear.

I awoke the following morning before sunrise, to the touch of Jude's kisses across my bare skin.

We made love slowly, taking our time until we were both weak from the intensity of our passion.

We still had time before the alarm went off. I found myself telling Jude all about my life in Texas with my parents.

"It sounds like you have wonderful parents, Paige. When was the last time you saw them?"

"A few years back. They came to New York for their wedding anniversary. I showed them around the town. They loved it."

"I take it you don't go home all that much?"

"That's because I don't have a home to go to. At least, not in Texas, anyway. My parents traveled around for a long time. They settled in Florida over the past year. It was kind of strange there for a while, not having a place to call home."

"What about this year? Are you going home to see them over the holidays?"

I couldn't tell Jude that until I'd met him, I'd promised my mom I would come home for Christmas.

Now, with my new romance in full bloom, I didn't want to be away from Jude for a minute.

"I'm not sure. It depends on what their plans are. Maybe, but I don't know yet."

Unfortunately, I think he guessed the real reason behind all my uncertainty even though he didn't say as much.

"You should go be with them, Paige. You're lucky. It must be nice having normal parents."

"Oh, I don't know how normal you can call them. They've certainly never behaved like any of my friend's parents."

"But they were there for you. They came home every night. And they loved you."

"Not like your parents?" I asked a little hesitantly.

I wanted to know all about his life, but was afraid I was expecting too much from him. I held my breath, uncertain he would answer me, until I felt him smile against my hair.

"Yes. My parents were divorced before I even reached high school. But they were living separate lives long before that. My father, well, let's just say we've never been close. Oh, don't get me wrong, I owe him a lot. He was the one who got me interested in the publishing field in the first place. And I've always had the best of everything money could buy. But you see growing up, none of that mattered to me. I would have given anything to have a normal life like my friends."

I shifted in his arms to see his expression clearly. Jude sounded both sincere and sad. He tried to smile then kissed my nose, unable to hide how unhappy his childhood had been.

"Did your parents fight a lot?"

"No," he answered with another smile. "At times, I almost wished they had. The truth was their marriage was over, probably since I was a kid, but for whatever reason they couldn't let it go. Maybe they thought they were doing what was best for me—I don't know. But they never fought, never argued like my friends' parents. In fact, they were barely together for more two minutes at a time.

"I spent most of my holidays with one or the other. But I was always closer to my mother. I think because she needed me the most."

"Is she remarried?" I asked quietly, trying not to break the spell that had him actually sharing parts of his life with me.

“She passed away a few years back, but she did get remarried to a wonderful man who gave her all the things my father wasn’t capable of giving. They lived in a simple house, on a hundred-acre ranch in Wyoming. I’d never seen my mother happier. Of course, this was all after I’d left home for good. The house in the Hamptons was where my parents lived when they were married. After the divorce, my mom stayed on at the house for a while, and Dad lived in this apartment until he met his second wife and bought her a house in upstate New York. My father adopted Marissa’s two children, Geoff and Cara.”

“You have a brother and sister?”

“Stepbrother and sister,” he corrected, unaware of all the things he’d revealed. “But yes, even though in truth, I’ve never been close to either of them. After Marissa and Dad divorced, they pretty much stopped having anything to do with this side of the family. Except for Dad’s money, of course. Now, he’s remarried again and has moved to California with his third wife who’s close to my age.”

“You’re kidding? How do you feel about that?”

“I don’t. I don’t feel anything about it. I appreciate what my father was able to give me, but he never was much of a father to me or my stepbrother and sister. In fact, they got less of him than any of us.”

“Was he involved in his work?”

“Sure, I guess that was part of it, but I think he used work as an excuse to keep us at a distance. My father might have been a brilliant executive, and he definitely built the company to what it is today, but he was also very self-absorbed. He believed in indulging all of his desires.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant by this. Jude’s smile told me he’d seen my confusion.

“My father cheated on my mother since the day they were married. He was never faithful to her, or Marissa, and I’m sure he won’t be faithful to Suzanne either. He’s not capable of those things. My father cares only about himself. I watched his affairs all but destroy my mother. And I swore I wouldn’t become him. But look at me now? Running the same business he created. Following in my father’s footsteps.”

“You didn’t want to come back to the states, did you?”

“And you’ve been listening to gossip, haven’t you?” He feigned a shocked expression. “It’s okay. No, that’s not exactly true. What I didn’t want to come back to was my father. He’d been after me for years to come back to work in New York and take over someday. But I’d always refused, because I knew my father. You see in the past, there were always strings attached to whatever he offered me. When he called to tell me he wanted to retire and he wanted me to take over without any interference on his part, well, that was a whole different story.”

“So you’re okay with being back in New York?” I asked, and was rewarded with a slow maddening smile before he reached for me and I forgot all of my other questions.

“Oh, I’m more than okay with it. In fact, since meeting you, Paige Wilder, I can’t imagine living anywhere else.

* * *

To my credit, I was only half an hour late getting into work that morning.

And as Jude was quick to remind me, I had a very good excuse. If anyone chose to ask I should refer them directly to the boss.

It took all my willpower to keep from laughing aloud when he kissed me like some school kid as I stepped from the elevator.

The first thing I did when I got to the office was look for Dani. She wasn’t in and so I did the next best thing. I found Ralph who told me he hadn’t heard from her at all.

“And mind you, she’s got meetings all day. I’ve canceled the morning stuff for now, but I don’t know what to do with the rest of these, Paige.” He tossed Dani’s calendar over for me to see. “I mean, she’s on the calendar for the big guy, your boyfriend, at one.”

I ignored the remark about Jude entirely, in my fear for Dani.

“Have you tried to reach her by phone?”

“Yes, Miss Texas. This isn’t my first day, you know. But she’s not answering, and I can’t put the big guy off. His assistant was very specific.”

“Shit! Okay, give me her calendar and I’ll fill in for her the best I can. Can you work these meetings into my schedule? And try Dani again at my home number... Don’t ask. I’ll let her tell you.”

The second I got to my office, I called Dani’s cell phone, but she wasn’t picking up. Desperate, I called Mark only to get his recorder.

I’d become frantic by the time I left my office to attempt to cover Dani’s first meeting.

“Keep trying all her numbers for me, will you, Ralph? If she doesn’t show, and if you can’t reach her by lunch, I’m going over to the apartment.”

“What about the big guy?”

I stopped dead in my tracks. The meeting in question was with several of the heads of departments. I had a feeling that it was going to be one of those meetings that would not allow for any substitutes.

“Call Stella and lie. Tell her Dani’s sick and can’t make it. See if she still wants someone to cover.”

“Well, all right. I knew you had it in you, Miss Texas.”

Any other time, I would have found Ralph’s statement funny, but not today. Not when I didn’t know what might be going on in my friend’s life.

Somehow, I faked my way through the first of Dani’s meetings, coming away from them with more questions than I’d actually been able to answer. I almost ran back to Ralph’s desk, where I saw my answer before I found the words to ask.

“Sorry, Paige...nothing. I must have called all the numbers I have for her at least a hundred times. I don’t know what to do.”

“I’m going over there right now. I’ll call you in a bit.” I’d almost reached the elevator when I ran into Jude.

“Hey, where are you rushing off to in such a hurry?” The second he caught sight of my panic, Jude stopped me. “What is it, Paige? Has something happened?”

“It’s Dani. I can’t reach her, and she hasn’t called in. That’s not like her, Jude. Dani would never act so irresponsible. I’m on my way over to the apartment now.” I quickly punched the elevator button.

“I’m going with you,” he said.

I turned back to look at him. At the sight of all the concern there in Jude’s expression, I struggled to keep the tears inside.

“Yes...thank you, Jude.”

We drove the short distance to my apartment without saying a word. I was so afraid of what I would find when I got there that I couldn’t open the door. Jude finally had to take the key from me to unlock it. We stepped into my old apartment to be greeted by silence.

“Why don’t you wait here, Paige?”

I didn’t want to think about what we might find, but I couldn’t wait behind either. I followed Jude through the small apartment to my bedroom.

We found Dani unconscious. Beside the bed was an open bottle of sleeping pills.

“Oh my God—Dani!” I ran to her side and tried to wake her while Jude felt for a pulse then called emergency services.

Jude gently put me away and started CPR on Dani. By the time the EMTs arrived, Dani was starting to regain consciousness at last.

While one paramedic got Dani ready to transport to the hospital, the other asked me questions about Dani’s medical history.

“I’m going with her,” I told the EMT when they started toward the door with Dani. “Jude, I’m going with her. I’ll call you later and let you know how she’s doing.”

“I’m coming with you to the hospital. I’ll follow in the car. Don’t worry. She’s going to be okay.”

“No, Jude, what about all your meetings? You must have dozens of things to be doing right now?”

“I’m coming with you, Paige. This is more important. Stop worrying about me. I’ll meet you at the hospital.”

Lesson 14: Remember that silence is sometimes the best answer.

As I rode with Dani to the hospital, I prayed the whole time she would be all right.

In the emergency room, Jude found me again. We waited together while the doctors pumped Dani's stomach.

I stood at the admissions desk and filled out Dani's medical forms. Over the years, Dani and I had pretty much shared everything about our pasts with each other. I knew she'd the measles when she was six and the chicken pox the following year. She had lost her virginity when she was fifteen years old. I thought I knew everything about my friend, and yet I hadn't seen this coming?

Once we were allowed to see Dani again, we found her awake and groggy from the pills. I went to her, not even trying to hide my tears.

Jude stood close while still trying to give us some privacy even though all I could do was squeeze his hand. I'd been holding onto it as if I were holding onto a lifeline since we'd found her in the apartment.

"Are you okay, Dani? Are you feeling better?" I hated the way my words sounded strained, but I didn't know what to say to her. I wasn't sure if this had been a deliberate attempt on her part, which went against everything I believed I knew about Dani, or if maybe in her emotional state, she'd simply taken too many pills by accident.

Not that it mattered. I'd failed my best friend. I should have insisted on going home with her last night. I should have stayed with her until I knew she'd be all right. I should have seen this coming.

“No...” I barely recognized Dani’s voice. She sounded so weak. When I saw her watching me with those huge tear-filled eyes, I knew she’d read my thoughts.

“No, Paige, you didn’t let me down. And I know what you’re thinking, but you’re wrong. This was an accident. I just wasn’t thinking. I would never do anything like this deliberately. You have to believe me, Paige.”

“I do, of course I do. You just gave me quite a scare. I thought I’d lost you. You scared us both to death.”

“Yeah, well, I scared me too, kiddo. You don’t have to worry about that ever happening again. I’ve learned my lesson. I’ll be more careful in the future. But it looks like you may have to keep the troops in line at work for a few days.”

“Don’t worry about work. I’ll take care of everything for you. You rest for now. Try to get some sleep. I’ll come back a little later to check on you, okay?”

“Mr. Martin, I haven’t thanked you for saving my life. The paramedics said it was you who did the CPR which saved my life. Thank you.” Dani’s voice shook a little as she said those words.

“Of course. I’m just glad Paige insisted on going over to the apartment when she did.”

“Me too. I don’t know what I would do without this one, sometimes. Do you mind if I talk to Paige alone for a second?”

Jude looked at me and I nodded, then he squeezed Dani’s hand and told me he’d wait for me outside.

“It was an accident,” Dani said once we were alone.

“I know. I believe you.”

“I know you do, but I’m afraid that most people at work may not. Paige, I don’t want anyone from there knowing about this, okay?”

“No one will find out anything.”

“You know how Ralph likes to gossip. Will you promise me you won’t tell him about this? The doctor says they’ll release me sometime later today. After I’ve talked to their shrink to make sure I wasn’t trying to off

myself.” When she spotted my reaction, she smiled a little weakly. “I promise I’ll be fine, but I think I’m going to take a few days off work to sort through some things.”

”I think that’s a wonderful idea. Maybe I should take some time off as well. We could go back to Vermont. You know, like that one time. Rent one of those little cabins again?” I watched as my friend smiled, then shook her head a little sadly.

”No, that’s not what I need right now. As much as I love you honey, I need to be alone to sort through this. But I do like the idea of going to Vermont. Would you mind if I borrowed your car for a few days?”

”Of course not. But are you sure you’re okay with making the trip alone? Will you be okay all by yourself?”

”I’ll be fine. Paige, it *was* an accident. But it make me realize I needed to get away from New York for a while. I have to decide where I’m going from here. Do you know I’ve worked for Martin Publishing since I graduated from college? And I’ve lived in New York for about as long. I think its time I thought about my options. Maybe a fresh start is what I need?”

As much as I hated hearing those words, I couldn’t help but wonder if maybe, this might not be the best thing for Dani.

”We can talk about this later. Right now, you need to get some rest. I’ll see if they have any idea what time you can be released, okay?”

”Okay, but I don’t want you hanging around all day. You have loads of things to do at work. I’ll be okay. Don’t worry.” If possible, Dani sounded even weaker.

”You forget I’ve got an inside advantage. I know the boss biblically. I’m not going anywhere, Dani. Besides someone has to make your travel arrangements for you.”

I kissed her cheek when she would have protested. When I left Dani, she was sleeping again.

I found my boss, the one I knew in a biblical sense, waiting outside Dani’s room, talking to her doctor.

”Dr Simmons, this is Dani’s friend, Paige Wilder.”

I shook the doctor's hand before asking him when Dani would be released.

"Not until we're sure this was accidental, like your friend claims. I don't want to take the chance of her hurting herself, if it was more than an accident. I'll have someone stop by and speak with her soon. We'll decide from there, okay?"

After the doctor left us, I told Jude I would be staying with Dani until she was released.

"That's a good idea. I don't think she should be alone right now. I should go and leave you two alone. Come, walk me to the door."

I took his hand and wondered what Jude must be thinking.

"I'm sorry..."

"For what?" He stopped in the middle of the hallway and looked at me tenderly.

"I'm sorry you got involved in all of this. I should have seen this coming, Jude. And this isn't your responsibility. I've wrecked your day."

"Paige." He slowly drew me into his arms. "Don't you see, anything that concerns you is my responsibility. Dani is your friend. Of course I'd want to help her."

"You are...you have been. I just feel this is unfair to you, considering we've only started dating."

"Please don't worry about me, Paige. I wouldn't be here if I didn't want to be. Now, you'll call me later and let me know how she's doing? Don't worry about Dani, Paige. She's a fighter. She's going to be fine."

"Jude, do you think it was an accident?"

"Yes, I do," he said slowly.

"But how do you know?"

"Because Dani isn't the type of person to take the easy way out. She's too strong. It was just an accident. She'll be fine—you'll see."

After I kissed him goodbye, I called Ralph and told him Dani had a serious case of the flu. I would be taking care of her for the rest of the day.

Ralph didn't believe my explanation, but he knew from my tone not to ask any questions.

"For the rest of the week, I'll be taking all of Dani's meetings. Can you put them on my calendar for me?"

After I hung up from Ralph, I sat with Dani while she slept. I'd gotten in touch with the rental agency we'd used once before and booked a small cabin outside Stormyville, Vermont for the rest of the week.

Dani talked to the hospital's counselor and was released later the same afternoon. I went back her to my apartment with her to help her pack.

"You want to grab something to eat after you're packed?" I asked, watching while she tossed clothes into a bag.

"No, I just want to stay in, get to bed early and start fresh in the morning for the drive if that's okay?"

"Sure, but at least let me make you a sandwich. You should try and eat something, Dani."

I think she figured it would be pointless to argue with me when I was in this mothering state. Dani watched me search through the bare fridge before settling on lunchmeat.

She took a couple of bites, but she wasn't really hungry. I made us some coffee and we talked about work.

"I don't want to talk to anyone," she told me when the phone rang and I went to answer it.

"Paige? Hi, it's Mark. I've been trying to reach Dani all day. Is she there with you?"

When Dani glanced my way curiously, I whispered, "It's Mark."

Her reaction was immediate. There was still a tiny amount of hope in her gaze but she forced it aside and got to her feet.

"No, I can't talk to him yet. Tell him whatever you want, I don't care. I'm going to take a shower."

Dani left me alone. My anger with Mark grew.

“No, I’m sorry, she’s not here right now, Mark. But I’ll tell her you called.”

“Paige, wait! I don’t believe you. She’s there, isn’t she? Please, I need to talk to her.”

“Too bad, Mark. Dani doesn’t want to talk to you right now. I think you should respect her wishes and leave her alone. She’ll call you when and if she’s ready to talk to you.”

“Wait—Paige, please, don’t hang up on me!” Mark sounded desperate. “Paige, please, I can understand why Dani doesn’t want to talk to me yet, but will you at least?”

“Me? No, I can’t... I have to go, Mark.”

“Okay, fine, I understand you can’t talk in front of Dani, but will you at least meet me somewhere later? I need to talk to you. Please, Paige. You’re Dani’s best friend. This is important. I need to talk to you.”

“Where?” I found myself giving in a little.

“How about the deli close to your place? Where you and Dani and I ate that time?”

“Yes. When?”

“Six? I can meet you there at six.”

“Okay, but I don’t know what you hope to accomplish by this, Mark.” In the bathroom, Dani turned off the shower. “I have to go. I’ll see you later.”

Dani came from the bathroom wearing a robe. Her wet hair smoothed back away from her face.

“What did he want?” she asked quietly.

“I don’t know. To talk to you?”

“Mmm, well not yet. I’m not ready to have that talk yet. You know, I think I’m actually going to enjoy getting away by myself for a few days. How is everything at work? I mean...”

“No one knows anything, Dani. And no one will. Don’t worry about work. I promise I’ll take care of everything for you.”

"I think I'm going to try and get some sleep now. You should go, Paige." I didn't want to leave her alone and she knew it.

"It's okay. You don't have to worry about me. I'll be fine."

Coming so close to death today scared Dani more than she wanted to admit. She handed me the bottle of sleeping pills and told me to get rid of them.

"I certainly don't plan on taking any more of them, not in this lifetime. I don't any reminders lying around. It's hard enough knowing... Paige, in case I haven't told you this lately, I appreciate you being there for me today, and every other day for that matter. Thank you for everything, the car, for taking over my busy schedule on top of yours. For understanding why I need to get away by myself. You're the best friend I've ever had."

"You'll call me on Sunday, won't you? Let me know how you're doing? And if you need anything at all, call me. It doesn't matter what time of day. Just call me, okay?"

She hugged me tight. "I will. I promise, I will. But I'm okay, or at least I will be. I'm going to watch a little TV in bed and call it a night. I'm anxious to get an early start before the traffic hits tomorrow morning."

After I left Dani to her TV, I called Jude to let him know I'd be meeting Mark.

As always, the sound of him had the power to jolt me right back to the center of all of my own insecurities. What on earth was this guy doing with me? He could have any woman in the world, and he was with me a woman far too old for him?

"How's Dani?"

"Better, I think. She's going to be okay." I told him about the call from Mark.

"Well, maybe he isn't as bad as Dani wants to believe? You never know. Maybe there's hope for him. He certainly seems determined to talk to her, or at least about her. Why don't you call me when you and Mark are finished? I'm planning to leave work early tonight to make it up to

you for leaving you alone on our first night together. I'll make us dinner. Call me when you're on your way home."

It hit me then that Jude wasn't anything like I'd been led to believe either. In fact, I was the one doing my best to keep some distance between us. Jude honestly seemed to want to spend as much time with me as possible.

"I will. And thank you, Jude."

"For what?" That tender indulgence crept back into his voice, further weakening my resistance.

"For putting up with me...for everything. We've only started seeing each other and I feel like I'm already putting obstacles in the way of us spending time together."

"Paige, some things can't be helped. Dani needs you. We'll learn how to be together. It takes time and patience. I'm not going anywhere. Don't you."

Lesson 15: When you say I'm sorry look the person in the eye.

In the past, I'd pretty much been indifferent to Mark. Sure, he was great looking, rich and seemed to have it all. But the only thing that had mattered in the past was he made Dani happy.

That was until I'd learned all the details of their relationship. Now, I believed he'd hurt my friend and almost cost Dani her life.

So when I walked into the deli at exactly six and found Mark waiting for me, I'd planned to give him a piece of my mind then dismiss whatever he might have to say to completely.

"Thanks for agreeing to meet me, Paige." He ordered a sandwich while I stuck with coffee.

Until this moment, the only things we'd found to say to one another was hello in passing. Now, I didn't know what to expect from him.

"I'm not sure what we have to talk about, Mark, but I don't have much time."

His smile told me he'd figured what a hard sell he was in for with me.

"I see you know everything. Well, I can't say I'm surprised. After all, Dani thinks the world of you. She told you all about me, about our little agreement. About what a terrible person I am?"

I had no idea where he was going with any of this, but I decided I owed it to my friend to get to the point.

"What do you want, Mark? Why did you want to meet me?"

"Because, *you are* Dani's friend. And I'm willing to do just about anything to get her to talk to me again. I haven't been able to reach her

since she left. She just came to the apartment while I was gone, took her things, threw the note I left her away unread and told me she never wanted to see me again. Paige, I need you to ask her to please talk to me, at least.”

“I can’t do that, Mark. I won’t. If Dani doesn’t want to see you again, it’s your own fault. I think you should respect her wishes and leave her alone.”

I’d started to leave when his next words stopped me.

“I can’t do that, Paige. I can’t walk away from Dani. Because, God help me, I think I love her.”

I dropped back into my chair, all thoughts of leaving gone.

Had I actually heard him correctly? Had Mark, Mr. Sophisticated-Never-Going-To-Let-Any-Woman-Tie-Him-Down, just admitted to having human feelings?

“It’s true. Although I don’t expect you to believe me, after what you’ve heard. And yes I know, I’ve hurt Dani, but please just listen to my side for a second,” Mark added when I wasn’t able to hide my disgust any longer.

“Paige, Dani was the one who set those rules. She was dead set on our relationship never being anything more than a physical convenience for the both of us. I told her some things that weren’t true, because I was afraid if she saw how I felt about her she’d dump me without a second thought. Don’t look at me like that, Paige. You know it wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Wait, hold on a second. Are you actually saying you’ve been in love with Dani since the beginning and that you invented the part about seeing other women?”

“You don’t believe me...”

“Frankly, no I don’t. All those times she said you didn’t come home at night. How do you explain those times?”

“I stayed with friends, crashing at their place.”

“And the other girlfriend? The one you dumped because she was too possessive after only six months!”

“All lies. I wanted Dani to tell me she didn’t want to play games anymore, and I was willing to try anything to make that happen. Only it didn’t work so well. In fact, it backfired horribly. Dani became furious with me. Before I knew it, we were barely speaking to each other. We had the fight that sent her packing. Paige, I know I’ve made a mess of things, but I love Dani. I don’t want to lose her.” He shook his head. “I don’t know what to do anymore.”

“Mark—you idiot! Do you have any idea how badly you’ve hurt Dani? I can’t believe you would play games with her feelings like this?”

“*Her* feelings? Dani doesn’t have those types of feelings.” He added angrily, before running a nervous hand through his hair. “*I* have those types of feelings. I love her. And I don’t want to lose her.”

“Mark, you have to tell her—”

“Are you kidding. Dani’s gorgeous, Paige. She can have any man she wants. She isn’t going to want to stick around with me for long.”

I’d wanted to blame Mark for everything wrong in my friend’s life. But I couldn’t. I knew Dani too well. She’d tried to appear that cool, in control, love’em and leave’em kind of woman. And until recently, I’d believed all those things about her. If she fooled me, her best friend, what chance did this guy have?

“I don’t know what to say, Mark. I’ve always thought you wanted the same things from the relationship as Dani.”

“I wanted Dani—any way I can get her. That’s all I’ve ever wanted. Now, I’m afraid I’ve lost her for good.”

As I sat watching the man I’d convinced myself I despised, I realized I’d been completely wrong about Mark.

And there at last, I realized how dangerous all those silly games we play as lovers can be.

“Mark, I can’t tell you how Dani feels, because I won’t break her trust. But I will say this, if you care about her, and I mean if you really

care about her, be honest with her. Tell her how you feel about her. Tell her the truth about those other women and stop playing games.”

When I left Mark, the man that I thought I knew didn’t exist in my mind anymore. I didn’t tell him how close to losing Dani he’d truly come, but I believe Mark had come close enough to the truth to realize the only way back would be by being completely honest with Dani.

* * *

After I left the deli, I called Jude. For the first time since meeting him, I didn’t want to play games either. I no longer wanted to keep part of myself protected from him. No matter what it cost me, I wanted to give Jude all of me. Everything, because I’d seen how destructive playing games truly could be.

I walked into Jude’s apartment to the smell of something wonderful in the oven. I found the man of my dreams in the kitchen making dinner for me.

“Something smells great.”

Our gazes met across the room. I couldn’t wait to hold him and tell him everything. I didn’t want there to be any more secrets between us. I wanted our story to be different from Mark and Dani’s.

“Hi.” I held him a little tighter than I would have normally and I couldn’t stop myself from trembling no matter how hard I tried.

“Hi... God you feel good.” He pulled back to look into my eyes. “Are you okay? You’re shivering.”

“Yes—I’m okay.” But I didn’t quite believe my own words. “I’m okay, but I want to talk to you. Do we have time before dinner?”

“We have all the time in the world. Let’s go into the living room. Sit next to the fire where it’s warmer.”

Jude brought a couple of glasses and some wine with us into the living room. He sat next to me and handed me one of the glasses of wine.

“What’s bothering you, sweetheart?”

I forced myself to say the words, even though I still believed in my heart of hearts our relationship would end. I wanted us to be completely honest with each other, every step of the way, until that final goodbye.

“Jude, I don’t want to play games anymore, and I don’t want you to play games with me either. I know what you don’t want from me. I know you don’t want anything permanent, but can we at least promise each other we’ll always be honest with one another, no matter what? Can we do that?”

His expression was hard to take. Something I’d said hurt him. I couldn’t imagine what. I simply wanted him to know I understood where I stood with him and I accepted it.

“Paige, don’t you know I’m crazy about you? I don’t want to play games. I’m not...playing with you. I’ve never been more serious.” Then he touched my hair.

“Promise me when you get enough, when you’re ready to end this thing between us, you won’t keep me hanging on. I need you to promise you’ll let me know.”

“Paige, for God’s sake.” It was hard not to believe the hurt in his voice was real. It sounded real. “What makes you think I’d ever get enough of you?”

“Jude, I’m serious. Please. Promise me.”

I hated that I started to cry as I said those words, but my emotions were always so close whenever I was with him.

“Paige, I promise I will never hurt you. I promise I’ll never hurt you, baby.” He took me in his arms and for the moment, I forgot all about my fears.

When Jude touched me the way only he could, it was as if he touched far more than just me, physically. Jude’s touch had the power to reach straight through to all the hidden places of my heart.

By the time we emerged from the bedroom again Jude’s dinner was burnt beyond recognition.

“Want to order pizza?” he asked as we stood looking at the crispy chicken.

"I think we'd better, if we want to eat tonight. The poor chicken. And you went to such trouble."

"Mmm, we'll, I'd like to say I'm upset about it, but I'm afraid that would be a lie. I could care less about the chicken, Paige."

Instead of Jude's perfectly prepared meal, we ate pizza in front of the fire, and I spilled the beans about my meeting with Mark.

"It was...strange, hearing him say those things. Dani has always believed the very last thing Mark wanted from her was love. It was certainly the last thing that she thought she wanted until recently. I think turning forty in a few weeks has got her all mixed up inside."

"Sometimes people don't realize what they want until they don't have it anymore. I guess age has a way of putting those things into perspective sometimes."

"Uh huh. Well not for everyone, obviously. And while we're on the subject of age, exactly how old are you anyway? Do you realize I don't even know when your birthday is?"

"You think I'm too young for you, is that it? Exactly how old do you think I am?" He said with a grin.

"Twenty-eight?" Truth was this was only a guess. The number I'd gotten from Ralph. I had no idea how old Jude was.

"I guess I should be flattered. I'm actually twenty-nine. Only ten years younger than you."

"Oh God." I groaned. "I feel like I'm robbing the cradle or something. How on earth am I ever going to keep up with you? You're still a baby!"

"You are shameless, aren't you, Miss Wilder? But don't worry. I think you can keep up with me just fine."

I looked at the man I could no longer deny I cared about and realized I'd never felt this close to another man before him. Not Dwight, certainly not Harry. The thought terrified me.

Jude wasn't going to be the man to fulfill any of my dreams. I would never have a future with him. Certainly never have children, or the security of someone who would be there with me for the rest of my life.

But that didn't change facts. I felt closer to Jude than I'd ever been before.

"What are you looking serious about all of the sudden?"

I shook my head because I couldn't tell him the truth. "Nothing. I was only thinking what a lucky woman I am.

"And how is that, you figure?" He took the wine glass from my unresisting hand and brought me closer.

"Tell him," my mind screamed. *"Tell him that you're crazy about him."*

But all I managed to do was smile and shake my head. I couldn't tell him any of those things. There was no way I could ever tell Jude Martin how crazy I was about him.

Lesson 16: Talk slow but think fast.

When I walked into my office the next morning, it was to a mountain of meetings and emails. Covering for Dani would be harder than I'd imagined.

My first challenge came when I was forced to attend a staff meeting with Dani's boss...Jude.

I had Ralph pull all the current open items from the last staff meeting, hoping at least to pretend to be prepared. But faking my way through this thing with the other department heads was not going to be easy.

I found myself seated next to Jude, which in my opinion was deliberate on his part, and trying to remain unmoved when his hand touched mine under the table.

I spent most of the meeting concentrating on Edwards from Foreign Acquisition's bald head. I think the poor man had started to believe I had the hots for him by the time the meeting finally ended, if the somewhat pitiful smile, whose purpose I suspected was to convey "come hither", was any indication. I'd probably have to hide from the man from now on.

Of course, I didn't believe anyone seated at the table lived in a vacuum. I'm pretty sure most of them had heard all of the rumors flying around the office concerning Jude and me.

On more occasions than I cared to think about, I'd been met with the sudden cease in conversation when I walked into a room. That alone told me I'd been the subject of gossip no one wanted to repeat to my face.

When the excruciating meeting finally ended, I wanted to bolt. Or at least explode from holding my breath. I was almost free and clear when Jude asked me to stay behind for a minute.

I caught several snickers from the group as they left us alone.

“Oh God. Why did you do that? You know they’re all talking about us behind our backs already, don’t you?”

“What’s the problem? Why don’t we give them something to talk about?”

He closed the door on several people still standing nearby.

“Jude!” I managed to say before he took me in his arms and kissed me. I forgot all about my embarrassment or that I was already ten minutes late for a meeting on the fourth floor.

“Mmm?” he murmured against my lips while his hands did very inappropriate things to my self-control. “What say we blow off the rest of the day and hide out? There’s a couch over there.” He indicated the leather sofa I’d pictured his dad hosting all those stodgy meetings on and cringed.

“What about Stella? She’s right outside that door now, tapping her foot in annoyance with us both.”

He rolled his eyes but released me at last. “Thanks a lot. That’s definitely a mood killer. Okay, go. Run away to your little meeting. I’ll just sit and try to recover.”

I ignored this and kissed him again. Just before I left, I couldn’t resist the urge to muss his always-perfect hair a little bit.

“There. Now you *look* like you’ve been up to no good.”

“Thanks. That will certainly give Stella something else to fume about. But I’d rather actually be up to no good,” he told me with that maddening little grin which had me reconsidering.

Did I need to go to another boring meeting today? Fortunately, my common sense side kicked in.

“Okay, I tell you what? Why don’t you meet me at, oh say, seven tonight at our favorite place—you know, your apartment—and you can be up to no good all night long if you’d like?”

He definitely liked. That was quite clear from the expression in those blue eyes.

“I think you’d better go now, otherwise, Miss Wilder, you’re not going anywhere.”

I focused hard to see if he was serious, or simply teasing me again. For the life of me when I left the conference room, I still wasn’t sure.

But I was back on cloud nine again. Well, until I caught Stella’s hostile expression which took the smile right off my lips.

By the time I walked into my next meeting, twenty minutes late, I couldn’t care less what anyone at the office might be saying about me.

I was in... Whatever. I wouldn’t allow myself to admit I loved him yet. Admitting this truth meant I’d broken the most important promise I’d made to myself. I wasn’t supposed to let Jude Martin hurt me.

* * *

“Bout time you got back. I thought you’d been taken hostage. You’ve got a little surprise waiting for you in your office, Miss Texas.” Ralph didn’t bother looking at me. He handed me my messages and dismissed my second-in-command ass just that quickly.

I flipped through the usual assortment of calls, mostly from other department members wanting to talk about money. Most of which, I knew there was nothing much I could do anything about until Dani returned. But there was one message I *could* do something about, if I only knew what?

The call from Harry.

I opened my door and was greeted by the scent of fresh lilacs. Lilacs in the fall, especially in New York, were as rare as an optimistic attitude at times.

I knew immediately they were from Jude.

In the back of my mind, I remembered the bunch of lilacs from Ralph I'd taken home a few days after my birthday. They'd been on my bedside table each night when Jude came to me.

"Someone's beaming. You'd better watch it, Miss Texas. Someone might think you're in love." I hadn't realized Ralph had followed me, but as I turned, I saw him standing in my doorway, staring at my elation.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Ralph."

"Oh yes you do, sweetie. Oh, heads up—here comes the ex."

I was still trying to recover from Ralph's last statement when Harry stopped in front of my office.

"Hi. Nice flowers. Who are they from...oh." Harry would have guessed the truth, even if my embarrassing color hadn't given it away. "Oh—sorry. I didn't realize you were..."

"Hi, Harry. Its okay. Why don't you come inside? I should have told you, but, well, you know."

"Yeah." Harry closed the door and stood watching while I did a little nervous shuffle. "You okay?"

"Sure, I'm fine. Actually, I'm better than fine. I'm sorry I haven't called you lately. Its just, well, things have been crazy with Dani being sick and all of the budget crunch still going on." I stopped to take a much needed breath and realized I'd been babbling on and not making much sense.

"How've you been, Harry?"

Harry sank into a chair. "Good...missing you. Does this mean it's serious?" He pointed to the lilacs.

"Serious, as in living together, but not serious as in anything more."

"I see..."

"What does that mean? What do you see, Harry?"

"Nothing—I don't know. This sounds crazy, especially coming from me, but I don't want to see you hurt."

“Harry, I know you don’t want to see me get hurt, and I love you for that, but I’m okay. This is what I want.”

Harry smiled but I could see he didn’t believe a word of what I’d said.

“That’s not what the old Paige would have said. Remember her? The one who said this job was only temporary. The one who wanted to become a great teacher someday, get married, have a handful of kids and live happily ever after. What happened to her?”

“She finally grew up. She realized those things only happen in fairy tales. This is real life, Harry. People don’t live happily ever after in real life. There are problems and compromises and...life. And I guess I’ve come to realize, I don’t want any of those things anymore. I don’t want to be married. I enjoy my freedom too much. I’ve been married before, and I’ve come to realize what I had with Dwight is what marriage is all about. It’s not pretty—far from it. And I don’t want any of those things anymore.”

“Mmm, well, I don’t happen to believe you. I think secretly you still want all of those things. You’re afraid to admit it, because you don’t believe you can have them with Jude Martin. Well, who knows? Maybe you can change people. Anything’s possible, right? Maybe the great and mighty Jude Martin can be taught a few things about life. If anyone can do it, you can.”

“I don’t think so, Harry. Trust me, it’s not possible. And I don’t want to talk about Jude any more. Tell me about you? How are things with you? Are you seeing anyone?”

Harry caught my sarcasm. I felt like a heel. Harry was trying to be my friend. He’d admitted he’d made a mistake, and I’d forgiven him because Harry was my friend. Why was I behaving this bitchy towards him now?

“I’m sorry. That was totally uncalled for. Not to mention downright mean.”

“No, it’s okay. I’d say it’s deserved. There isn’t anyone new, Paige. I’ve decided to take my time. I guess I’m not ready to date again. I screwed things up badly with you. There’s no future for us as a couple, but I don’t want to lose your friendship either.”

“Harry, you’re not going to lose me. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said what I did. I guess there is still some anger left in me. But we are friends. That won’t change.”

“Good. Look, I have to run. I only wanted to see how you were doing. I’ve got a meeting in a few minutes with your guy. I’ll see you later, okay?”

After Harry left, I called Jude. Unfortunately, I got Stella instead. She made it clear I’d interrupted her day as well as her boss’s.

“Just a minute. He’s on the other line.”

I listened to the music on hold and wondered how Jude’s father ever tolerated Stella for all those years. The woman was abrupt to the point of being rude at times. But maybe this attitude was reserved strictly to Jude and me.

“Hi, sorry to keep you waiting, Paige. How’s your day?”

“Great. Wonderful, in fact. I got the lilacs. They’re beautiful, Jude.”

“I took a chance they might be you’re favorite. But you know it occurred to me I don’t know a whole lot of other important things I want to know about you. But I have an idea.”

“Really.” I forgot all of the old doubts Harry brought back to the surface when Jude spoke so tenderly. “What?”

“Why don’t you and I go away for the weekend to the house in the Hamptons? In fact, why don’t we leave early Friday? Have Ralph clear your schedule and I’ll brave the wrath of Stella and do the same. We can leave early Friday morning and spend the whole weekend together. And then you can tell me all about your favorite things. How does that sound?”

The I’m-Not-Ready-To-Admit-I’m-In-Love gal couldn’t get enough of this guy. While the girl who still had some common sense cringed over every single word the emotional woman had to say.

“That sounds wonderful. I can’t wait.”

“Me too. Okay, I’ve got to go now. You know who is coming this way and she looks mad.”

I said goodbye, smiling at his little pretense of terror, and tried to squelch the little voice in the back of my head warning me I was headed willfully down the path to my own destruction.

Lesson 17: Sometimes what you want and what you need are two different things.

The weekend spent with Jude in the Hamptons was the best I ever remembered.

Growing up, I'd felt a little like the third wheel in my parent's love affair. Even though I'd been amazed at the depth of their love for each other, I never understood it until now.

Through all of my boyfriends past, I'd searched for something like my parents love without ever realizing it.

Until now. Until Jude. At last I'd found that type of love my parents knew. And I couldn't help but wonder if maybe this was some kind of payback for all the things I'd done wrong in my life. Was this what was meant by cosmic justice?

But for the moment, I remained in denial. I believed I'd be able to handle this relationship under Jude's terms. I'd simply walk away when things got bad. And after all, there was no way this could be a one-sided love affair. Jude had to feel something for me.

We spent every single minute of that weekend in each other's company. Jude and I talked about everything. All the little, get-to-know-you things. I'd never felt closer to him. And yet, there were warning signs even in the beginning.

Sometimes, when I slipped up and mentioned something about the future, a distant look would come into his eyes as if he were warning me not look beyond the moment. Even his touch held a certain remoteness. Oh the passion was all there. Jude knew how to make me crave his touch more and more each time he loved me. But his lovemaking felt a

little too precise at times. He loved me with body but our intimacy never reached beyond physical fulfillment for him. No matter how many times I gave myself to him and loved him with all my heart I couldn't seem to touch him emotionally. Jude always held parts of himself back.

Oh yes, the signs had all been there. I'd just been too caught up in him to realize their meaning until I'd given Jude my heart.

On late Sunday afternoon while Jude and I sat reading through the paper in front of the fireplace Dani called. She sounded almost like the old Dani.

"You sound terrific. How are you feeling?"

"Good. Wonderful, in fact. Time away was the best thing in the world for me. I feel like me again."

"I'm so glad. You had me worried. Did you get some things sorted through?"

"You know I think I did. And I had a call from Mark. I didn't answer it, but he left me a message. He wants to talk. I'm not sure, though. What do you think?"

I'd never told Dani about my meeting with Mark. I wasn't sure how much it might hurt her at the time.

"I think you should talk to him. You owe it to yourself to hear what Mark has to say. Once you're ready. There's no rush. Just hear what he has to say. You don't have to make any commitments. But you do need to listen."

"Really, you think? I figured you'd tell me not to see him again."

"No, you need to hear what he has to say. But only when you're ready."

"What about work? How bad was it? Do I even want to come back?"

I knew what she wanted to know. Dani was afraid someone might have guessed the truth.

"Everything is fine. Although, filling your shoes has been all but impossible. And if you don't believe me, ask Ralph. But I did my best.

Don't worry, no one knows a thing," I added because I wanted her to be okay with coming back to work the next day.

"Thank God. I don't think I could face anyone if they suspected...well, you know. Paige..." While she searched for the right words, I knew what she wanted to tell me.

"It's okay. You'd have done the same for me if the situation were reversed."

* * *

Jude and I left for New York bright and early Monday morning. We were both quiet on the drive in. I think maybe we knew things couldn't stay this way between us forever. It was too perfect.

But I still managed to hold onto my cloud of happiness for as long as possibly. I breezed through the entire months of October then November, totally and absolutely captivated by Jude.

Much later, I would wonder if those closest to me suspected my fate.

There were the usual questions, the comments, which should have gotten my attention and if I'm being honest, they did. But for the most part, I ignored any unpleasant reminders of where I might be heading.

With Christmas just three weeks away, my own Christmas plans couldn't have been more frustrating.

On the one hand, I wanted to go home to be with my parents. But on the other, I wanted to spend every single moment of my life with Jude.

And yet, I still didn't know what Jude had planned for the holiday.

Each time I spoke to my mother, I stalled, right until I was forced to see the events unfolding right before my eyes, moving me toward my uncertain future.

The first event came one weekend at the Hamptons. I'd begun working my way through another detailed financial report when my cell phone rang.

The only people who ever called my cell phone anymore were my parents. In all the months that I'd been staying with Jude, I hadn't been able to tell my parents about my new living arrangements. I'd had Dani screen their calls at my old apartment.

Lately, I'd been pretty much avoiding their calls entirely, especially since I didn't know what to tell them.

Today, my mother apparently decided to try another tactic. When I didn't recognize the number on my phone screen, I assumed it was something work related.

The second I answered the call and heard Mom's voice, I couldn't run any longer.

"Well, I found you at last. Where have you been hiding?"

From my somewhat pained expression, Jude knew something was wrong. I managed to smile while mouthing it was my mother.

"Who is that you're talking to, honey?"

"Hi, Mom...just a friend." I glanced at Jude. He wasn't very pleased with my keeping the truth from my mother. I shook my head once more. I'd deal with him later. Right now, I had to get rid of Mom. "I haven't been hiding, Mom. I've been busy. How are you and Dad?"

"We're fine. Stop trying to avoid the subject. You know why I'm calling. We want to know if you're coming this year. You've been promising us for a while you would, but you've been avoiding the subject for weeks now. What's going on with you, Paige?"

"Nothing. I'm just not sure I can get away this year. I'm sorry, I don't know yet. I'll have to call you back."

"Oh no, you don't. I recognize a stall when I hear one. What's got you busy, and don't say work. Is it Harry or is it someone else?"

I couldn't keep avoiding the subject, but I didn't want to try to explain to my mother what I didn't know how to explain in front of Jude.

While I continued to stall, I pointed to the bedroom and indicated I'd take the call in there, which only seemed to further distance Jude.

Unfortunately, as much as I hated admitting it, I didn't care. I'd never hear the end of this if I didn't at least come clean to my mother about my relationship with Jude.

"Mom, Harry and I broke up a while back," I confessed when I was alone. "I'm sorry, I should have told you sooner, but honestly it didn't seem like such big of a deal. We've decided it's best for us to remain friends. But there is someone else. Someone I met a few months back. Someone...who is important to me."

"You sound nervous. Paige, are you in love with this man?"

"No, Mom...no. It's not like that. We're just...together. Look, Mom, I can't talk about this right now."

"Is he there with you? Paige, I've never heard you sound like this... You do love him, don't you? It's true. I can tell from the way you don't want to talk about him. It's serious. Isn't it?"

"Mom, I have to go now. I'm sorry I haven't been easy to reach lately, but I promise I'll give you a call soon. I'll let you know about Christmas in a few days, okay?"

"Why don't you bring him with you, honey?" My sweet, sometimes clueless mother continued with her interrogation bringing a completely new wrinkle into the mix. "Your father and I would love to meet him. "

"Mom, no. That is, I don't know." The last part was added when I realized Jude had walked into the bedroom. "Mom, I promise, I'll call in a few days, okay?"

I didn't give my mother the chance to say anything further. I simply closed the cell phone on my mother and all of her unanswered questions.

For a long time after I ended the call, Jude didn't say a word. He simply watched me across the room.

"You want to tell me what that was all about? Why don't you feel comfortable talking to your mother in front of me? We've shared everything with each other, Paige. Or so I thought. Why can't you talk to your mother when I'm close?"

"It's not like that, Jude. I don't know what it's like, really. It's just I don't know what to tell her about us. I don't even know what we are sometimes."

Jude closed his eyes for a moment before taking a step closer.

"We're two people who enjoy being together for the moment. Isn't that enough? Can't we be happy with what we have right now? It's important to me. I care about you, Paige. Hell, I'm crazy about you. Why do you need me to define it as anything other than that? Isn't it enough that you are the only thing that matters to me right now?"

I turned away. What Jude told me should have thrilled me. And part of me was thrilled. But the other part, the woman who tried to deny she wanted the whole fairy tale, was reminding me I was heading down a path of no return.

Jude sat next to me then turned me to face him.

"Your mother wants you to come home for Christmas, doesn't she?"

I couldn't trust myself to speak. I nodded, not quite able to meet those cold, distant blue eyes.

"Would you like me to come with you?"

At this unexpected request, I searched his face.

"You want to come home with me?" I couldn't believe it. He'd asked me not to hold him to all those old conventional relationship traps, and yet, he wanted to come home with me for Christmas to meet my parents. I couldn't keep my happiness inside any longer.

Before he could answer, I threw myself into his arms. I was so happy that he'd suggested coming with me I ignored what was to be another big event in my life.

The shifting of our relationship onto dangerous ground.

"Yes, of course I want to come with you." Something in his tone made me hesitate if only for a second. Oh his words thrilled me but there was a certain hardness in his voice that made me wonder if maybe he were simply being polite.

I pulled away. I needed to look into his eyes. Jude smiled at me but it never really took away the coldness from his eyes.

“Are you sure? I mean, you don’t have to.”

“Of course I’m sure.” I would have given anything to believe him. But for the moment at least, all I thought about was Jude wanted to be with me, on the most important, *family* holidays of the year. This had to be a sign.

I couldn’t wait to call my mother back and tell her the good news. I barely waited until we’d made all of our travel arrangements before making the calling in front of Jude, and God, and the universe to tell her the good news.

Mom, as expected, was thrilled.

Absolutely nothing was able to snap me from this euphoric state.

I went to work each day, battled my daily doses of problems and counted the hours until I was back with my fantasy once again.

Unfortunately, my newfound happiness was taking its toll on my other relationships. I couldn’t stand to take a minute away from Jude, even for my friends. My time with Dani was spent mostly in her office, or over lunch close by, where we rushed through our life’s highlights.

Dani told me she and Mark were seeing each other again, although they weren’t living together anymore. Dani had pretty much taken over my old apartment.

“What exactly does that mean?” I asked one day over sandwiches brought in from the deli around the corner.

“That means we are actually dating.” At my confused expression, she added, “We’re not sleeping together”

I raised both eyebrows.

“It’s true. Believe it or not, I’m actually enjoying taking things slow for a change. I mean, before I never got to know any of the men I dated, including Mark. This is kind of nice, for a change. Oh, don’t get me wrong. There are times... Well, I’m only human. But Mark is the best. We both agree this is what we need to do. We want to take our time, get to

know each other, really know each other, beyond the bedroom. You know, see where things are going.”

“That sounds nice.” By now, I’d begun seeing Dani in a completely different light. Since the overdose I’d gone through so many levels of emotions with her.

I’d been forced to see my idol as a human being, instead of simply as my hero.

But looking at Dani closely now, I saw something else. She looked happy. Truly happy. This woman had managed to get beyond one of those major humps in a woman life. Dani’d breezed through turning forty when I believed she might fall apart.

She might be human, but she was every bit as strong as I’d believed her to be.

“What? Why are you looking at me like that, Paige?”

“I’m just thinking how happy I am to I know you. Do you have any idea how much you mean to me?”

For me, this admission was as completely out of character as Dani falling in love. I wasn’t good at telling those I loved how I felt about them.

“Its true. I don’t normally say those things, but it’s true. And I want you to know it.”

“Okay, stop right there, before you have me crying. I happen to have a department meeting to go to this afternoon, with your guy. It wouldn’t look good to show such weakness at work. Are you and the big guy all set to go home to Mommy and Daddy?”

No one had been more surprised by Jude’s suggestion than Dani. She was finding the few things I’d told her about my relationship with Jude hard to explain.

“I think so. But I have to tell you, I’m starting to get a little nervous about it. You’ve met them. You know how odd my parents are.”

“Paige, there’s nothing wrong with your mom and dad. They’re a little eccentric is all. Trust me, Jude will love them.”

"No, he won't. He'll be miserable the whole time, and he'll wish he'd never agreed to come."

"That's not very positive. Come on, girl—my money's on you. Don't disappoint me."

"Well, I hope you didn't bet too much money on me, because it isn't happening, Dani."

"Paige, you don't know that."

But none of this stopped me from giving away a little bit more of myself with each passing moment spent with Jude.

We spent the week before Christmas shopping for last minute presents, which brought me to the difficult decision of what to buy my former boyfriend-slash-friend.

"Don't tell me you're still not finished? It looks like you've bought the store already," Jude said, once he'd returned from buying his father an elaborate espresso slash coffeemaker, something that seemed rather impersonal for a father-son relationship to me.

"Who are you looking for now? Maybe I can help?"

We were standing in the middle of one of those expensive men's stores. The type to make me feel as lost as a child in a hardware store.

"I'm looking for something for Harry," I admitted slowly and saw Jude's disapproval surface. It was always there whenever I mentioned my ex-boyfriend to him.

Although Jude never once said anything negative about Harry, I knew he didn't like the idea of the two of us remaining friends.

"Well, you've got me there. You'd probably know more about what the guy likes than I would."

"What's that suppose to mean?" My frustration at Jude's behavior continued to grow.

"Nothing. Only you're the one he's friends with, not me. What type of things does he like? What did the two of you do together when you were dating?"

My guilty self gave him a look that told him I wasn't thrilled by the suggestion, and he smiled.

"I didn't mean it like that. Maybe you'd better take your mind from the gutter, Miss Wilder. What I meant was you've known him for a while now. What type of things does he like to do?"

Jude took my hand, as well as most of my bags, in an effort to redeem himself.

"Harry likes to work puzzles."

"What sort of puzzles?"

I glanced up at the hint of amusement in his tone, which Jude hid with difficulty. He was trying hard not to laugh but I could see this new piece of information didn't exactly endear Harry to Jude.

"You know, the big puzzles pieces. The ones with pictures, and thousands of pieces. It sounds silly to you, but Harry likes them. He told me once working them helped him to relax."

"Okay, well, I think there's a place on the lower level which has stuff like that. Let's go see if we can find a puzzle for Harry."

* * *

The week before and after the Christmas holiday, Martin Publishing pretty much resembled a ghost town. Everyone around the place took vacation during this time.

Jude and I decided to take advantage of the off time and leave the Monday before Christmas for my parent's house in Miami.

We'd sent our presents ahead of us and asked Dani to take Sammy for a while. It was just the two of us on the flight to Miami. I couldn't relax for the entire trip. I was too worried about what Jude would think of my parents.

"Sweetheart, what's wrong with you?"

I turned to catch him watching me with that maddening smile.

"Nothing...I'm sorry, I guess I'm not very good at flying."

“You’re also not good at lying. Are you worried about what your parents will think about me, or what I’ll think about them?”

“Both. Mostly that you’ll see what odd folks I come from and decide I’ve inherited all of their bad traits.”

Jude simply laughed. “Paige, your parents sound like wonderful people to me. And the fact that they care about each other the way they do speaks highly of them. They raised you, didn’t they? I’m crazy about you. I’m sure I’ll love them. Stop worrying, okay?”

He kissed my cheek and looked at me with so much tenderness I forgot all about my fears for this Christmas, or the future beyond. I’d be happy looking into those blue eyes. I didn’t need any promises.

Did I?

Lesson 18: Remember you can't change the length of your calves, the width of your hips, or the nature of your parents.

My parents were there to meet us when our flight landed. My mother and father looked beautifully tanned and happy. Living in Florida definitely agreed with the both of them.

I hadn't seen the house they'd bought in Miami, except through the pictures my mother emailed of the place. The last time I'd visited them, they were still living in the RV Park along the beach.

I watched as my father and Jude shook hands while my mother alternated between crying and laughing. Once she'd finished with me, she threw her arms around Jude and hugged him tight.

I almost felt sorry for the poor guy. He had no idea what he was in for with these two. Describing my parents to anyone who didn't know them was virtually impossible.

They were crazy in love with each other and had been all their lives. Everything else in the world took second place in their life, including me.

But I'd grown to accept my place in their world a long time ago.

After Jude and Dad loaded our luggage, I sat next to Jude in the back seat of my parents' minivan and tried not to laugh. How I wished I could snap a picture of Jude Martin riding in a minivan.

"What's so funny?" he whispered in my ear and I smiled.

"Oh, I'm wondering how many times you've actually ridden inside a minivan before now?"

It was Jude's turn to laugh. "You think that's funny, do you? Well, I have to tell you, sweetheart, you don't exactly fit into the minivan category yourself."

That got me thinking. Maybe he didn't know me as well as he thought he did. I mean, after all, I'd grown up in a minivan kind of atmosphere. I was small town, middle-class, softball games and tennis lessons. My mom had been hauling me and my select group of friends around in a minivan for years.

But Jude didn't know any of those things. He knew me as the New York woman who'd all but seduced him the first night we met. He knew how I worked, how I played, but seeing me with my parents in my true environment was something he didn't understand. Jude didn't know the small town girl who still existed inside me.

I'd shared my secret desire of becoming a teacher again with him once. But to someone like Jude, it seemed extremely naïve. I'm sure Jude thought it odd I'd be willing let go of such an exciting, fast-paced career to baby-sit someone else's kids.

"Paige, I can't believe how nice you look with your hair cut short. I don't think you've ever worn it above shoulder length before, have you?"

Mom, whose own graying hair was still long and flowing, the way my dad preferred, smiled back at the two of us. She was completely dumbfounded by Jude. He wasn't anything like what she and Dad were expecting.

"It's easier to take care of this way."

"Oh, I'm sure you're far too busy with that career of yours to worry about your hair. Oh, here we are."

From the handful of pictures I'd seen of my parent's house, I knew it was a couple of blocks away from the beach. I also knew it was a white, two-story Cape Cod. But even before I walked into the front door, I knew what I would find there.

The cluttered assortment of possessions my mother collected throughout her lifetime filled every single room of the house.

There were the usual sentimental things which had no real value except in their hearts. Most were little knick-knack items they'd given each other over the years, along with a few of the things I'd created growing up. And of course, the assortment of photos that gave away little hints of the house's inhabitants to anyone who cared enough to look at them.

I noticed there were several new additions to the pieces I could almost describe by heart. Things my parents, in their trek around the country, collected. Mostly your typical tourist keepsakes.

On the mantle of the fireplace was an assortment of photos, most of which were taken in front of their prized RV.

"Oh, that's the picture your father took of me at the Grand Canyon. That was the last year we had the RV," my mother said lovingly as she came to a stop behind me.

Now, I'd told Jude all about their little journey across the country in a RV, but I don't think he had actually believed me.

"See, I told you." I said after he set our luggage down and stood next to me. "Mom, Jude thought I'd invented the part about the RV. He can't quite grasp the idea of traveling around the country in a mobile home."

"Oh, it was real, all right. We still miss the RV," my mother said as I tried to keep from smiling at his expression.

The poor man had no idea that my mother could talk for hours about their travels. But by the time we left Miami he would.

"Mom, I think we're going to get settled in first then you can tell Jude all about it."

"Oh, of course—what was I thinking? You two must be tired. Honey, we kept all of your old things. They're in the first door to your right. Your father and I have our room on the first floor..." Mom couldn't quite meet my eyes and for some reason she was blushing like crazy.

It took me a few minutes to realize what my mom was trying hard to tell me. But when it finally clicked I became so embarrassed I turned and left my mom standing, while Jude followed close behind laughing at my uneasiness.

"I take it this isn't normal? I mean you've never brought another man home to meet them. Not even Harry?"

I couldn't even bring myself to think about what my parents must be thinking right about now.

"Oh God—no! And I don't know what's gotten into Mom. We never talk about anything serious, really. Especially not sex," I whispered this part before closing the door behind us on what was now to be deemed my new bedroom.

"God forbid," he agreed in mocked astonishment.

"You don't understand. It's just not done in my world. I mean, the deepest conversation we've ever had was my father telling me about the dangers of drugs. He left sex to Mom who gave me a book when I became a teenager and told me to read it. I learned everything I know..."

I'd been close to saying firsthand, but then I thought, did this guy need to know all the little intimate things about my past?

"You see, in my parents' eyes, you don't have sex without being married. It's not done."

"Well, maybe they've changed their minds? I mean you are a grown woman, Paige. I'm sure they trust your judgment by now. They have to know we're doing more than sharing a bed together. Especially a bed that small." Jude set our cases on my tiny twin bed.

For the first time, I considered how two grown adults were going to sleep comfortably in such cramped quarters. I glanced over at Jude and saw he was reading my thoughts again.

"I think it's perfect," he said. "Just right, in fact."

After we were unpacked, we went downstairs to find my parents. We were halfway down when Jude whispered, "We're sticking with the whole don't ask don't tell thing, right?"

"Right."

And that was exactly what we did, even though it wasn't easy with my mother's constant attempts at getting the goods from me on Jude.

But somehow, for our entire week in Miami, my parents never said a word about our "sleeping arrangements", and Jude and I never brought the subject up.

I couldn't help but be surprised and a little amazed at how easily Jude and my parents adjusted to each other.

We spent most of our time at the beach. We took long walks along the shore as we did at his house in the Hamptons. But unlike the Hamptons, the weather in Florida was simply gorgeous. By the time we were ready to leave for New York, Jude and I both achieved fabulous tans.

We were scheduled to fly back the day after Christmas. I'd been avoiding having the chat I knew my mother wanted to have with me for our entire time there. Until she finally corralled me early Christmas morning in the kitchen.

"You going to tell me what's going on between you two? Well, besides the obvious fact you're in love with Jude, and he doesn't know how he feels about you?"

This was just like my mother. Straight to the point and didn't mince words. Never mind the fact that her words cut straight through all of my illusions.

"Mom, he'll hear you. He's just in the shower, you know." I was still trying to prevent the inevitable. But Mom wasn't having it.

"Come on. Bring that coffee with you. We're going for a walk."

She all but took my hand and forced me along the now familiar path to the beach.

"Now spill it, Paige."

"Mom, I don't want to talk about this..."

"That's too bad, because I do. Now, what's his story?"

Before I knew what hit me, and against everything I still tried to hold onto, I told my mother everything about Jude.

"Honey, why are you wasting your time with him? Don't get me wrong, I think Jude's a wonderful man, but you're not getting any younger, Paige. I hate to be the one to say the obvious, but you'll be

turning forty before long. No matter how much you're trying to deny it, you're ready to settle down, find the right guy and have some children."

"Mom, as you've pointed out, I am almost forty. I think the whole children ship has sailed, don't you? And as far as the other stuff... Well, you're wrong. You're wrong, Mom. Maybe marriage worked for you and Daddy, but it's not for everyone. I tried, remember? It wasn't meant to be. Jude makes me happy for now."

"Oh, Paige. That's a bunch of lies and you know it. Dwight was a mistake. You were too young to know any better. You married the wrong guy, honey. But there's someone right for you. I know there is."

"Yeah, well, I've thought the same about every guy since Dwight, Mom, but look how wrong I've been. It's not going to happen for me, Mom. I've accepted that. You need to as well."

"Oh honey. I don't know what to say. I think you're wrong, but how can I convince you?" Mom knew it would be pointless to argue when my mind was made up. "I'm sorry, Paige. I guess you know what's best for your life."

Looking at my parents, I realized what lay ahead for me. Ultimately, I'd be alone. Oh, not today. Maybe not for a long time still. But someday. I would never have what my parent's shared. The thought hurt like hell.

Mine was not going to be the all-consuming love story my mother found in my father. My story had all the passion without any of the commitment. All the fireworks Ralph warned me about, but none of the warmth.

And it would be my decision when enough was enough.

Jude suspected something happened between my mother and me, but I couldn't bring myself to talk about it with him, and he didn't ask. Not even the beautiful diamond earrings he gave me for Christmas brightened my day.

We left for New York the day after Christmas with all my mother's disappointments still ringing loud and clear through my troubled thoughts.

When we landed, it was to a winter wonderland that slowed traffic to a halt and put the busy pace of New York life on hold.

Lesson 19: Know where to go, be it your best friend's kitchen table or a little inn in the woods, when you need to do some soul searching.

A few days after the New Year, something happened which I knew would be the beginning of the end for Jude and me. This was the sign I'd been waiting for.

It started innocently enough. Jude and I were doing our usual weekend ritual, going over work at the house in Hamptons, when Jude received the call.

At first, I didn't pay much attention. Jude routinely received calls from his staff. But something in Jude's voice struck me as strange. He sounded shocked. Even before I glanced his way, I knew that it wasn't good.

"What's wrong?"

"Hang on a second, Suzanne." Jude held the receiver away from him. "It's my father. Suzanne is calling from the hospital. The doctors believe he's had a stroke."

"Oh my God, Jude." I stood next to him in silence and listened as he told his stepmother he'd catch the first flight out.

When he looked at me, I saw the fear in his gaze. "I have to go. Suzanne doesn't know how to handle this alone. The doctors won't speculate on his condition over the phone, which can only mean it isn't good."

Jude was already miles away. He touched my hair then reached for the phone again. He made the necessary arrangements to leave New York that very day.

"I'll have to hurry to make the flight. Do you mind if we head back into the city right now? I'd feel better if you didn't have to drive in alone." The sound of his voice had turned brittle. Jude had begun to pull away from me emotionally as well as physically.

I followed him into the bedroom. We quickly threw our things into the suitcases and were on our way before it hit me he hadn't asked me to come with him.

"When will you arrive?" I asked instead of the question I wanted to ask. Why didn't he want me to go with him?

"Late this evening." He said distracted. I kept remembering all the terrible things he'd told me about his father, even though none of those things mattered to him now. Jude was going to California out of obligation.

Once we reached the apartment, Jude packed in record time before calling the car service.

"I could come with you. I wouldn't mind." I couldn't let it go. Why didn't he want me with him during this horrible time?

"No. I don't know what I'll be dealing with when I get there, Paige. Chances are it will be complete chaos, if I know Suzanne. You should stay. I don't want you to get behind at work when there's nothing you can do."

"I could be there with you." I still hoped he'd change his mind and ask me to come. The second I spotted that pulling away look in his eyes again, I let go.

"No, it's okay. I'll be fine. I'll call you when I arrive and know more about what's going on."

I wanted to say so many things to him, but I couldn't seem to find the words over the tears that were close.

"Don't, Paige. I have enough to worry about without worrying you'll be okay."

His words hurt more than I'd ever imagined. When he kissed me and left me alone, I couldn't help but wonder if he'd even remember what he was leaving behind once the door was closed between us.

For me, the day had lost its promise. The one thing in my life that made me happy was on his way across the country, and he hadn't wanted me to come with him. This said everything about our relationship.

I paced Jude's elaborate apartment and wondered how I would ever be able to sleep again without him lying there next to me.

I managed to fill some of the day by taking poor Sammy on several walks. After the third and final trip outdoors, Sam went into hiding.

It was late when Jude finally called. I'd gone to bed but was unable to sleep.

"I didn't wake you, did I?" he asked.

Hearing his voice made me miss him even more. It reminded me he was thousands of miles away.

"No, I wasn't sleeping. How's your father?"

"Not good. It's bad, Paige. Worse than I thought. And Suzanne is no help at all. In fact, she was complaining so much I sent her home. The woman is already talking about leaving my father. Can you believe that? They've been married for only a few months, he needs her, and she's talking about leaving him. I'm sorry. I'm just so disgusted with her right now. Anyway, the doctors believe Dad had a massive stroke..." Jude stopped speaking for a second. I almost believed he struggled with tears.

"He can't move, Paige. The entire left side of his body is paralyzed. He can't even speak. All he can do is make this pathetic guttural sound. I can't believe the man in that hospital bed is my father. It's like looking at a shell of the person he used to be. I'm sorry... I didn't mean to go on like this. I thought you should know how serious things are. I have no idea how long I'll need to stay. I called my step sister and brother, but they aren't coming. No real surprise there and I can't blame them either. I mean, my father treated them like shit most of their lives."

"He treated you the same way."

"Yes, but I'm all he has right now. I can't leave him on his own, with Suzanne."

"Of course you can't, Jude. You need to be there with him."

"Yes. Look, Paige, I should get back to him. I'll give you a call in a few days, okay. When I have a better idea about things. You should try and get some sleep now."

"Jude?" I whispered after a moment when I thought he'd hung up on me.

"Sorry, Paige, I'm here. I'm probably sounding like the world's biggest grouch right about now. I don't mean to, and it's not you. It's just...everything. Get some sleep, sweetheart."

"It's okay... I understand. It must be hard seeing your father like that."

"Sweetheart, listen to me. I know things are crazy right now, but we're still together. Please don't run away, Paige. I need you now more than ever."

I clung to those words through all the long endless nights that lay ahead of me.

During the day, I was okay. I threw myself into my work with a new vigor and went to dinner with Dani or Harry. Even Ralph a few times. Anything to keep my mind off missing Jude.

But the nights were the hardest to get through. The nights seemed to go on forever.

In spite of Jude's promise to call in a few days, it was almost a week before I heard from him again. And that was only after Stella transferred him to me. A little piece of information she was happy to point loud and clear.

"Ms. Wilder, I have Mr. Martin on the line for you. He would like to speak with you for a moment." Stella's voice screeched through the line. I pictured her smiling smugly into the receiver.

"Hi." I breathed a sigh of relief when Jude's voice replaced Stella's.

"Hi, Paige." Even through the phone line, he sounded exhausted.

“How are things going with your father?”

“Terrible, just terrible. It looks like he’s going to need round the clock care for a while. The doctors aren’t sure he’ll ever come back completely. Suzanne is useless, still threatening to leave. I finally talked her into waiting. I mean, I don’t care if she leaves, just not when Dad needs stability in his life. I threatened to cut off her allowance. Since she signed a pre-nuptial, she doesn’t have a leg to stand on. She’ll stay, at least until he’s better able to deal with her leaving.

“What about you? How are you doing? How long will you be there?”

“I don’t know. Dad needs me. I can’t walk away. He has no one else. He’ll be in the hospital for another week at least, possibly longer. His doctors want to talk about long-term care facilities. But they still think he needs to be monitored in the hospital for a while longer before we decide on the best care for him. I’m afraid I may be here for some time yet.”

“Oh Jude...” I missed him terribly. I loved him and wanted to help yet didn’t know how.

“I’m sorry, Paige. This is tough on you as well. Trust me I’d rather be with you than anything else in the world right now. But I can’t desert him.”

“I know. Jude I do understand. I just miss you. Are you getting any sleep at all? You sound terrible.”

“Some, but it’s hard. I spend most of my time at the hospital. Maybe once Dad is ready to leave the hospital I’ll have a better idea of what to do next. I can’t make you any promises right now, sweetheart.”

When he sounded this sweet and vulnerable, I knew I would do anything in the world for him.

“It’s okay. I’ll be here when you can come home. Is there anything I can do to help? I feel useless to you right now.”

“Oh Paige, you aren’t useless at all. You’re there for me. That means everything to me.”

Letting go of Jude had to be the hardest thing in the world to do. I missed him and wanted to be with him, but I knew there was nothing I could do about either of those needs.

And for the life of me, it felt like I'd become a prisoner of my own despair.

* * *

After the first week of Jude's absence, everyone around the office knew about his father.

And I'd quickly become the object of office gossip once more. I faced those questioning looks from my co-workers which told me how odd it was for me to be in New York when my boyfriend faced one of the worse tragedies of his life, alone in California.

Dani became a lifesaver during this time. She knew all the things being speculated, but she simply dismissed it as the flavor of the moment for the office gossips.

We were at dinner one night when Dani surprised me by announcing she and Mark had quietly gotten married a few days earlier.

I was in shock.

"Dani! I can't believe it. I'm thrilled for you but why didn't you say something earlier? I would have helped you plan or..."

She took my hand and squeezed it. "I know. But we didn't want it to be anything elaborate. Just the two of us. You understand?"

"Yes, of course. But wow. I think I'm in shock." I tried to gather my scattered thoughts enough to make sense.

I heard Dani laugh at my confusion. "I know. It's crazy, isn't it. Mark and I wanted to have a few days alone with the news to get accustomed to saying we were married before telling anyone."

"So you're both happy?" I could see from the way she beamed that this was the understatement of the year.

“Yes. I never could have imagined being this happy before.” She hesitated for a moment then added, “So how are you managing without Jude?”

I tried not to show her how sad I felt without him near me. I didn’t want to spoil her happiness.”

“I’m okay. But I can only imagine what the office gossips must be saying about our being apart.”

“Why do you care what anyone at the office thinks? They don’t know anything about your relationship with Jude. Don’t let them get to you, Paige.”

“Yeah, well, they’re right you know? I mean think about it, Dani. Wouldn’t you want the one person you’re supposed to care about in the world with you at a time like this?”

“People deal with these things differently. Maybe Jude’s not the type of person to lean on anyone. He’s been on his own for a long time now. Maybe he doesn’t know how to ask for help?”

“I wish I believed you, Dani. But for the life of me, I can’t help but feel this may be it for us. Jude tells me he doesn’t want to think about not being apart of my life, but all the while I feel like he’s pushing me away a little more every day we’re apart.”

I watched my best friend choose her words carefully before answering me.

“Paige, you know sometimes it’s best to get these things in the open. I know it’s hard,” she added when I would have argued. “It’s hard, but look what happened to Mark and me? We both assumed we knew what the other wanted from life and from our relationship. And we couldn’t have been more wrong. If you don’t talk to Jude about how you feel, how do you know you’re not reading his feelings all wrong? You need to do it now, before things get further out of hand.”

“I can’t talk to Jude like that, Dani. We’re not like you and Mark. Trust me, I wish that we were.”

"I guess you know him better than I do, but I have to tell you, Paige, you owe it to yourself to lay all your cards on the table. Don't assume you know how Jude feels."

A few days later, I received another call from Jude which made me believe I knew him pretty well, in spite of what Dani believed.

It'd been days since I'd heard anything from him. Part of me still hoped Jude would simply show up on my doorstep and dispel all my doubts. His call only served to confirm how impossible this would be. Jude was letting me know he wasn't coming home any time soon.

"Dad is supposed to be transferred to an extended-care facility in the next few days, but his doctors aren't very optimistic. They tell me he may never regain full use of the left side of his body. Or his speech, for that matter, which means I'll have to make some decisions that aren't going to be easy."

"This must be so difficult for you, Jude." I wanted to hold him.

"It is. I've tried hard to deny it, but the truth is I do still care about my father. It's hard watching him this way. He can't talk. All he does is cry. At least he can use a pen and paper to convey some thoughts, but all he says is he doesn't want to be put in a home. I don't know what to do, Paige. I can't take care of him on my own, and I can't stay indefinitely. I've been able to check email, and I'm in contact with Stella several times during the day. Thankfully, nothing major has come up which couldn't be handled by phone. But I do have a company to run. I'll need to get back soon. But he is my father." It shocked me to hear this much indecision in Jude.

"I'm hoping once he sees the place, he'll feel differently. I stopped by, talked to the administrator the other day, and took a tour of the place. It's nice. I mean considering what it is, it's very nice. I think once he gets it in his mind he doesn't have a choice, he'll be okay with it."

"It has to be tough for you, Jude. But you're doing the right thing."

"I hope you're right. Like it or not, it's all I can do. Anyway, I don't want to talk about this anymore. How are you doing? What have you been up too? Have you found yourself another boyfriend yet?"

“Don’t joke, Jude. That’s not funny. I’m okay, but I miss you terribly. I wish that I could see you.”

“Believe me, baby, I know how you feel. I think about you all the time. And as far as how much longer I’ll have to be away from you, well, I hope it’s not long.”

It was several more days before I heard from him again. Jude called to tell me that his father was adjusting quite well to his new digs.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong—he doesn’t like it, but he’s finally resigned himself to the fact if he doesn’t like it here, he’ll have to work harder to get better so he can leave. I’m hoping it won’t be much longer before I can come home again. I miss you, baby.”

With this small glimmer of hope, I breezed through my days and worked late into the night to get by.

I was exhausted most of the time, and fighting off a cold that wouldn’t go away, no matter what I chose to feed it.

Lesson 20: Know how to be alone even when you don't want to.

By Friday, all I thought about was hopping into bed and sleeping through the entire weekend.

As always, in Jude's absence, sleep was an impossible task to achieve. I tossed and turned until well after midnight, when I finally drifted off.

His touch didn't seem real at first. I'd missed him terribly. I thought his touch was simply part of my dreams until he woke me in the best possible way, reminding me, as only Jude could, how much I'd needed him to bring me back to life.

"What are you doing here?" I asked in wonderment when I lay in his arms, holding him close.

"I had to see you. My God, I've missed you, Paige. You have no idea. I had to see you."

"But your father..."

"He's in good hands. He'll be fine. I can't stay, though. I'm flying back in the morning. I just needed to see you. Touch you. I sorry I missed your birthday, baby."

I started to cry and he held me tighter, but no matter how close I got, or how real he felt, I couldn't stop my tears. I'd missed him more than I ever believed possible.

In all my sadness over Jude's absence from my life, I'd almost forgotten about my fortieth birthday the week before, until Dani reminded me. But I'd refused her offer to celebrate. I wasn't in a celebrating mood.

When I awoke to find Jude gone, his absence took its toll on me physically and emotionally. I spent the whole weekend in bed, more miserable than ever before.

A preview of my future to come.

Jude called, but I think it was as hard for him as it was for me. We didn't talk all very much. I hung up the phone and cried even more.

After another week of constantly throwing up, I finally was able to force myself to eat solid food again.

I didn't hear from Jude for almost a week, but when he called it was to tell me he would be coming home for good this time. His father had made excellent progress. His doctors no longer believed there was any reason for Jude to stick around.

He told me he planned on flying back to California a couple of times during the month to check on his father. I was ecstatic. I'd been ignoring the concern of everyone around me for a long time. Now, it didn't matter how bad I felt. Jude was coming home.

But he never made it back to New York. A few days before his flight, Jude's father suffered a massive heart attack. He never regained consciousness.

"Oh Jude, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'll come—"

"No. It won't be necessary." He sounded so cold and distant. As if he were merely talking to a stranger and not the woman he claimed to care about.

"I know it's not necessary, but I want to be with you. You shouldn't be alone right now."

"I'm okay. My father didn't want any type of service. He left very distinct instructions concerning what he wanted. Dad wrote them on a piece of paper before he died. Someone at the care center found it after he was gone. I think he knew somehow. He wanted to be cremated and have his ashes spread along the cliffs. There won't be anyone there but me, and I just want to get through it, okay? I'll be home as soon as I can."

And so I waited and endured all of the speculation in my fellow employees stares. Everyone around me saw the truth. But no one wanted to admit it. Including me.

As I faced the newer, sicker Paige in the mirror each morning, I wondered whether the man who left me behind would find anything left to want in me? I looked deathly pale all of the time and I'd lost quite a few pounds.

Dani had been trying for weeks to get me to see her doctor, but I couldn't bring myself to face the truth just yet.

To cover my illness, I layered on the makeup. It helped a little, but nothing would cover the weight loss. Most of my clothes no longer fit.

One afternoon while I sat scanning over reports in my office, Harry was the one who finally found the courage to confront me with the truth.

"Paige, what on earth is wrong with you lately? You look terrible."

"Thanks a lot." I tried to sound angry but in truth I struggled not to cry.

"Paige, snap out of it! You need to see a doctor and you need to do it now. You are not okay."

"I'm just tired. I've been working too hard. Then there's everything that's been going on with Jude."

"Yeah, there's Jude. The real reason why you're this way. Damn it, Paige, you've got to break this spell he has you under and think about yourself for once. Before it's too late. Think about what you're giving up. Your whole world has been about Jude and his problems." Harry saw my reaction and tried to soften his next words. "I know, he's been through a lot with his father's illness and death, but you have too."

"I'm okay. I'll be fine once he's back. Can we talk about something else for a change? I mean, don't you have a life outside of mine?"

The minute the words were I'd said the words and spotted Harry's reaction to them, I felt lower than I had in a long time.

"You right, I do. It's time I got back to it. Take care of yourself, Paige. You know where to find me if you need me again."

Harry left my office without another word, ignoring all of my attempts to apologize. After he left, I spent the rest of the afternoon staring through my window and considering what Harry said.

I'd been ignoring my friends for a long time. Did they all feel the way Harry did about Jude? Was Harry right? I'd always considered myself an independent woman before Jude. But since meeting him, I couldn't seem to function on my own. My whole life revolved around him. That wasn't me. I wasn't the clingy type.

When I left the office later that afternoon, I went straight to visit my newly married friend. I found Dani and Mark sitting in their living room watching TV.

"Look who's here." Mark seemed surprised to see me. "Come inside. She's in the living room."

Since our little heart to heart, Mark and I'd become friends. In a way, I think he believed I'd somehow managed to get Dani and him back together. I didn't have the heart to tell him nothing could be further from the truth.

"Paige, hi. What are you doing here?" Dani asked

"Hi, I'm sorry to bother you at home. I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

She arched an eyebrow which told me it didn't matter what they might be doing. We were best friends.

"Come, sit down." She gave Mark a look that sent him scurrying into some other part of the apartment.

"Sorry, Mark," I yelled after him.

"No problem."

"What's wrong? Has something else happened with Jude?"

I studied my friend for a few minutes answering. I realized then that Dani had been expecting something to go wrong between Jude and me.

"No, that's not why I stopped by. I wanted to talk to you about something. Dani, Harry came to see me today. He said some things that,

well frankly, they hurt, but they also got me thinking. Dani, have I been ignoring you for Jude?”

She took long enough in answering for me to realize the truth.

“Oh Dani, I’m sorry.”

“No, wait. Listen to what I have to say first, Paige. I don’t think you’ve been ignoring me, but I do believe you’ve been ignoring you. You’ve been sick for weeks now, but all you can think about is Jude. Honey, you have to find some way to keep yourself in this relationship. You’re losing Paige.”

“That’s not true. I’m still the same person, I’m just...”

“In love? I know the feeling. It can totally take away your confidence. And destroy you if you let it. Especially when you’re in love with someone as commanding as Jude Martin. He’s a different kind of man than any of the others you’ve dated in the past. But you’d better find a way to stand your ground, kiddo. Otherwise you’ll disappear.”

I hung around talking to Dani longer than normal that night, because I didn’t want to be alone with my thoughts.

Things had changed between Jude and myself. Something shifted between us again. Now for the first time, I almost dreaded seeing him again.

The day Jude was scheduled to return to New York, I found I was so nervous I barely managed to do any work at all.

Jude told me he would be arriving late. I’d gone into the office feeling my usual blah self, wanting the day to be over while hoping to prove my own predictions wrong.

By mid-afternoon, I’d become a nervous wreck. I barely heard a thing anyone said to me. I simply hid in my office and wondered if I even have the nerve to go home tonight.

I was grateful when the knock sounded on my door until Jude walked in. I couldn’t move and couldn’t believe my eyes. He was real and standing before me after what felt like an eternity of separation.

“Aren’t you going to say something?” he asked when I still hadn’t moved.

“You’re here. I can’t believe you’re really here.”

One minute I was frozen in place, and the next, I was all reaction. I went into his open arms without another thought of what our future held. Vaguely, I was aware of Jude closing my door and then he kissed me. It was as if he’d never left.

“Let’s go home. I think we have a lot of catching up to do, don’t you?”

I never even hesitated. I simply gathered my things and left with him without a single word to anyone.

Lesson 21: Know when to try harder and when to walk away.

For the rest of the day and night, Jude and I got reacquainted with each other in all the right ways. I asked him later, once we were forced to leave the bedroom to search for food, how he was handling his father's death?

"I'm okay. You know, I never thought I'd possibly care what happened to my father, but I did. Being with him in California made me realize I did still love him. I think we got closer before he died. That's a good thing, right?"

"I'd say that's a great thing."

"Yeah, that's a great thing." He hesitated for a moment then asked the question I'd known was coming, "So are you going to tell me what's going on with you?"

I turned away, pretending to be totally engrossed in what was going on in our fridge. "What do you mean?"

"Don't even try, Paige." Jude closed the fridge and turned me to face him once more. "You don't look well at all. Are you still sick? You've had that cold for weeks now. Have you seen a doctor yet?"

How to answer that without giving away, all of my fears and uncertainties...

"No, I haven't. But I am better... Really, Jude," I added to the skeptical look he gave me. "It's the cold weather. It's taking me longer to get over it. I'm fine. I'll be okay now that you're home."

He didn't buy my story, not that I could blame him. It sounded pretty lame.

For the next few weeks, things seemed to be slowly getting back to normal in my world. While I still felt sick, I'd gotten better at hiding it.

Life for me couldn't have been happier until the next event came my way which brought me right back to face all of my uncertainties.

Jude had been telling me about the troubles the London branch had been struggling with for some time. It had begun lagging behind financially, starting around the same time Jude returned to the states to take over for his father.

The person who replaced Jude had since left the company entirely, but not before making some very bad decisions which cost the company dearly. Things had been slowly reaching the critical stage since his father's illness, but Jude had managed to postpone making any decision about the office until now.

Since returning from California, I'd noticed a subtle change in him. He seemed more driven than ever. Jude believed it was possible to make up for all the past mistakes between himself and father by making the business as successful as his father had originally.

One night, when we were having a quiet dinner together, he told what his plans were for the future. He would be traveling back and forth to London indefinitely.

"Business has gotten so bad it will either have to turn around immediately or it will have to be gone."

I listened while Jude tell me about his plans for the company until he mentioned he would be leaving me again.

"You're leaving? But you just got back." I was in shock and because of it, everything I said sounded accusatory. I think it was at this point that he actually saw me for the first time.

"Tomorrow. But I'll be back by the end of the week, Paige. It's not like before. I'm not going to be gone for long periods of time. I'm sorry, but it has to be this way."

"But I hoped..."

"This is terrible timing, I know, but I have to go. This is what I do. The company was my father's life work. Now, it's mine. There are people

who depend on that branch to make a living. I have to help get it back on track again, if possible. I have to go, Paige.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“I told you, until the end of the week.” He sounded so cold.

“No, I mean how long with you have to go back and forth to London?” I wasn’t sure why I asked him that of all things. I think I was simply grasping at anything to cover my unhappiness.

Jude struggled to control his frustration with me. Suddenly, I realized this wasn’t my fantasy anymore. This was just another human. And I was on my way out.

In my mind, I’d remembered the promise I’d made to myself when I’d first moved in with Jude. I knew the time had come for me to consider my future without him.

“Does it matter? However long it takes. Paige, please try and understand.” He took my hand and I willed myself not show him how much those words hurt. I would not crack in front of this very human guy.

“No, you’re right of course. You have to go. It’s what you do.”

His expression hardened at those words, but I no longer cared. I had begun making my own plans for the future.

For the first time since the night we met, neither of us wanted to make love that night. We lay on separate sides of the bed, faking sleep.

The following morning I was up long before Jude. I actually arrived in the office before most of my co-workers. And my first stop was Dani’s office.

“Hi,” I peeked around the door to see that she was already hard at work.

“Hi, yourself. What are you doing here this early?” Dani began before getting a good look at me. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing...no, that’s not true. Everything is wrong.” I told her about Jude’s latest venture and waited for Dani to tell me what she thought.

“What do *you* want to do, Paige?” she asked instead.

“Oh, I want things to be the way they were before—in the beginning. Can you make that happen?” I smiled at Dani’s pained expression. “It’s okay. It’s time for me to take some very good advice someone close to me once gave me. I need to decide what I want for a change. Starting with my health. You were right, Dani. I’ve been neglecting myself for a long time. Do you still have the name of your doctor handy? I think it’s time I saw someone.”

“Oh thank God. I almost envisioned having to take you to the emergency room one day soon when you dropped at my feet.”

Dani wrote the name and number of her doctor on a piece of paper and handed it to me. “You’ll like Margaret. She’s very easy to talk to. What happens now?”

“I don’t know. Jude will be leaving tonight so I’m on my own again for a while.”

“If you want, you can come always stay with us?” Dani added tentatively. “You know we have that guest bedroom. It’s a shame we let your old apartment go back, isn’t it. But I don’t want you to be alone, Paige. I worry about you spending too much by yourself.”

“I know and I appreciate that. Who knows, I may take you up on that some day soon.”

I didn’t hear from Jude again until later in the day. He called from the office right before he was getting ready to leave for London.

“Paige, I’m sorry. I know this is all coming as a shock to you, especially after me being gone all that time with my father. But please try to understand. I have to do this.”

“I do understand. Jude. It’s just...hard.”

“I know. It’s hard for me, too. But I promise it won’t be like this forever.”

“Yes, I know. Will I see you again before you leave?”

“I’m leaving in an hour. I’ll stop by your office on my way out, if that’s okay?”

I wanted to tell him no, but I wasn’t that strong.

When Jude arrived at my office a little while later, I hated that we had to part in such a public way.

"I hate this," I told him, brushing away my tears.

"I know, baby. I do too. I hate that I'm hurting you," he whispered softly, holding me closer. "I promise, it won't be for long."

I desperately wanted to believe that promise, but for the life of me, I didn't.

With Jude, it would always be something else. I would never be more than an afterthought in his life. Just the woman he slept with. I'd been second in my parents world for most of my life and it had hurt no matter how much I'd tried to deny it. Now I'd become second in Jude's as well.

For me, second place wasn't enough anymore.

* * *

As much as I missed Jude, I was almost thankful he wasn't around when I heard the news of my condition from Doctor Margaret Jenkins.

"You're pregnant."

I was crushed. I couldn't be pregnant. People didn't become pregnant for the first time at forty, did they? I didn't even know if I had a future with Jude anymore. I couldn't be having his child.

"This wasn't planned?" she prompted quietly. "You know you do have options. There's still have time to decide."

Margaret was talking about abortion, but as I considered this, all I wanted to do was cry. I couldn't abort my child, no matter how convenient it might be for me. I mean, I *was* forty years old. How many chances at having a baby were there left to me in this world?

"What about my age, Margaret?"

"There are some risks of course, but you're healthy. I don't foresee any problems. Let's take each day as it comes, and try not to worry, no matter what you decide to do."

I left the doctor's office, but I couldn't go back to work. I called Ralph and told him I wasn't feeling well.

I spend the rest of the day crying and eating loads of chocolate.

Jude had told me how he felt about kids. My choices were simple. I could either chose him and be with him until there wasn't anything left between us, or I could choose my child.

In the end, I knew there was only one choice for me, really. I'd choose my baby. Like it or not, I let go of what I believed was the love of my life to keep my child.

But even knowing what lay ahead for us, I still wasn't ready to leave him just yet.

When Jude came home that weekend, we spent the time in a rush trying to catch up with each other's lives.

I could have won an Academy Award for my performance as a woman without a care in the world. Although from some of the looks Jude gave me, I guessed he wasn't buying my act. He seemed resigned to accepting I had secrets I wasn't sharing with him. And in the end, I think he was happy being with me for however long we had together.

He left again on Monday morning and I finally relaxed again.

I lost myself in work, which was the one thing in my life that seemed to be flourishing, while each night I thought about my future.

How fair was it to keep my pregnancy secret from Jude? What rights did he have in this decision? I believed if I told him about the baby, he would want me to have an abortion. I couldn't accept that.

And so I did the next best thing. I pushed him away. I picked arguments over stupid things, certain it would drive an even bigger wedge between us.

My days with him were numbered. My little plan to drive him away seemed to be working quite nicely. Jude was barely speaking to me anymore.

The days he was in New York, he worked late into the night to avoid another argument with me. When he came home, he made love to me

still, but there was still so much anger between us that the frustration far outweighed the passion.

By the time he left again, I knew that I couldn't go on with things the way they were. I spent all of my time either crying or being angry at Jude.

I loved him. I didn't want our relationship to end this way.

Everyone around us knew what was coming, but no one knew how to help me through it. And lately, Jude chose to spend more time in London than ever before. I'm sure preferring the company of strangers to mine.

After another frustrating weekend spent arguing and avoiding each other, I believed I received an answer to all my prayers. The next life-changing event to take place in my life.

It was as if a light clicked on inside my head. *This is it. This is what you've been waiting for.*

It was a response to the resume I'd submitted a few years ago at the elementary school in Vermont. They wanted to meet with me for an interview. There had been an unexpected opening for a first grade teaching position. My resume fit all their requirements.

I almost shouted aloud when I saw the email. I reread it several times to make sure I'd actually read it correctly.

When I called the number, I spoke to a sweet woman by the name of Agnes Miller who arranged some time for us to talk the following morning.

I was so excited I barely managed to get through the rest of the day. I ignored all calls from Jude and waited until I got to the apartment to leave Ralph a message letting him know I wouldn't be in the office the following day.

Instead of hanging around an empty apartment, I decided to pack a bag and head for Vermont right away. I'd be fresh for my interview, fresh instead of tired from driving half the morning.

I called ahead and booked one of the little cabins Dani and I had shared once before, then grabbed Sammy and we were off for our trip.

I'd almost reached the Stormyville city limits when Jude called my cell phone. I ignored his call entirely. He left a message but I deleted it without listening to it. I couldn't hear his voice and not want to call him back.

By the time I reached the cabin, it was late, and I was worn out. The following morning I overslept and had to rush to make it to my appointment on time.

By the time I walked into Agnes Miller's office, my frustration had reached a new record. The nausea that followed me most days had kicked into overdrive on this particular morning.

Agnes looked to be somewhere in her late fifties, with short, wiry gray hair and little half glasses that always seemed to ride low on her nose.

I knew the second I met her that we were going to be friends right from the start.

"Come in, Miss Wilder, please—have a seat."

I took the hand she extended to me. At this point she noticed I was shivering.

"Oh my goodness, your hands are like ice cubes! Are you cold, dear?" Agnes turned the thermostat up another notch.

"Thank you. It seems I'm always cold lately. I don't know why that is."

"Well folks today don't take care of themselves like they should, and my goodness, you're as skinny as a rail. And you don't look well, child. Are you okay?"

At the gentle concern in Agnes, I did what most professionals will tell you is the kiss of death as far as good interview skills go. I started to cry. I couldn't help it. I'd been crying for weeks now, usually about the smallest of things. Why should Agnes' concern be any different?

"Oh what's wrong? What did I say?" She handed me a tissue, and I buried my face in it while trying to control myself enough to at least leave the room gracefully.

"Nothing—its not you. It's me. I've made such a mess of things."

Lesson 22: The only person you have the power to change is you.

I don't know if it was because of my tears, or because she felt sorry for me. Or maybe it was as simple as I'd spilled the beans about everything going on in my life, including the fact that I was pregnant, but when I finally finished jabbering, I felt at least somewhat more resolved about my future without Jude.

"Okay, dear, now let's think about this. Are you sure the boy doesn't want to marry you?" I couldn't keep from laughing at her old-fashioned way of referring to Jude. Calling him a boy was almost comical.

"Agnes, trust me, I'm positive. There's no way he's going to want this baby, and I can't give my child up. So where does that leave us? What else can I do? You think I'm doing the right thing, don't you?"

Yes, I actually asked her this. A total stranger, who probably considered any type of relationship outside of marriage unspeakable.

But Agnes Miller didn't have any judgment for me. She simply took my hand and held on tight.

"Why, of course you're doing the right thing! This is your child we're talking about. Paige, you have to do what you can live with in situations like these. Not what someone else wants you to do. You are the one who will have to live with this decision for the rest of your life. Men get off easy in these things. They can walk away. We women can't. We rely on our emotions too much."

"Yes, but I never believed it was going to be this hard. I mean, I love him, and I don't understand why he doesn't feel the same way about me. Jude doesn't want any of those things from me. And I'm not sure I'm

strong enough to do this on my own. Raising a child takes a lot of work, doesn't it?"

It occurred to me I didn't even know if Agnes had any children of her own.

"Oh my yes. It sure does, dear. I've got two of my own I just got through college. Trust me, if one of my daughters was in the same position as you, I'd want them to follow their heart."

"Thank you, Agnes. I'm sorry—I can't believe I told you all of this. I do want the job though, if you still want me?"

"Of course I want you. We happen to have an excellent doctor in Stormyville. He was there for the birth of both of mine. He'll do right by you. And there are plenty of reasonable places to live. Maybe this is the answer to your troubles. In fact, this might actually be the perfect place for you."

"You might be right. And thank you, Agnes. I can't thank you enough. When would you like me to start?"

"Well, now, Miss Henderson will be retiring in another week. It would be nice to have you begin as soon as possible. When can you start?"

As I thought about what lay ahead for me in New York, I knew the truth. I was at the point in my life where I could pick up and move on. I needed change. I didn't have my name on a lease anywhere. There was nothing holding me to New York any longer. I was free to go at any time.

"Day after tomorrow?"

"That would be wonderful, but what about your lovely job in New York?"

"The truth is I've been looking for a change for a while now. If I hadn't met Jude when I did, I would probably have moved on a long time ago. This is the right time for me."

"Then it's settled. I'll introduce you to Miss Henderson now, and you two can talk a little about the job."

Mary Henderson was seventy years old, tall, thin with obviously dyed jet-black hair. My first impression of her was she scared me to death. But it was easy to see that her kids loved her.

I sat in with her during her classes that morning. When the kids took their lunch break, Mary and I had a chance to talk.

"I can see the kids love you, Mary. What's your secret?"

"No secret...it's simple enough. Don't let them see that you're afraid of them. Don't worry, you can learn that in time," she told me when she saw my uncertainty.

"It's hard keeping kids this age attentive for any length of time. They constantly want to wander around the room or talk. You have to keep it interesting for them while helping them learn something at the same time."

"You must be looking forward to your retirement?" I asked as we made our way through the lunch line.

The selection of food took me back to my own elementary days. Apparently, nothing much had changed.

"No, I'm not," she told me in a commanding tone that had made me want to do whatever she asked of me. "I have no family of my own. I never married, there's just my cat and me. In fact, if they weren't making me retire, I'd probably die teaching in Stormyville."

"They're making you retire? How can they do that?" I couldn't believe what she'd just said.

"Apparently, it's rather simple. Some school policy from a hundred years ago. I guess they're afraid I'll lose my mind and do something embarrassing."

"That's awful, Mary. What will you do?"

"Can't say, because I don't know. I thought about doing some private tutoring to keep my hand in things and my mind going strong. You see, it's not as if I need the money, really. I've done okay on my own. But I love working with the kids."

"Oh Mary, I'm sorry. I feel terrible I'm the one taking your job."

“Well, if it weren’t you, it would be someone else. Don’t feel bad. And don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine. I always am. I’ll find something to keep me busy. You make sure you take care of my kids for me. And don’t hesitate to call if you need my help.”

When I left Vermont late that afternoon, I felt slightly more settled about my future. But I still didn’t know how to face Jude, or Dani, or any of my other friends and tell them what I’d planned.

When I reached the apartment, much to my surprise and anxiety I found Jude waiting for me.

“Where have you been all day? I’ve been worried sick about you. I tried reaching you by phone all day. Ralph told me you took the day off, and Dani didn’t have a clue where you’d disappeared. Why weren’t you answering your phone? Where did you go, Paige? Are you seeing someone else?”

I couldn’t believe he actually asked me that. I wanted to cry and was close enough so that I chose to ignore Jude entirely. I started for our bedroom when he caught me.

“Are you, Paige? Is that what’s been wrong with you lately? Tell me!” he asked more frustrated than ever by my silence.

His fingers circled my arms, bringing me closer to him, was the ending of my resolve.

I would have given anything to tell him yes, because I wanted to see Jude hurt. But part of me wondered if would even matter to him. Would I simply find that same cold, distant, familiar look I’d grown to hate?

I gave into my tears, and he let go of his anger.

Jude gathered me close. “Paige, I’m sorry. I’m sorry. It’s just you haven’t been yourself lately and I don’t know what’s wrong. I can’t seem to reach you anymore.”

I never answered that question or any of the others that went unasked in Jude’s gaze. I let him make love to me throughout the long night.

I wanted to pretend all the tenderness in his touch was real. That Jude might actually feel something close to the love I felt for him.

When I awoke that morning, Jude had left already.

I dressed for work then packed the few possessions I had at Jude's place, loaded them in my car and reserved the small cabin in Vermont indefinitely.

I wanted to embrace my new life as single mother. I just had to find the strength to let go of the old one first. Unfortunately, I wasn't strong enough to face Jude in person.

Instead, I left Jude a note at the apartment explaining why I believed it was best if we never saw each other again. It was the hardest thing I'd ever done putting those words on paper.

When I walked into the office that morning, I was a woman with one mission in mind. I would finish all of my open projects and turn in my resignation.

But telling Dani about my plans was harder than I'd imagined.

"Hi." I said once I'd found her seated at her desk, scanning through her emails.

I'd clearly surprised her. The minute she saw my expression, she knew what was coming next.

"You're leaving, aren't you?"

I had to smile at how well my friend truly knew me. But I wasn't surprised. I'd been giving away little hints of what was to come for a long time now.

I found myself wondering if this was why I found it hard to be with Jude any longer. Shouldn't the man of my dreams have seen this coming as well?

"Yes," I said quietly.

"When?" She struggled to say the word.

"Today. I know I'm not giving you much time, but quite honestly, Dani, there are plenty of qualified folks around who can take over for me, including Ralph. He knows everything about this place and my job. He's been more qualified for the position than me for quite a while now."

"Tell me why?" she asked, ignoring the Ralph comment for the moment.

"It's not that hard to understand, is it? I can't do *this* any more, Dani. And yes, I know I'm taking the easy way out instead of facing my problems with Jude, but I can't do it. I love him but there's no future for us...and I'm pregnant."

I watched her expression change to happiness for a moment, before the truth hit home.

"You aren't going to tell him about it, are you?"

"No, he wouldn't want to know. Jude doesn't want children. It's best this way really."

"Oh Paige, are you sure? I don't know..."

"I'm positive, Dani."

"Have you told him you're leaving?"

"No, and I don't think I can. At least I can't face him again and do it. I'm taking the easy way out there as well. I left Jude a note at the apartment. I'll send him a message later today."

"Paige, you need to talk to him."

"Maybe, but it wouldn't change things."

I spent the next half-hour going over everything about my new job with her, as well as explaining all the things that would still need to be handled when I left.

"What about Harry and Ralph?" she asked when I'd finished. "What are you going to tell them?"

"I can't face Harry right now, either. I'll call him once I'm settled in. But I'll have to tell Ralph. I owe him that much. I'll wait until the end of the day."

"Paige, why don't you let Mark and I help you with the move?"

"There's nothing to help with, really. I don't have all that much stuff, after all. And I packed this morning. I'm all set. I just need to get Sam and I'm on my way. But you'll come see me, won't you? Both you and Mark?"

“Oh course we will. God, I’m going to miss you, kiddo.”

Lesson 23: When starting over in life, have a firm grip on where you're heading and a clear idea of what brought you there.

For the rest of the day, I hid in my office crying. By the end of it, Ralph came looking for me.

"I wondered what happened to you today, Miss Texas. You've been hiding out too long..." When Ralph spotted the tears, he didn't know what to say for a moment. "What is it?" he asked at last.

"Sit down, Ralph. I have something I need to tell you."

He did as I asked, because I think he was too stunned to do anything else.

"Ralph, I'm quitting Martin. I've talked to Dani about this already. She knows. Today is my last day."

"What? Why?"

"Because its time. It's past time, actually. This job was never supposed to be permanent. I only started working at Martin to pay the bills until something I wanted to do came along. I guess it's been easy to get caught up in the day-to-day things of life and forget about what I wanted to do."

"Oh, don't give me that, Miss Texas. You can pretty it up any way you choose, but the real reason why you're leaving is that man. Isn't it?"

"No... Well maybe a little. Ralph, please try and understand. It would be too difficult to have to face him every single day after our break up. You can understand, can't you? And you know I've wanted to go back to

teaching for a long time now.” I told him a little about my new job, but I don’t think Ralph believed all of my fake enthusiasm.

“Are you sure you know what the ending is to this little love affair, Miss Texas? Maybe you’re not giving the guy enough credit.”

“Yes, trust me, Ralph—I do. Nothing can change what is bound to happen. It’s not meant to be for us. I don’t want to talk about Jude anymore. I’ve wasted far too much time talking and thinking about him in the past. I just wanted you to know the reasons.”

“Damn, girlfriend, I’m going miss you like crazy.” He got to his feet and gave me a hug that held more emotion than Ralph normally showed.

“That goes double for me. But you have my cell phone number. Will you give me a call sometime? And as soon as I get my new phone number, I’ll give it to you. I want you to promise you’ll come see me, Ralph. That’s the only way I can do this. Knowing that you’re not angry with me?”

“Vermont, huh?” He mulled the word with fake indifference. “Well, I haven’t been away from New York City in years so who knows? Maybe its time to get away from this crazy place for a little while? I take it you don’t want you know who knowing where you’ve gone?”

I shook my head, grateful Ralph understood.

“Have you told the old boyfriend yet?”

“No. I’m going to send him a note later. I’m not ready to face Harry with this yet. I don’t know how he’ll react, and I think I’ve had enough emotion for one lifetime right now.”

“Yeah, well I know you like him, hon, but honestly that’s more than he deserves. Whatever you do, don’t let him talk his way back into your life. You can raise that baby alone without a man in your life. You’re a strong woman, Paige. And if you need a man, you can call me anytime.”

I laughed at the image of Ralph changing diapers.

“How did you know about the baby?”

“Please! You think I’m blind? I’ve known for a while. I’m surprised you know who is too damn ignorant to guess the truth.”

“Yeah, well, I guess he’s not as in touch with the real world as you and I.”

“I mean it, Miss Texas. You need me you call me. You got that?”

As hard as it was to leave Martin Publishing that day, I knew I had some good friends there, who would stick by me and support my decisions no matter what the future had in store for me and my child.

I promised myself I wouldn’t look back with regrets. This was another chapter in life to close. Like the time I’d left Sweetwater, and Dwight behind. In fact, this was a new beginning. Anything might happen.

I walked away from Martin Publishing and New York, without another look back. Embracing my future and my new career with as much optimism as I could muster, being a forty-year-old, single pregnant woman starting over again. Alone.

* * *

I was almost to Stormyville when my old life caught found me again. I recognized Jude’s cell number immediately. I chose to ignore it.

I’d deliberately waited until I’d reached the cabin to send him the email explaining why I’d disappeared.

Much to my surprise, I found it was much easier talking to Harry. Before I left New York, I’d sent Harry the email I’d composed earlier. I wasn’t at all surprised when he called me later that night.

“You’re quitting? You can’t quit, Paige. Martin Publishing has been your life.”

“Harry, I don’t want to talk about this right now. It’s done, and you’re wrong. Martin isn’t my life. It was never meant to be permanent. I told you that. I’ve wanted to go back into teaching for a long time now, remember?”

“Stop it, Paige. You know if it weren’t for Jude Martin you’d still be working at Martin.”

“That’s probably true, but I’d also be in the same old rut. Look, Harry, I realize how you feel about Jude, and I know I’ve handled things badly, but I can’t talk about this anymore right now. I have to go. I’ll call you in a few days and we’ll talk, I promise. I’m sorry, Harry.”

I didn’t give him the opportunity to say anything more. I simply flipped the phone shut, put the ringer on mute and shoved it back inside my purse. For tonight, the past could stay in the past.

When I reached the tiny rental cabin I was exhausted from driving for hours, and sick again from worry and regrets.

But there was one last thing left to do before Sam and I collapsed into bed. And I had to do it before I lost my nerve.

I powered up my laptop and typed Jude a note. I kept it as simple as possible to let him know it was over between us and that I’d left a more detailed note at the apartment explaining my feelings. I asked him not to call me again.

Two minutes after I’d sent the email, my cell phone was vibrating. I knew it would be Jude.

When he couldn’t reach me by phone, he sent an urgent email asking me to wait until he got back to the apartment that night before making any decision. Jude told me he needed to see me. He couldn’t let it end this way.

I shut the laptop off without finishing his note. I had to let go of any hope I still clung to with Jude. Otherwise, I’d never be able to pick up the pieces of my life and move on.

And I needed to move on for myself as well as for my child.

* * *

As hard as it was to be thrust into a new job, it also became a welcome distraction. It gave me few opportunities to think about Jude during those first few days.

Mary pretty much turned the class over to me completely after my first day, which was scary enough, even with her still there making sure I didn't make too many foolish rookie mistakes.

I think I was even happy a little. At least, as happy as any human can be with a broken heart.

I threw myself into getting to know each of my students, who were wonderfully sweet and inspiring.

I spent my evenings with Sammy, preparing lesson plans for the following day and pretty much ignoring my computer and my cell phone entirely.

Oh, I'd checked both after the first night, only to find several heartbreaking messages from Jude that made me want to run back to New York and into his arms once more.

While it might be what my heart wanted, and I'm sure he'd welcome me back with open arms, how long would it last? How long before we were right back to that same stalemate as before?

We didn't want the same things from life. I had to accept that. In time, Jude would as well. The only way I could remain strong and not give in to my need for him was by severing all ties. I couldn't talk to Jude and not want to be with him.

I'd given the number at the cabin only to Dani and Ralph. After the first endless day alone, I couldn't help but call Dani and asked her what was happening back in New York.

"You are not going to believe the way that guy of yours is acting. He got me out of bed the day you left—at one in the morning, I might add—banging on my door. He demanded to know where you'd gone off to, and when that didn't work, the poor man fell apart. Right there, in front of Mark and me. He actually cried, Paige. It was hard to watch. Afterward, Jude and Mark made this instant connection. Mark told me later, he'd felt the same way when he learned I was gone. Paige, I have to tell you, I think you're way wrong about Jude. He's crazy about you. You need to talk to him and sort this whole mess out."

“No. Dani, I can’t! I have to do it this way, otherwise, I’ll be right back there with him, and we’ll end up hating each other in the end. You can’t change people, Dani. You said as much yourself. Nothing I could do, or say, will ever change Jude.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t think he’s going to give up easily, Paige. I’ve talked to him more over the past few days than ever. Even Ralph said the same thing. In fact, I think Jude’s even spoken to Harry about you, if you can believe that.”

“You didn’t tell him anything, did you? He doesn’t know where to find me or about the baby?”

“No, of course I didn’t. But Paige, I have to go with my instincts on this one. And they’re telling me you’re wrong about Jude.”

As much as I wanted to believe Dani, in my heart I knew she was mistaken. I still remembered what Jude told me in the beginning. He wouldn’t want to know that I loved him, certainly not that I was pregnant with his child.

After a few more days passed, I finally worked up the courage to call my mother and tell her what I’d done.

“Paige, your father and I have been worried to death about you. Jude called looking for you. He told us you’d broken it off with him. I guess he thought you might have come home. I told him we haven’t heard anything from you, but I promised that I’d let him know when we did. Honey, why didn’t you call us? I must have tried your cell phone a dozen times or more. Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m okay. I’m sorry I didn’t call you sooner. It’s just everything has been crazy around here, and my life is such a mess right now. But I’m finally doing what I always wanted to do again, Mom. I’m teaching in a small town in Vermont.”

“But I thought you were happy living in New York and working for the publishing house? What happened.”

“Mom, that was only supposed to be temporary in the first place. You know I’ve always wanted to go back to teaching eventually. I’ve finally gotten the opportunity, and, I love it. The kids are great. It’s great.”

I rattled on for over an hour telling my mother all about my new job and the small town I now called home, all the while trying to deny her words had hit a tender spot with me.

Was my mother right? Had I outgrown this childhood dream of being a teacher and was simply using it as a convenient excuse to run away from my problems?

I couldn't truly answer the question. That alone had me feeling more confused than ever.

Lesson 24: Pray—there is immeasurable strength in it.

In the past, I'd never been the kind of woman grounded in any spiritual faith.

Growing up in Sweetwater, we were surrounded by churches. Texas being part of the Bible belt and all.

As a child, my parents and I attended church regularly. Right until the time I left home for good. Mom and Dad still went to service every single time the doors were open. But until now, when I was faced with trying to overcome what I couldn't seem to get beyond, I hadn't been inside a church in years.

In the small town that I now called home there were five churches within a stone's throw of one another.

One Sunday morning, I found myself in the church, praying for the strength to overcome this pain inside of me I couldn't put in the past.

The members there met me with open arms. And I found myself remembering all those past times in my life, when going to church had seemed almost like part of my life.

In a small community such as Stormyville, news spreads fast. My arrival in town had apparently created quite a stir. Everyone wanted to meet the newest addition to the community.

Several of the parents I'd met at school attended the church. Still others stopped by to introduce themselves and to welcome me into the community. I'd almost forgotten how tight-knit a small town could be.

I wasn't sure how many folks knew about my pregnancy, but I hadn't tried to hide from anyone.

When I left the church that Sunday, for the first time since leaving Jude I was happy. That afternoon, with some sense of peace, I thought I had the strength to finally read Jude's emails.

But I barely managed to get through the first heartbreaking one before I deleted the rest without reading them. I couldn't read them and not miss him terribly.

For days after I'd arrived in Stormyville, I kept looking back over my shoulder expecting Jude to come after me.

Part of me was tremendously saddened that he hadn't tried to call, or come after me, since those first few times. He'd sounded upset in those notes. But wasn't the fact that he hadn't tried to find me speaking the truth?

Maybe Jude had let me go just as he believed I'd wanted.

I called Dani that afternoon on a fishing expedition for answers. She told me she hadn't seen Jude since the first week.

After another week of silence, my sadness grew to the point of depression. I missed Jude terribly and hated him all in the same breath.

I spent my evenings talking over my problems with Sammy.

By the end of another long school week, all I wanted to do was go back home to my tiny cabin, back to my best little friend, and collapse into bed.

Friday night at the local market in Stormyville was the busiest time of the week. Everyone in town was preparing for the first snowstorm of the year. By the time I got home, it was pitch dark.

My little rental cabin was located on the outskirts of town. Very secluded, but this suited me to a tee. I wanted to be alone in my misery.

I took Sammy for a little walk, feeling even more tired and depressed.

Everywhere I looked, people were in love. But the love of my life was Sammy.

At Agnes' recommendation, I made an appointment with her nice doctor and was trying to do my part, by eating all the right foods.

But every now and again, I splurged. Tonight was one of those times. I'd brought home a pizza from the Italian restaurant in town. It was cold by the time I ate it but it was still wonderful.

By eight o'clock, I was close to falling asleep in front of the TV. I'm sure I was a pitiful sight to see. Dressed in pajama bottoms and a gray sweatshirt to match my mood. I couldn't have looked less appealing had I wore combat boots.

You can imagine my surprise, as well as my annoyance, when at almost ten o'clock, Sammy's barking woke me from my dozing. It took me a few minutes to realize what Sammy was actually barking at. Someone was knocking rather loudly at my door.

I imagined all sorts of possible visitors. None of which were welcome.

At this point, I'd pretty much decided against opening the door. When the doorknob turned, I froze. I looked around my tiny living room in a panic searching for something that might be used as a weapon, as the door started to open very slowly.

I couldn't move. I stood frozen in place, waiting for my fate, imagining all sorts of untimely ending. When the door opened a little wider, Jude stepped inside.

At this point, I almost fainted right there from relief that it wasn't a burglar and dread that it was the one person I wanted to see me this way.

Faced with seeing Jude again when I was least prepared for him, I almost wished it had been the burglar.

"What...what are you doing?" I managed somehow. I didn't come across sounding like the woman I wanted him to see me as. Someone in control. Sure of her future. Over him.

As I glanced at my gray pajamas, I realized I looked like hell. The way I sounded at this point was the least of my worries.

"What are you doing here, Jude?" I repeated more angry this time.

"Do you always leave you door unlocked? Or were you expecting someone? Other than me, that is? You obviously weren't expecting me." His sexy voice sounded almost solemn. It took me back to a past I'd

thought I could leave behind. And yet the Jude standing in my tiny cabin looked so different than the man I'd left behind in New York. I could almost swear he'd lost weight and the shadows beneath those beautiful eyes reflected many sleepless hours.

I actually took a step away from him. Jude saw this little move and clearly didn't like it.

"You shouldn't have come. It's late. I... You shouldn't be here, Jude."

"How else am I supposed to get you to talk to me, Paige? You won't return my calls. You don't answer my emails. You disappeared into thin air. What was I supposed to do?"

"I can't do this, Jude. I explained everything in the note."

He took another step closer and stopped when I stepped away once more. Then Sammy suddenly recognized the man who'd been a part of his life for more than a year. He ran to Jude with his little tail wagging.

I'd never felt this betrayed before.

"Sammy, its good to see someone remembers me fondly. Apparently, you're the only one."

The sound of the man I'd dreamed about through all those lonely nights was more than I could let myself to accept from him.

"Jude, there's nothing we have to say to each other. It's over. Now, please just leave."

"That's it? No explanation, no listening to what I have to say? Just get out?"

"There's nothing to explain," I yelled, sending Sammy scurrying from the room.

"Now you've done it." Jude gave me that damn smile of his. Apparently, nothing I'd said had gotten through.

"How did you find me? Did Dani..."

"No, Dani was silent, along with Ralph and you're old boyfriend. No one's talking."

"Then how did you find me?" In spite of my need to get rid of him, I couldn't stop the questions from flying out of my mouth. I'm sure Jude spotted all of the holes in my story the second I asked that question.

"Well, you don't believe this, but I do listen when you talk, Paige. I remember you telling me once about the time you and Dani came here for vacation. I also remembered that Dani came here when she and Mark were having problems. I even remembered the name of the cabins you and she stayed. I saw how much you loved this place from the way you talked, sweetheart. I admit, it took me a while to figure it all out, but I blame that on the fact I was torn apart by your leaving me the way that you did. Once I started thinking somewhat more clearly, I knew I would find you here."

"Well, you've wasted your time, Jude. I don't want to talk to you. My life is here. I'm not going back to New York."

"You won't even talk to me?"

"No, there's nothing left to say. It's over. Now if you don't mind, it's late."

I hoped he would leave me alone before I fell apart completely and begged him not to go. But Jude wasn't leaving so easily.

"Is that how you feel, Paige?"

Something in his tone gave it away. Jude was giving up on me. I wanted to cry.

"Yes."

"I can't change your mind, can I?"

"No. Please don't try. Just leave."

"Paige, it's late, and the weather is horrible. I realize you want me to leave, but you can't send me back in that storm. I almost lost it a couple of times driving up the road."

Until that moment, I'd forgotten all about the storm raging outside. The wind slapped the trees against the roof of the cabin, driving what sounded like ice hard against the door and windows.

And I felt my resolve weakening.

“I’m not sleeping with you, Jude.”

“No, I can see that. But can I at least use your couch?”

I wanted to tell him no. I wanted to send him into the stormy night without another thought. Unfortunately, I couldn’t do either of those things. I still loved this man after all. How could I let him go to his death?

“Oh, do whatever you want...” I threw up my hands and marched from the room. I found a blanket and pillow and tossed them at him, leaving him laughing at my anger before I slammed my bedroom door.

When I glanced at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, I was shocked. I looked dreadful. I was angry and it showed, but worse than my anger, or the fact that my hair was going in several different directions, was my pale complexion. My eyes appeared huge. The poor man was probably thanking his lucky stars he’d gotten out of this thing before I turned into Satan.

I forced myself to get ready for bed, brushing my teeth and scrubbing my face with more enthusiasm than was necessary.

But in my small twin bed, I found I couldn’t think about sleep. The man I’d been missing for weeks was with me, and I couldn’t let him back into my life.

I didn’t want to be his girlfriend anymore. I wanted, no I needed, more from Jude.

I’d started crying again. I buried my face in my pillow, not wanting Jude to hear my tears. I cried and cried until somewhere through all of my heartache, I finally found peace in sleep.

Lesson 25: Remember that not getting what you want is sometimes a stroke of good luck.

Somewhere in the middle of the night, my fantasy joined me in my new reality. His hands slid around my body, pulling me back against him.

“God, you feel good,” He whispered close to my ear.

“No, Jude.” But for the life of me those words sounded like an invitation.

“I’ve been going out of my mind wanting you,” he whispered while his hand slipped beneath the band of my pajama bottoms, touching my stomach. For a moment, I froze. Would he feel the change in me?

I leaned against him and couldn’t stop the moan that escaped as his fingers slipped further, touching my moist center and stroking gently.

“God, you feel good,” he repeated.

I’d never heard him feel so shaken. His other hand moved beneath my top to stroke my breast.

“Jude,” I whispered, my breath catching in my throat as I felt his fingers slide inside my body. I pressed closer and felt his arousal against my bottom.

“I’ve wanted this since the last time. I need you, Paige. I know you want this too.”

What was the point in denying it or myself any longer? I’d wanted him from the beginning.

“Yes. Yes, I want you Jude. I want you so much.”

He turned me in his arms and his lips took mine. Jude kissed like none other. His lips were gentle but demanding. He parted mine, his tongue tasting me. I met him touch for touch. His lips left mine to trail hot kisses across my cheek to my throat. My head rolled back and Jude's lips ravaged my throat.

"I've missed you so much." The words slipped into the heated space between us. His fingers slid beneath the hem of my top and lifted it over my head.

Our gazes locked. He looked shaken.

"What is it?"

"I just want to look at you. Before we get too carried away, just let me look at you."

It became impossible to hold his gaze when he looked at me with so much passion.

I drew in a sharp breath as his fingers trailed across my fuller breast to the sensitive skin beneath. I couldn't control my shudder.

"Your eyes are sexy. When I touch you like this, they are so damn sexy. You're sexy. I don't know how long I can wait."

I couldn't wait either. I pulled him closer and claimed his mouth. My trembling fingers pushed his pullover over his head.

For a moment, Jude was too surprised by my actions to do more than let me lead the way. My hands stroked over his bare chest to the hard plane of his abdomen before he stopped me.

"Wait. Slow down, baby. If you go any further, I'm not going to be much good to you." Jude pushed me back against the bed. "Lie back and let me look at you. Let me love you, Paige."

He had no idea how much he was asking. I wanted to feel him inside of me. I didn't want to wait any longer. I wasn't sure if I could wait for him to remove the rest of my clothes much less his.

Jude slid the bottoms away from my hips. I shivered in reaction to his touch, the look in his eyes.

I closed my eyes and tried not to think about his lips moving along my stomach. Would he guess the truth?

Jude parted my legs with his body and with one strong thrust he slid inside mine.

For a moment, time stood still. Our gazes locked, our breath driven from our bodies with the initial joining to each other.

I saw him hesitate. He was looking at me as if he'd never seen me before. Jude didn't move. His body was still within mine. He lifted a finger and brushed something from my face in wonderment.

"You're crying?" he asked in amazement. "Did I hurt you?"

I didn't even know why I was crying.

"Please Jude. If you don't make love to me, I think I will melt away into a million little pieces."

He shook his head but began once more to move within me. I moaned deep within my throat as his lips took mine once more. His tongue matching the rhythm of his body moving within mine. Slowly, he thrust deeper, harder. I tilted my hips to meet his thrusts. I felt him groan against my lips and slid harder into me over and over again.

He was close. I was closer. I arched against him as the force of my climax exploded and my muscles tightened around him. With another deep thrust, another ragged groan, he filled me. Jude collapsed on top of me.

"That was intense. No, that was beyond intense. That was amazing. Out of this world. Unbelievable," Jude whispered, short of breath.

Slowly I found my bearings again. The world around us at least stopped spinning enough for me to recognize Jude's body was still encased in mine. I didn't want him to ever leave me again.

He looked at me as if he'd never seen me before. "You're eyes are that color again. I love that color." He kissed me long and slow. I couldn't get enough of tasting him. I felt his body responding again to our closeness. I shivered, my muscles contracting around him as he begin to move again within me once more. It was even better than before. It was one long sensual climax.

He collapsed once more on top of me and I was crying again. Actually crying from emotions I'd never felt before or would again with another man.

"That's never happened before," he whispered against my throat kissing me there. "Has it with you?"

Words just wouldn't come.

Jude rolled over on his back and took me with him, slowly sliding from me before gathering me close.

"I think we'd better play it safe. Otherwise, someone's going to find our dead bodies in a very compromising position in a few days. I can only imagine their reaction."

I didn't speak. I didn't even think I'd be able to form words together at this point.

"Are you okay? You're crying again."

I tried to answer him. Tried to lie, but the tears came harder.

Jude held me close and whispered reassuring words against my ear until I had no more tears left.

"Paige, are you sure I didn't hurt you? Please tell me that I didn't."

"No, I'm okay." I couldn't look at him. I cried even harder.

"It's okay. You don't have to say anything. It was a first me as well." When I buried my face against his chest, he added, "You know, you can call this whatever you want, baby. But we both know this isn't over between us. Not by a long shot."

I didn't answer. I simply let him hold me this one last time. I couldn't tell Jude I needed more from him than sex. I needed what Jude Martin wasn't prepared to give.

I wasn't strong enough to push him away. I might regret that weakness for the rest of my life, but for the moment it didn't matter. I loved this man in my arms.

As I drifted off to sleep again, he whispered against my ear the words that made me hate myself all the more.

"It's not quite as over as you think, is it, Paige?"

When I awoke late the following morning, it was to the smell of fresh coffee and the return of morning sickness. I managed to make it to the bathroom and close the door while trying to be as quiet as possible.

When I finally faced Jude again, I found him in my little kitchen, making breakfast.

“Good morning,” His smile held Jude’s usual confidence. He was sure of me. He believed he had me.

“Get out!” I yelled at him then headed for the door.

“Paige, what are you talking about? You don’t want this to end anymore than I do.”

“Yes, I do. I have to. Now get out.”

“Paige, this is crazy.”

“Maybe, but it’s the way it has to be. Look Jude, I’m fine. I’ll be okay. Don’t worry about me. But I want you to leave.”

“Is this because of New York? You don’t want to go back to New York. I know, I understand. You thought I didn’t take what you said about teaching seriously, but I’m listening now. Tell me what you want.”

“It’s not New York. It’s not teaching. It’s none of those things.”

“Then what is it? Whatever’s wrong we can fix it. Let me stay with you. I’ll move into the cabin if that’s what you want.”

Okay, I had to admit, that got my attention and caused my resolve to weaken for a moment. “You’d do that for me?”

“I’d do anything you want. Please don’t send me away. I love you, Paige. Being away from you made me realize how much I need you in my life. I can’t lose you again. Tell me what’s wrong and I’ll fix it.”

I turned away. God, I wanted to believe in his love but did it even matter anymore?

Slowly I faced Jude with tears in my eyes. “It doesn’t matter, Jude. None of what you’ve just said matter. It isn’t any of those things.”

“Tell me what it is? Surely you owe me that much.”

“I’m pregnant,” I said in a tone surprisingly lacking in emotion. “I’m having a baby—your baby, Jude. And I know how you feel about

children. Babies are messy—I'm messy. I'm sick all of the time. *That's* what it is."

"You're pregnant?" Stunned, he took a step closer. "When were you going to tell me about this, Paige? Or were you?" His eyes narrowed when he realized the truth.

"No, you're right, I wasn't going to tell you. I know how you feel about kids. I didn't want you to feel obligated to me. And yes, I know that's probably wrong, and yes I know I was on the pill, but I'm still pregnant." I forced myself to take a breath. "And that's all that matters now. I won't have an abortion, and I won't give up my child. So where does that leave us, Jude?"

"Did you think I wouldn't want our child? How could you think that of me? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you *told* me you didn't want kids!" I yelled again, mostly because I wasn't so sure about any of my decisions to date. Had I'd somehow made the biggest mistake in my life?

"Paige, I love you." He took another step closer. "How could you think I wouldn't want our child?"

"I don't believe you!" I struggled to say the words through all my tears.

"It's true. I love you. Of course, I want our child. I want to be part of everything involving our child." Another step closer, but this time, I wasn't backing away any longer. I was listening to everything he said.

"You don't believe me now, but give me the chance to prove it and I will. I love you, Paige."

"I *don't* believe you, Jude. You were so distant those last few weeks in New York. You were looking for a way out."

"Yes." His answer wasn't what I wanted to hear. "Yes, I admit I was scared to death. And yes, I used my father's illness and later the trips to London to put distance between us. I guess part of me was hoping I'd piss you off enough to make you leave. But another part, the part that loves you, really wanted to understand what was going on with you. I was distant, but so were you. I love you, Paige. I admit I've made an

awful lot of mistakes in this relationship. But I love you and I want to make it work between us.”

“I don’t believe you.” I took a deep breath and let go of anger. “But I want to.”

“Then let me prove it to you. Give me the chance to prove to you I’m serious. Please, Paige. Give me that chance.”

As I looked into his eyes, I found the beginning of acceptance. I saw something in Jude that had been there all those other times in the past. I’d just been too certain that I knew what our future would be to believe in its existence.

“I want to. But you have to promise me you won’t hurt me. I can’t go through that again.”

“I promise I’ll never do anything to hurt you.” Jude reached my side and took me in his arms.

For the first time I believed him but I remembered all the other obstacles standing in our way.

“But my life is here now. I won’t quit my job.” I expected him to walk out my door with those words.

“Paige, I meant what I said about moving here. I want to be with you. I don’t care where that is.”

“But your job...your life is in New York.”

“My life will be where you are. We’ll work the rest of it out.

“What about Martin Publishing, and the problems in London, and—”

“We can work through those things together. The London office will either make it or it won’t. At this point, it doesn’t matter. And as far as the rest of the business, we’ll work something out. I’ll go into New York a couple of days a week. The rest of the time I can work from here. We can look for a house here...together. Something that will be ours.”

“What about the apartment and the house in the Hamptons?”

“Those are only details, Paige. Stop worrying. You are the only thing that matters to me. We’ll solve the rest of it as we go along.”

For once, I stopped worrying and simply held on tight, finally trusting that no matter what happened Jude wouldn't let me down again.

"You know, nothing says we can't start looking for a house today. Maybe I can even talk you into coming back to New York with me to get some things. I think I'll be staying here for quite a while before I trust you not to run away from me again."

* * *

Jude and I spent the entire morning looking at available houses around the area. We found one in particular in which we both fell in love with the second we saw it. It was a pale yellow, two-story, Cape Cod sitting in the middle of thirty acre apple orchard.

The listing agent met us at the house and allowed us to look around. We were even more impressed with the place once we'd walked through it.

It wasn't anything close to the house in the Hamptons, but it was cozy and full of open rooms that let in plenty of light. I pictured our little family here.

The agent, Mrs. Sinclair, left us alone while we made another pass through the rooms, stopping when we reached the master bedroom.

"Okay, before we tell her this is the one, you've got to promise me something?" Jude closed the bedroom door softly.

"Jude, she'll think we're up to something." It was hard not to laugh at his expression.

"As tempting as that sounds, I'd hate to embarrass the poor woman. Paige, I want to get married. Now. Today. As soon as we can legally get the details sorted through. What do you think? Is it okay with you?"

"You want to marry me?" The question surprised me so much that I couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Yes, I want to marry you. I love you. Don't you want to get married?" He smiled a little at my confusion.

Did I? Oh, yes I did! If I were being honest, I'd thought of nothing else since I'd met Jude. But never once had I believed that outcome would be possible for us. I'd pretty much squashed all hope when he left for London the first time.

Now I desperately wanted this to be real. But I was still afraid I'd wake again in my tiny little rental cabin, alone in bed. Only to discover that I'd simply been dreaming of him again. I hated that I still didn't trust Jude.

When I finally answered, I pretty much threw myself in his arms and cried all over his shirt.

"Yes! Yes, I want to marry you, Jude...and I love you too."

The expression in his eyes was easy to read. Jude Martin was one relieved man.

"Thank God. I was afraid you'd say no and I'd have to drag you down the aisle."

"Oh no, Mr. Martin. There won't be any aisle to drag me down, because I'm not walking down one. I want us to be married very quietly. Just the two of us. Is that okay with you?"

"Is this some kind of test? Are you trying to see how obliging I can be? Never mind," he said quickly. "Of course that's fine by me. Whatever you want is fine by me."

We stayed up there long enough for our friendly real estate agent to fear the worse.

When we finally joined her downstairs, she couldn't seem to look us in the eye.

But the second Jude told her we wanted to make an offer on the house, the woman forgot all about her embarrassment and beamed from ear to ear.

Lesson 26: Marry a man who can knock you off your feet and keep you grounded at the same time.

I called Dani the second we got back to the cabin.

Once she'd learned Jude and I would be coming to New York later that evening, Dani became quite excited.

"You have to let Mark and I take you two out to celebrate you guys getting back together. I'm so happy for the both of you. It's about time both of you came to your senses."

We arrived late that afternoon and even though I still had reservations after the way I'd left New York before, Sammy seemed excited to be back on familiar ground again.

For the first time, I considered the fact I'd uprooted his life, as well as my own. He greeted the doorman in his usual exuberant fashion. The poor thing barely stopped wagging his tail long enough to walk to the elevator.

"I think he missed this place, Jude. I never thought about Sammy when I left."

"You might be right. But Sammy will be happy wherever we are. Don't worry, he'll settle into his new digs soon enough. And he'll be roaming the countryside before you know it."

I sat on our old bed while Jude packed enough clothes to make me believe he might be serious about staying with me. But as happy as I was at the moment, I still didn't trust him not to change his mind, miss the city and leave me hurting once more.

"I know what you're thinking." He stopped packing to study me. "But that's never going to happen. I'm not leaving you, Paige. I love you too much."

"I know..."

"No, you don't. You don't trust me yet. I can't blame you for that. But I am hoping someday you will. It's hard I know. I don't expect you to automatically believe everything I tell you after the things I've said in the past. But you have to understand, I worked very hard at trying to convince myself I wanted those things. It was all a lie. I only want to be with you. I guess it took me a while to realize it."

At his simple words, I found my cloud nine again. And I stayed on it in spite of all the problems that would lay ahead of us. I was in love. And for the first time my love was returned.

We met Mark and Dani later that evening at a small Italian restaurant close to Mark's apartment.

It was great seeing them again. It actually felt like months since I'd left Dani's office for the last time.

"I can't believe you actually went after her, Jude." Dani told him after we were seated at our table. "I'm proud of you. Paige would never have been happy again if you hadn't."

"Dani, that's not true," I interjected half-heartedly.

"Oh please. You've been miserable since you left and you know it."

I tried to be angry with her but the truth was, everything that Dani said was dead on as usual.

"Were you surprised to find you're going to be a father?" Dani asked.

"Oh yes. But even more surprised to realize I'm this thrilled by the prospect. I never thought of myself as father material before. Now, I'm starting to find I like the idea of being someone's dad."

"How are you two going to work all this with the company in New York? Are you going to convince our girl to come back home?"

"No." Jude smiled and took my hand. "I would never ask Paige to give up her dreams. I'm planning to move to Vermont to be with her. In fact, we've put a down payment on a house there." He winked at me.

"You're moving? To Vermont? What about the Martin Publishing?"

"I'll still commute back and forth until I can find a more permanent solution. I've been tossing a few ideas around in my head, but there's plenty of time to decide. Right now, I'm looking forward to being a husband and a father."

"You're getting married?" Dani breathed in awe. "That's wonderful! Have you set the date?"

"Well, you'll have to ask Miss Wilder. Personally I think she's still in shock."

I finally emerged from my "shock" long enough to realize I needed to help Jude a little. I'd been happy to sit back and listen to him talk about his feelings.

"Well? You are being very quiet tonight, Paige. What's up with you? When are you going to marry this poor guy?"

"Soon I think. Jude and I've talked. We don't want anything big—just the two of us."

"Well technically my friend, I think you have to have someone there to actually perform the service and of course, there have to be a couple of witnesses."

My gaze went to Jude's. He understood. "You know you're right, Paige. That's a great idea. Why don't you ask them?"

"Ask us what?" Dani was clearly finding our conversation a bit confusing.

"You're sure you're okay with it?" I ignored Dani's impatience for the moment.

"Sweetheart, I'm positive. I just want to marry you. I don't care about the details."

I squeezed his hand and turned to my friend. "Okay, I want to get married soon. Next week if we can arrange it. How does next weekend

sound to everyone? And Dani and Mark, we'd like you to be our witnesses."

"Really? You mean it? You want us to be apart of your wedding? We'd love to, wouldn't we, Mark?" Dani turned to her husband who simply smiled, content to sit back and lose himself in the warmth of Dani's smile

* * *

On a slightly cloudy spring day, I stood beside the man who'd long since become my reality and pledged my love to him.

And I couldn't help but think about our rather strange relationship. It struck me as almost comical I was marrying a man I'd slept with before I'd actually known his name. I'm sure to the relationship experts this would have been considered the kiss of death. But Jude had been my fantasy long before he'd become my dream come true. How many girls were lucky enough to find both those things in one man?

Jude stood solemnly next to me, guessing all my thoughts and simply smiling without saying a word.

I loved this guy with all my heart.

In retrospect, everything leading up to this wedding was nothing like I'd been expecting.

I mean, Jude and I spent the week before our wedding with me teaching during the day, and him working remotely from our tiny little cabin or simply hanging with Sammy while taking care of all the details for both the wedding and our new house.

I begun to feel quite guilty. I mean, all I had to do was go to my dream job each day while I left the man of my dreams alone, taking care of all the other details of my life.

"I think I can handle it," He told me when I voiced my guilt. "Besides, the wedding stuff is a breeze since we've decided to keep it simple. There's really not much to plan. The house, on the other hand... Well we still need to talk about furniture, you know?"

We'd been sitting in front of the small fireplace in the cabin, because frankly the place was freezing cold. It was then that Jude he was thinking of selling the apartment in New York.

"What—why? I thought you loved that place?" I asked too shocked to think of anything else to say.

"Actually, no, I've never liked it. The only time the apartment ever felt like home was with you. We don't need it anymore."

"But what if you need to stay overnight in the city sometime?"

"I don't ever plan on staying over in New York without you. But if it has to happen, I'll find a hotel. And it won't be that often. Certainly not enough to warrant keeping the place."

"Are you sure, Jude? I don't like the idea of you giving up things for me?"

"I'm not giving up anything I don't want to. I'm positive."

When he asked me where I wanted to go for our honeymoon, I told him I didn't want to go anywhere.

I mean, my life was turning into one big fantasy. Who needed a honeymoon? As far as I was concerned, we didn't need to run off to some tropical island to have everything we'd ever dreamed about.

The Monday following Jude's proposal, I couldn't wait to tell Agnes the good news. Of course by this time, she knew just about everything there was to know about my life. Agnes was thrilled. She told me she'd been praying for us.

The day before our wedding, Agnes and the other teachers at the school threw me an engagement party. She'd been thoughtful enough to invite Jude. They served cake and punch and it couldn't have been more perfect.

I was so happy I didn't even mind having to explain a dozen different times why Jude and I had decided against a honeymoon.

"You aren't going anywhere?" Mary was clearly surprised.

“Nope. We decided we’re jumping headfirst into this whole marriage thing. Besides, there’s too much to do. With getting the house ready to move into, and the baby. We don’t have time for a honeymoon.”

“Well, I can certainly see that you’re happy. You don’t need any of that other stuff to prove anything. You two are happy together. That’s all that matters.”

So on that somewhat cloudy and uncooperative day, I married my dream guy and went to dinner with my new husband and our two good friends. We dined at the small Italian restaurant owned by one of the locals.

Jude told me he’d learned the restaurant had been part of Stormyville history for almost forty years. The older man who owned the place was well into his seventies. Like Jude and myself, he’d had come to Stormyville from the city.

For some reason beyond my understanding, Jude and the old guy seem to hit it off right from the start. They’d first met when Jude and I tried the place together. Since that time, Jude told me he and the old guy had run into each other in town a couple of times. Jude had lunch with the man on several different occasions.

I’d been a little surprised and more than a little amused to hear about this new friendship. After all, Jude was this rich sophisticated man in my mind, where as Frank Marantino appeared to be somewhat middle-class.

But there was no denying the two were friends, which had me realizing once more, there were many things about my new husband I’d gotten completely wrong in my head.

Frank was kind enough to provide a small band to play those beautiful Italian love songs for us. We danced until early morning, then Jude and I left Dani and Mark still dancing to spend our first night together as man and wife.

We went back to our small little cabin and made love like it was our first time together. I was more in love with Jude than I ever imagined

possible, and even more afraid I might still wake up any moment and find this was all one big mistake.

* * *

A few days after our wedding, I finally decided it was time to tell Harry about our marriage. I'd told Jude what I wanted to do and he left me alone to make the call, even though I told him that wasn't necessary.

The second Harry heard my voice I think he suspected something.

"Don't tell me, you're back together with him. I've heard he's been away from the office an awful lot. So I figured..."

"Yes, we're together, Harry. But there's more. Jude and I are married."

"Have you lost your mind, Paige? Please tell me you didn't marry that guy?"

"Yes, I did, Harry. I married him because I love him and he loves me."

"You're kidding, right?"

The sound of Harry's laughter made me realize I'd been wrong about him as well. Harry and I would never be just friends. At least not in his mind. It was hard not to end the call right then and there, but I forced myself to listen to what he had to say.

"You bought into the whole lie. I thought you were smarter than that, Paige."

"Harry, I'm sorry. This must be hard for you to accept, but you and I were only meant to be friends. This has nothing to do with you."

"Yes, well, you may think that he loves you, but he isn't capable of loving you or anyone else. Jude Martin only loves money, power and himself. He'll only hurt you, Paige."

"That's not true. You don't know him. I'm sorry things didn't happen the way you wanted for us, Harry. I called you because I wanted you to hear it from me. You know I never meant for you to be hurt by this."

“I’m not the one who’s going to be hurt, Paige. Trust me you will live to regret marrying Jude Martin. And I hope you don’t believe he’ll ever be able to make you happy.”

Harry hung up on me without another word. I truly believed I’d lost his friendship for good. I didn’t think we could get beyond those ugly words even though it hurt to think of losing Harry from my life.

I still sat in front of the fire crying when Jude found me.

“What happened?” He knelt in front of me and took my hands in his.

“I guess I should have realized how Harry was going to take the news of our marriage. He was so angry with me, Jude. He said you’d never love me the way that I want you to.” I hadn’t meant to tell him the hurtful things Harry had said to me but I found myself looking to him for reassurances more than ever.

“Then I’ll just have to prove to you I can. Paige, I don’t care what Harry thinks. I know how I feel about you. *I know* how much I love you. And I intend to prove it every single day of my life.”

Suddenly, I realized this was exactly what Jude had been doing. Since the moment he found me again, he’d been proving his love to me. Very effectively and in every single way a woman of forty who was pregnant for the first time could ever want.

“I think I may have lost Harry’s friendship for good.”

“Maybe. But if so, Harry wasn’t your friend. If he cares about you, he’ll get over the hurt and be your friend again. Only time will tell.” He kissed me tenderly then added, “Okay, that’s one down—one to go. Why don’t we call your parents and tell them the good news? I think they’ll have a slightly different reaction to hearing about our marriage.”

We sat on my tiny couch together and called my parents.

“Paige? Honey, your father and I were thinking about you. We were wondering how you’re adjusting to living in a small town?”

“Mom, is Dad there with you?”

“Well, yes he is, honey. Why?”

“Can you get him to the phone for me? I have something to tell you both.”

I waited for the sound of my father’s quiet voice. “Paige? Everything okay there?”

“Hi, Dad. Yes, everything is fine. I have something I want you both to hear. Dad, Mom, Jude is with me and we need to tell you something important.”

“What is it?” my mother blurted.

“We’re married. We were married yesterday.”

“Oh my...Paige! That’s wonderful. I’m happy for you—for the both of you. But when did you decide to do this? And why didn’t you call us?”

I was crying too hard to answer them. Jude took the phone from my hand and told my parents why we got married so quickly.

“You can understand why I didn’t want to wait any longer. I didn’t want her to run away again.”

I imagined my parent’s shock after Jude told them I was pregnant. I’m sure they were both still trying to understand how that was possible.

“That sounds so romantic, Jude. I’m glad you went after her. Welcome to the family.” I barely heard what my mother said. She sounded a little unsteady and completely unlike my mother. Mom had always been a sucker for a good love story though. Ours had clearly thrilled her.

“Thank you, Mrs. Wilder. I’m sorry we didn’t invite you two, but it happened very quickly.”

Jude told my parents all about our wedding, and our new house.

“Maybe you two will come for a visit some day soon? There’s plenty of room in the house and we’d love to have you stay with us for a while.”

For someone whose life had never measured up to the world I created in my mind, suddenly I found that my reality was kicking my fantasy’s butt.

You see, the man I'd married that cloudy March day wasn't a fantasy, after all. He was very real and very human. And he was very capable of fulfilling all of my real life fantasies.

Lesson 27: When you say I love you, mean it with every part of your being.

I'd started showing a little by the time we were ready to move into our dream home.

And my husband of under a month was making it a point to be with me at each of my doctor's appointments.

Jude had gone into the city only a handful of times. And each time, he'd always made it home to me at night.

I was slowly starting to believe he did love me as much as he told me every single day of our lives together, even though I still held onto some of the old Paige's doubts. After all, it was hard letting go of everything I'd believed to be true. But I think he understood.

Jude never questioned any of my doubts. There was only a certain look he got at times, mostly when I said something foolish, which told me he knew how hard it was for me to trust him with my heart.

Selling the apartment in New York was easier than either of us had imagined. We took only a few pieces of furniture with us back to Stormyville for the new house.

Mostly the bedroom furniture, because Jude told me he didn't want anyone else sleeping in *our* bed.

Before moving into the new house, we spent every single second of our free time scouring the surrounding towns for just the right things to fill our four-bedroom, two-story house. By the time we were ready to call it home, the place looked amazing.

There was only one room left to finish. The nursery. But that was something we still didn't know how to decorate. Jude and I still hadn't

decided if we wanted to know whether we were having a boy or a girl. So for the time being, the nursery remained unfinished.

The day we officially moved into our house, my husband carried me over the threshold for the first time, pregnant woman and all.

“You know, we’ve been here more times than I can remember,” I told him trying to resist the urge to laugh.

“Really, Miss Unromantic? Well, this happens to be the first time we’ve officially spent the night as husband and wife. So shut up and enjoy it.”

He didn’t stop until we reached our new bedroom. Where he dropped me on the bed and showed me in no uncertain terms—well after he managed to breathe again—how much he truly loved me.

* * *

With my little school closing for a week for spring break, Jude and I had decided to spend some time at the house in the Hamptons.

It was on one of our long walks along the beach that he told me what he wanted to do with *his* future.

“I’m thinking of selling the business.” Jude had been quiet for a long time. I knew something was troubling him but every time I asked him about it, he told me nothing. Now I knew what was on his mind.

“But that’s your father’s business. His dream. How can you sell it?”

“Yes, but it’s never been my dream. And it wasn’t my father’s really. Not at the end.”

I stopped walking and looked at him. “What do you mean?”

Jude smiled for a moment, before touching my face. “Before he died, my father and I talked like we’d never done before. I know what you’re thinking...my father couldn’t speak, but he could write. He and I did an awful lot of communicating that way.”

We started to walk again, Jude’s arm around my waist. “My father told me for all its success, the business had lost its appeal for him a long

time ago. Long before he retired. He told me there were many times he'd wanted to sell it outright, find someone to love him for who he was and not his money. He even talked about moving to a small town somewhere where he could be like any other person in the world."

Jude saw from my expression exactly what I was thinking.

"Yeah, I know. My father had it all. But he wasn't happy. He told me he knew he'd never been much of a real father to me. He also said he'd never loved another woman the way he loved my mother. Dad had many regrets in his life. He gotten too caught up in all the wealth and power to realize what he was giving up at the time."

Jude was silent for a while. I sensed part of him was back there in the past with his father, reliving that conversation.

"I told my father about you. You didn't think he knew, did you?"

I nodded and he smiled a little sadly at my admission.

"I can't say I blame you. I never gave you any reason to believe I wanted anything permanent, did I? I'm sorry for that, Paige. I guess I never thought how hard the time I spent away from you must have been. And you were right. I was trying to push you away and fighting with myself to hold onto you at the same time, trying to overcome all of my old insecurities. I can see how it must have seemed to you."

"Yes. I thought you wanted me out of your life, Jude. I thought you couldn't say the words to end it. But I don't think I tried to see it from your point of view, either. I guess I felt you were keeping parts of yourself closed off from me. Like you were trying to end our relationship, without actually being the one to say the words first."

"Oh Paige." He shook his head before taking me back into his arms. "Nothing could be further from the truth but I guess I wasn't very good at telling you how I felt. I hope that's changed. My father told me I shouldn't allow things to get in the way of my relationship with you. I guess I had to find that out the hard way. For myself. But you see none of the money or the power matters to me. It never did. I guess I thought I was doing what I was supposed to do—taking over for my father. I don't care about

the business, Paige. In fact, I'm hoping to do something entirely different. Something in Stormyville."

Jude added the last part almost casually. It took me a second to be sure I'd even heard him correctly. I turned to try and read his expression better.

"You want to start your own business in Stormyville? What do you want to do?" I asked slowly.

"Well, you know Frank Marantino and I have become pretty good friends. Frank's thinking of selling the restaurant and retiring...well, not retiring exactly, more like taking on a partner. I'm thinking of buying the restaurant and keeping him around as its proprietor."

I simply stared at him in shock.

"I've had a look at the books. In fact, I've had my accountant take a good look at them. He tells me, although the restaurant is small and certainly won't be making a fortune, it's strong and steady with a decent income flow.

"*You* want to run a restaurant?" It was hard to keep from smiling as I imagined my rich, sophisticated husband in the restaurant business.

"Don't laugh. Yes, I want to buy a restaurant. What do you think?"

"Oh Jude, I think it's a wonderful idea! I'm thrilled if that's what you want to do. But are you sure? I mean there can't be a whole lot of financial rewards in running a small restaurant."

I knew what his answer would be even before I asked the question, but I asked it the same. I wanted to hear him tell me again none of those things mattered to him.

"I think you know that doesn't mean a thing to me. I've thought about this a lot, sweetheart, and I want to do this. You know I love living in Stormyville with you. But I want to be more a part of the community. This will be a good way to get to know folks."

"A restaurant owner, huh? I like it...yeah, I definitely like it. I can see you doing it."

"You can? You don't think I'm crazy?"

“Definitely not. You are not crazy, Jude. It will be the perfect change for you. You’ll make the place an even bigger success than it is already.”

“And I was afraid of telling you because I thought you’d think I’d lost my mind.” He literally beamed with happiness.

“You definitely haven’t lost your mind, Mr. Martin. In fact, I’d say it’s still as sharp as everything else about you is. Definitely in perfect working order.”

For the rest of our week in the Hamptons, Jude and I went over all of his ideas for the restaurant together. I’d never seen him look this excited about work before.

He told me he’d found a couple of prospective buyers for Martin Publishing. One in particular, whose future plans for the company were something that he believed would have made his father happy.

“This is really happening? Are you sure you won’t miss the New York rat race?” I felt obligated to ask one last time.

“Are you kidding? I never wanted to be in the rat race. I just didn’t have much choice in the matter.”

“What about the rest of the family? Your step brother and sister, I mean.”

“They don’t have a say in any the decisions concerning the company. Dad made sure of that. He left them well provided for, but the business decisions he left to me alone.”

After several long calls and dozens more emails, the arrangements to sell Martin were all but done. The papers were being prepared for the final signature. And I held my breath.

After all, this represented another event in our lives. Another switch in direction on the road to our future...together.

But this time it felt different. Not too scary, after all. Because this time I wasn’t making that switch alone.

* * *

Once we returned to Stormyville, Jude and his new best friend began working through the little details of their partnership.

Financially, the restaurant would be Jude's responsibility alone. Frank only wanted to have a weekly paycheck and the ability to hang around, as he put it, with the people he'd grown to love.

The announcement of the new partnership had already made its way around town. This was big news for such a small town. Everyone in Stormyville knew the scoop on Jude. That he came from New York money and that he was making changes to the restaurant.

My brand new husband spent his days with Frank, going over the plans for their new "reopening" day. Each night over dinner, Jude was happy to tell me all about his day. And I was perfectly content to sit back and listen to his excitement.

The two partners had begun discussing plans to bring in live music on weekends, as well as adding a few new recipes to the menu. There was even going to be a few changes to the décor of the restaurant as well.

Jude decided the slightly used booths and tables needed a little updating to something a little bit more modern.

The planned reopening was set for less than a month. There was still much work to be done, but never once did Jude miss the opportunity to attend my doctor appointments or have dinner with me each night.

He was trying hard to prove I'd been wrong about him. With every tiny thing he did, I felt a little bit more of my doubts disappear.

As for me, teaching was definitely fulfilling all of my expectations. My small first grade class had become very dear to me.

We invited Dani and Mark to come stay with us for the reopening of the restaurant.

By this time, I had pretty much outgrown most of my regular clothes. I told Jude it was time for a trip into the city for some serious shopping.

"Why don't we go this weekend? We can spend the day shopping and have a late dinner?"

I threw my arms around him and hugged him tight. This guy was turning into one big fantasy with each passing day.

Lesson 28: Approach both love and cooking with reckless abandon.

The opening of Jude's restaurant venture could not have been more successful or more nerve-wracking.

Nothing seemed to faze Jude. The poor man got up at dawn to have breakfast with me before heading into town to oversee all the last minute renovations.

Jude was trying to help me through all of my pregnancy troubles while working hard to make his own vision a reality.

"Stop worrying so about me. I'm fine. You know that. It's okay to do something for yourself, Jude. I'm not going anywhere."

I think he was finally starting to believe that too. Jude had been so worried he'd slip and do something to cause me to run away again that he was afraid to do anything.

"Jude, I love you, and I want you to do what makes you happy. Go—do your thing. I'll still be pregnant in a few weeks. Trust me, you'll be sick of it by the time it's over. I'm not going anywhere. Don't worry."

"I'm going to hold you to that promise, Paige," he said before kissing my cheek.

Jude put in long hours the weeks before the opening. When he came home, he tried to keep from waking me. I, on the other hand, wanted to know everything that was happening at the restaurant. And Jude was happy to tell me.

Unfortunately, two days before the opening, my parents thought they would surprise us by showing up at our door. I didn't have the heart to tell them this was the worst possible time for a surprise visit.

Jude did his best to make them feel welcome.

"You guys came. That's great."

Jude and my father took their bags to one of the guest bedrooms on the ground floor.

"Oh, Paige, you look so pretty! I can't believe it. I'm going to be a grandmother."

"Hi, Mom. I can't believe you guys came. Why didn't you call us? We would have met your flight," I added and turned to give Jude a sympathetic smile as the men returned.

"We wanted to surprise you two. Paige, you're not working today, are you?"

"No, Mom. It's Saturday, remember. But Jude has to go to the restaurant."

"I'll stop by later," Jude offered. "How often do your parents come to visit?"

"No way, mister. You have way too much to do as it is. You go. I'll keep these two occupied. Don't worry."

After he left, I told my parents how hard Jude had been working preparing for the opening.

"Oh, Paige, we feel terrible. We should have called. But we wanted to surprise you."

"Mom, it's okay. I'm glad you're here and so is Jude. It's just that he's been working very hard, and he's nervous about the whole thing. I keep telling him everything is going to be great, but I don't think he believes me yet."

"Do you think we should find someplace to stay in town? We don't want to be in the way, honey?"

"Dad, don't be ridiculous. We're glad you came. Really we are. Come on, why don't you let me make you both some breakfast?"

My mother wouldn't hear of it. She insisted I needed to get off my feet. "There's no way I'm letting you wait on us, honey. Now, you sit and

relax. Enjoy all the pampering you can get while you're pregnant. When the baby comes, you're not going to be getting any sleep for a long time.

"Honey, you never looked more beautiful. Doesn't she look beautiful, dear?"

My father who had been sitting next to me at the kitchen table, patting my hand in an unusual display of affection.

"Just beautiful. She looks like you when you were pregnant. I can't get over how much you two look alike at times."

"Oh, Dad. I love you, you know?" I kissed his cheek, embarrassing him so much that he pretended to go for a second cup of coffee.

My mother and I exchanged our usual look at Dad's behavior.

"Why don't I show you both around town today? We can spend the day doing all those tourist things. How long are staying anyway?"

"Well, I'd love to see the opening of Jude's restaurant, if that's okay?" my mother asked tentatively.

"Are you kidding? He'd love to have you two here for it. Jude's been talking about us coming for another visit once the baby is born."

"We'd love that. I'm happy you two got everything worked. And I'm glad you listened to your heart, honey. I admit in the beginning I was surprised, but he's good for you. You can't imagine how much you've changed since meeting him. You've become softer. You are a wonderful woman, Paige. We couldn't be prouder of you."

My parents and I spent the rest of the day walking around the little town of Stormyville doing all the little touristy things my mother loved.

We stopped in at the restaurant to see Jude, who was actually back in the kitchen working on a new recipe. My parents and I happily volunteered to be his guinea pigs.

"It's great. What is it?" I asked him.

"I can't tell you just yet. We're unveiling it opening night. Until then, Frank's sworn me to secrecy."

"Well whatever it's called, its terrific."

When opening night came at last, Jude left the house early to make sure all the last minute details were in place and ready for the unveiling.

Dani and Mark arrived in the afternoon and I promptly sent Mark along with my parents off to do a little grocery shopping, allowing Dani and I to spend time catching up.

"I have big news, Paige." Dani barely waited until we were back inside before blurting those words out. She literally glowed with excitement.

"What?" I asked, my thoughts racing with possibilities.

"I'm pregnant!"

"Oh my gosh!" This was the last thing I expected to hear from her. "That's great news. I'm excited for you two. How far along are you?"

"Almost three months. Can you believe it? I'm actually going to be someone's mother. That's frightening, isn't it?"

"You're going to be the best mother ever."

"God, I hope you're right. But geesh, I never thought about kids until Mark. I'm afraid I'm going to screw everything up. You know raise a daughter who become just like me, God forbid."

"Dani, you would be lucky to have a daughter like you. You're the best friend I've ever had. I'm so excited for you and Mark. I bet he's on cloud nine."

"He's through the roof. You know, he's starting to talk about moving away from the city."

"You're kidding? How do you feel about that?"

"When he first mentioned it I thought *no way*. I mean, I'm a New Yorker through and through. But now, the more I think about it, the more I find I like the idea. And after seeing you and Jude this happy, well, I have to admit it makes me kind of jealous."

"You know you two could always come and live in Stormyville? Weren't you the one who used to talk about opening her own bookstore someday?"

“Yes, but like my mom always used to tell me, that’s a pipe dream.”

“It doesn’t have to be. You could make it work if anyone could. And it just so happens, there isn’t a single bookstore in Stormyville. The question is, would you be able to leave your job and New York behind? And what about Mark? What would he do?”

“Mark has made tons of money already. He couldn’t care less about leaving New York. He’s not even from the city originally. You see, Mark has the same small town background as you. I think he would be thrilled to move back to a small town and open his own financial consulting business. Can you believe we’re actually seriously considering leaving New York for good? I mean, think about it, Paige. A few years back, neither one of us could ever imagine our lives outside of the city, and now? Do you think this means we’ve outgrown the city, or maybe it’s outgrown us?”

“Maybe it simply means we’re growing up.”

“Yeah, and wouldn’t that be a shame?”

“Have you two been looking anywhere in particular?”

“Actually, we *are* kind of thinking about somewhere close to Stormyville. I mean, you and I have always loved this place, and Mark fell in love with it when we were down for your wedding. And you guys are our friends...”

“Dani, I can’t wait. It’s going to be nice having you close again. I’ve missed our girl talks.”

“Well, we’re still thinking about it, and nothing’s settled yet. Are you sure you and Jude wouldn’t mind?”

“Are you kidding? We’d love to have you guys close.”

Jude came home with barely enough time to change before we all left to attend the opening together. I sat on our bed while he dressed and told him about Dani and Mark.

I think he was as excited about the news as me.

“Just look what we’ve started.” He sat next to me and touched my stomach tenderly. “You have any idea how happy I am, Paige. How happy you’ve made me.”

I met those beautiful blue eyes that I’d once thought of as cold and stroked his cheek. “I know I love you so much.”

“You still have doubts?” he asked and I smiled.

I knew exactly what he meant. It didn’t surprise me to realize I hadn’t had any of those old doubts in such a long time. I wasn’t sure when they’d ended. Maybe it was watching my husband work hard at making his dream come true. Or maybe, it was simply the way he looked at me through all the stages of my pregnancy.

Jude still thought of me as the most beautiful woman in the world, in spite of the fact that I was forty and extremely pregnant. I couldn’t tell him yet, but I knew all my doubts were gone for good.

I shook my head and I kissed Jude with all my heart. Then I followed him out to accomplish a dream of his own.

Jude still had doubts about his ability to succeed outside of his father’s shadow. He’d never ventured out on his own before. He’d always had his father’s success as a cushion.

But in our little town of Stormyville, Vermont, not too many people knew about Jude’s father or his past successes. And the few who did weren’t all that impressed by money or success.

As Jude and I both were finding, small town America life marched to a very different beat. A beat that came from the heart.

The restaurant was literally filled to capacity that night. Jude and Frank greeted their guests and scurried around making sure the food kept coming and the drinks were flowing.

And me? Well I’d never been prouder of my husband. He’d done it. He’d made his dream a reality.

I sat with my parents, Dani and Mark, watching the success around us and trying to talk over the noise of the crowd.

But mostly, I was amazed to watch the guy I never imagined fitting into such a small town simple life before work the crowd and greet the townsfolk as if he'd lived here all of his life.

Unfortunately, by eleven I was falling asleep in my chair. And even though I hadn't talked to Jude much during the evening, I knew he was keeping a close eye on me. He'd spotted my exhaustion and knew the second it was time for me to leave.

"You need to go home, Paige. You're falling asleep in your soda," he told me while lifting me to my feet.

"Why don't you let us take Paige home, Jude?" my father volunteered. "You've got your hands full."

"No, its okay, John. Frank has everything under control. I want to take Paige home. You stay and enjoy the rest of the evening."

"Jude, this is your big night. I don't want you to leave it for me." I protested as we left the crowded restaurant and stepped into the crisp night air.

"Sweetheart, I want to. Besides, I want to talk to you. The place will be fine without me."

As Jude drove along the tree-lined road to our house, he wasn't in any hurry to talk. I was happy just having him to myself for a little while.

When we reached the house, he took my hand and led me over to the bench near the door.

"You should be proud, Jude. You did it! The restaurant is a huge success."

"I have to admit, I'm thrilled by the turn out. The next few months will tell the tale, though. But you're right. I think this is going to be good."

I touched his face gently and watched as he kissed my palm.

"Paige, I wanted to thank you. I've been away from you an awful lot lately, and even when I am here, I'm preoccupied. I wanted you know how much I appreciate all of your understanding and support."

“Oh, Jude, please don’t apologize for going after your dream. You gave up a lot for me. I mean, you completely uprooted your life to be with me, allowing me to live *my* dream. I owe you a great deal.”

“I didn’t give up anything. I gained everything I wanted. I love you, Paige. And if I had to do it all over again, I’d do it all again. Only this time, I wouldn’t let you ever feel like you needed to leave in the first place. I would be there for you right from the start. Don’t ever think I’ve given up anything that mattered to be with you. You and our child are the most important things to me.”

When he kissed me, I believed everything he’d said.

“I have something for you.” Jude reached inside his jacket and handed me a small jeweler’s box.

“I wanted to give this to you tonight, because you’ve made this all possible for me. I would never have the courage to go out on my own like this without your support.”

I opened the box and found a beautiful silver locket inside with three perfect diamonds encrusted around its edge.

“For us, and for the child that we’re waiting for,” he told me quietly. I felt tears sting my eyes when I looked at him.

“It’s beautiful. Thank you.” I went into his open arms and held him close.

“Look inside.” He opened the tiny locket.

There was a small photo of us our wedding day and an empty space for the one we waited on.

Across the back of the locket Jude had inscribed.

To the woman I love. The mother of my child. To the person who makes all of my dreams possible.

For the longest time I couldn’t say a single word. I only stared at the inscription, overwhelmed by the depth of his love for me. But I think he understood. He took my hand and led me inside to our bed. And while the whole restaurant waited for his return, my fantasy showed me everything inscribed on that locket was written on his heart.

Lesson 29: When you look back on the past and just how far you've come, learn the lessons of your mistakes so that you don't repeat them.

After much soul searching, Jude and I decided we wanted wait for our little bundle of joy to arrive to discover whether we were to have a son or a daughter.

So while we waited and our child grew inside me, Jude's restaurant continued to know success.

Oh, the initial crowds dwindled. But the steady cliental made the place a success.

And Jude still made it a point to be home with me each night. After all, we had plans of our own to fulfill. While Jude painted the baby's room a light buttery yellow, I spent several nights trying to get the little bunny border straight.

Dani and Mark came to visit several times after the restaurant opened. They'd begun seriously searching for a house of their own near Stormyville.

Dani had even starting to look pregnant. And I wasn't a bit surprised that she looked more beautiful than ever. The two of us spent hours talking about baby stuff.

Finally, after a whole lot of searching, they found the perfect house for them. It wasn't long before they were small town citizens like Jude and me.

Mark took a job at one of the local banks and in his spare time he began his own investment business. Dani decided she would wait until after the baby was a little older to think about opening her bookstore.

For the first time in her life, she was happy just to be happy.

By the time I started my seventh month of pregnancy our two friends were fitting in quite nicely in small town Vermont life.

Dani and I spent that entire summer, decorating her house and getting the nursery started. We were together almost every single day, and I'd never been happier.

We'd even heard from Ralph a couple of times. He promised once the baby was born, he would come pay me a little visit. But in the mean time, he kept us informed on all the office gossip.

It seemed not much had changed at Martin Publishing. From Ralph, I learned Harry had started dating another woman from work. They appeared to be getting serious. While I was happy for Harry, I hadn't been able to call him since the night I'd told him about marrying Jude. Some things can't be fixed, no matter how hard you try. Our friendship was one of those things.

Our breakup and my relationship with Jude had put a wedge between us that we couldn't overcome. Sometimes you have to know when to let go. I was happy for Harry. And I could at last let him go.

"Do you miss the rat race, Dani?" I asked her one afternoon while sitting outside on her deck.

"You know at first, it took me a while to get over the whole fast-paced schedule thing of having to be at work by a certain time. But now I'm actually starting to enjoy not having to rush off anywhere. And you know what else? I'm writing a children's book." She said this so matter-a-factly that it took me a few seconds to fully realize she was serious.

"What? When did you decide to do this?"

"I know. Trust me, I know it sounds crazy. I'm sure I'll never get anywhere with it, but I thought it would be good to have something original to read to our baby. I'm not sure how it all started. I certainly never considered writing before. But one day, I just picked up a pen and

started writing, and before I knew it, it kept building and building until... Well, it's almost finished."

"Dani! I can't believe you wrote a book and never told me about it? Can I read it?"

"Oh, thank you! I hoped you'd say that. You see, I can't bring myself to tell Mark about it yet, because, oh, I don't know... I guess I'm afraid he'll think I've finally lost it."

"Dani, he's crazy about you and you know it. But I would love to read it."

Dani left me sitting there in shock. A few minutes later she returned carrying several notebooks.

"Don't start them yet. I don't want you to read it in front of me. I mean, I want you to give me your honest opinion and all, but wait until you're alone, okay?"

"Dani, you know I will, but I'm sure I'll love it."

I couldn't wait to get home and start reading her story. Once I got to the house, I had to force myself to take a nap before I took the notebooks Dani had written her story in to the back porch with a glass of lemonade and started reading.

I barely made it halfway through the first notebook when I realized what a natural talent for writing she had.

The story was about a little girl who collected dolls from all around the world from her father's business travels. The dolls magically came to life and allowed the little girl to travel to all those places and have wonderful adventures.

I couldn't wait to call my friend and tell her how much I loved the story.

"It's brilliant, no, better than brilliant—it's perfect. I've only gotten halfway through the first notebook, but I love it."

"Really? You think?"

"I'm sure. I love it, Dani. And I have a great idea. Would you let me read the book to my class when school starts next week? You know, give it kind of a trial run with your audience?"

"You think its good enough?"

"Oh, Dani, I think it's wonderful. They'll love it. And I tell you what? It would be great if you talked to the kids in person about how you came up with the idea for the book in the first place. They'd love that. Would you be willing?"

"Are you kidding? I'd love to. I'm excited!"

"You should be. This is some terrific stuff. I can't wait for school to start."

I finished Dani's book that very afternoon and once I did, I knew my first instinct had been correct. Dani had a hit on her hands.

I couldn't wait for Jude to get home that night to tell him all about it.

My sweet husband brought dinner home from the restaurant for the two of us because he didn't want me to have to cook. We sat together over one of his latest dishes, and I told him all about Dani's little secret.

"She wrote a book? I didn't know Dani wanted to write."

"I didn't either. I don't think she even realized it until she started writing it."

"And you think it's good?"

"I think it's great." I told him about my plans to have her read it to the class the following week.

"You know, if she's interested, I still have contacts. I could get an editor to look at it for her."

"You would do that? Oh, thank you, Jude! But you'd better let me tell her when we're alone. She's been too nervous to tell Mark about any of this yet. I think she wanted to make sure it was good first."

* * *

The start of the new school year was also the beginning of my eighth month of pregnancy.

I felt tired all the time. I couldn't walk more than a little bit without becoming exhausted. I never felt more unattractive in spite of all of Jude's reassurances. I was ready for this baby to arrive.

My new first grade class's reaction to Dani's book was everything I'd expected it to be. They were excited after I'd read the first part to them and couldn't get enough of talking to Dani.

I decided to make it a weekly event. They loved the first adventures of Dani's little dolls and couldn't wait to hear the newest.

It was during one such session that I had the first labor pain.

It hit me so hard I felt as if I were going to faint, right there in class.

Dani had been sitting at the head of the class telling the children a story when she saw my pain. She was at my side in a second and instinctively knew what to do. Dani had the children start reading one of their books while she took me to the nurse's station. I'd barely reached her office when my water broke.

"It's too soon, Dani. I'm barely eight months. It can't be the baby yet. It's too soon."

"Shh, it's going to be okay, Paige." Somehow she managed to get me seated before calling Jude.

The rest was nothing more than a blur for me. I remember Jude arriving at the school and driving me to the hospital along with Dani.

"Paige, listen to me," my doctor told me once I'd been prepped for delivery. "You're going into labor. It's early, I know, but I need you to try and relax, okay?"

I reached for Jude's hand when another contraction hit.

It finally hit me, the doctor was about to deliver my baby.

"It's too soon, doctor. The baby...it's too soon." I kept repeating.

He tried his best to reassure me. "Paige, it may be a little early, but we don't have a choice. That baby wants to come, and there's no stopping it from happening."

So on a beautiful afternoon, a full month before my due date, I gave birth to a perfectly healthy, fully developed baby girl.

Exhausted but smiling, I was handed my daughter for the first time. I forgot all about the pain and my fears.

"Looks like we may have had some bad calculations somewhere," the doctor told us. "Because this little girl is perfect and I'd say right on time."

Together, Jude and I meet our daughter for the first time. I think we both were so overwhelmed by her, we couldn't stop crying.

"Now we've got to decide what we're going to call her." he said smiling at me.

I'd had an idea about what I wanted to name the baby if it were a girl, but I hadn't said anything to Jude until now.

"What was your mother's name?"

"India Elizabeth."

"India Elizabeth," I said the name slowly and knew it was the one. "I love it. It's perfect. Are you okay with it?"

He didn't have to answer me. I saw it in those blue eyes first. Jude was overwhelmed I'd wanted to name our child after his mother.

After a while, Dani and Mark were allowed to come see our little girl.

"She's beautiful. You guys did well," Dani said, touching India's tiny face. "She looks like Jude, don't you think?"

"Yes." I met my husband's eyes and saw all his love for me in them. "Yes, she's her father's daughter all right."

"I'm happy for you two," Dani said before bursting into tears.

Both Mark and Jude were at a loss as to what to think about this new emotional Dani. After all, she'd always been in control. But I knew the truth. Dani had learned a little something from me, as well. She'd become softer. Just like me.

By the following afternoon, after a very thorough examination, Jude and I were able to take our daughter home.

My husband decided to take a few days off from the restaurant to get to know little India.

For a man who couldn't image himself being anyone's father just a short time before, Jude was turning out to be pretty darn good at it.

Lesson 30: Its important to understand what is meant by life begins at forty.

A few days before my forty-first birthday, on a beautiful fall afternoon, while my husband went to the restaurant for a short time, I took little India on the back porch and decided turning forty-one meant taking some stock in my life.

Dani told me that life for her truly had begun at forty. She'd finally realized she wasn't the woman she believed herself to be all those years.

For me, I found my upcoming forty-first birthday to be a time to look back on how much my life had changed in the past two years.

If you had told me that night on the brink of turning thirty-nine that my life was going to change so drastically, I don't think I would have believed a word of it.

If you'd said in a few short hours, I'd meet the man who would change my life for the better, well, I probably would have laughed at you.

But that was exactly what had happened. My upcoming birthday would also be my second anniversary with Jude. I wondered, as I sat there that sunny afternoon, would he too remember? And what would our next year together bring?

For the life of me, I couldn't imagine anything better than the two years we'd spent together. After all, how can you top finding the love of your life and becoming a mother?

When Jude asked me what I wanted for my birthday, I couldn't think of a single thing I needed. Except to spend it with him and our daughter.

So, that night, my husband and daughter along with our best friends celebrated the passing of another milestone at his restaurant.

I couldn't have asked for a more perfect day.

Dani told me, thanks to Jude and his connections, her children's book was going to be published. Mark announced he would be quitting the banking job entirely in a few months to do his consulting full time.

My husband and I listened to our friends' happiness while those around the community who knew it was my birthday stopped by to wish me well and see little India.

And I smiled at each of them and held my daughter close, safe in the shelter of my husband's arm.

Later that night, after India was sleeping peacefully in her crib, the man of my dreams, my fantasy, the one I didn't know I wanted until that night two years earlier, came to me again.

But it wasn't like that first night. There were no secrets between us anymore. We knew each other completely, as well as anyone can ever know another person, that is.

In his arms, I now knew total happiness and peace.

Not just from the physical touch of him. Over the years of our love story, we had loved each other in secret, held pieces of ourselves apart out of fear, and came close to losing something wonderful.

But it's been said, that life is just a series of events with consequences.

On their own, they wouldn't add up to much. But when you put them together, you never know where they'll end up taking you, or what the outcome will be once you're there.

Tonight we understood all of those things at last. We knew how precious and hard to come by true love really was.

The little girl sleeping peacefully in her crib was the final proof of how absolute and overwhelming in its power true love could be.

When it's right, you know it, even before you can admit it to yourself. Even if you come close to screwing it all up.

But if you're really lucky, someone will be there beside you, sticking with you through it all and making all your little screw-ups work out somehow.

About the Author

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Look for these titles by Mary Eason

Coming Soon:

The Things You Think You Want
Survivor

Mudpacks, murder, deceit, betrayal and tattoos—how much can a friendship sustain without cracking?

La Bella Luna

© 2007 Bobbie Cole

Try telling your best friends that your husband is leaving you for another man, or that you've slept with one of their husbands and have borne his child. Better yet, let them know you've just committed murder or that you're dying.

Ann, Eazy, Merry and Leta Lou—all four of the Oklahoma City socialites, having spent years merely scratching the surface of their friendship, are thrust into an emotional tornado and left with the devastating ruins of aftermath as the secrets they've kept surface. Ann wants to help them rediscover their dreams, but before she can do that, she must first destroy their illusions.

Money can't buy happiness, forgiveness, or peace, but it can sure make life...and death...a lot more interesting.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *La Bella Luna*:

"I want you to be as naughty as you please tonight," Ann told her three guests the next afternoon after the last two had arrived. "That's why I told you to rest before you got here. Because, ladies, we are going to eat, drink, smoke and do it all tonight. Before you fill your plates, I want each of you to take one of those pens and a block of paper I've cut out, and list your secret naughty pleasure. Something you've never done that you want to do or be or have."

Merry and Leta Lou each tentatively accepted the slips of paper Ann held out, locked glances and then slid the paper back onto the counter with nervous laughs, shaking their heads. Ann gave a sigh, chastising them with a mock glare. "Just do it."

"A secret desire, hm?" Leta Lou asked.

“Something deliciously naughty,” Ann said with a wink.

Eazy rolled her eyes and groaned. “Bullshit. I’m not telling any of you something that private.”

“Yes, you will. If you don’t, I’ll make something up and embarrass the hell out of you,” Ann told her. “Everybody has to play.”

“What are we going to do with these?” Eazy asked, still obviously not convinced that she was in safe waters.

“We’re going to discuss them one by one after dessert. C’mon. Write!” Ann ordered.

When they’d done as she’d asked, Ann gathered the snippets of paper and tucked them under the phone for later. While the rest of them chatted over jalapeño chicken and sautéed mushrooms, Eazy’s eyes kept glancing over at the telephone.

“What is said in this house stays in this house, right?” she asked.

“Why are you so worried?” Ann couldn’t help but laugh as she watched Eazy’s face.

“Because I can’t believe I just bared my soul like that.”

“How about whatever is written down, we all do?” Ann asked. “That way you won’t be the Lone Ranger.”

“Do?” Eazy had a stricken look on her face. “I thought you said we’d *discuss* them.”

“Well, let’s take it a step further. Let’s all do whatever’s written down.”

Leta Lou and Merry laughed. Eazy blanched.

“Yeah, right,” she said. “I can just see this.”

“What are you afraid of, Eazy?” Leta Lou asked. “I’m game if you are.”

The rest of them looked at Merry.

“Sure,” she said.

After that, nothing they talked about could hold their interest as the tension built around those small pieces of paper. Often, when they had girls’ night out at Ann’s, she would challenge them to do something different. Once they played a game of Truth or Dare as they played

bridge, and the one who failed to be honest had to drink a shot of tequila. Another time they went bowling and were sore for weeks afterwards. And one Christmas they went Christmas caroling and visited other country club friends and got them to join in.

"How about what you want, Ann?" Leta Lou asked, stabbing the air between them with her fork.

"Mine comes last. But we *all* agree to do whatever is written down."

"Then write yours down as well," Eazy told Ann. "I'm not doing it unless it's written down. You're such a bully. I'll bet even the boys were terrified of you when you were growing up."

Ann challenged her with a cackle. "Promise that you'll do it?"

Eazy looked around at the rest of them and nodded. "I will if you will. But even you may balk at doing a couple of things."

"Never." Ann put down her fork and looked at the others who stared back at her expectantly.

"Well, this is getting us nowhere," Ann commented. "We're going to be starving later, but I doubt any of you have even tasted your food for the past ten minutes."

Wordlessly, they filed back to the kitchen and set their plates on the counter. Ann wrote down what she wanted then pulled out the slips of paper, placed hers on bottom, and with ceremonious deliberation selected one of the other three.

"I'd recognize this chicken scratching anywhere. Eazy wants a vibrator."

Ann almost felt sorry for her. Almost. It took them a few seconds to recover from the shock.

"A dildo?" Merry asked.

"I've been single a long time," came Eazy's defensive response. "And I've always wondered what the...big deal...was."

Everyone sniggered then burst into laughter.

"Some of them *are* pretty big," Merry said with a laugh.

“Leave it to you to already be intimate with something like that. Well, if you’re just going to make fun of me,” Eazy said in a huff, “I might as well...”

“Oh, Eazy!” Ann cried, throwing an arm about her shoulders. “I’ve never had one either, so this could be fun. Let’s go shopping!”

Amidst Eazy’s furious blushing and Merry’s shrieks, they all gathered their purses and jackets and headed toward Eazy’s car, piling in like sorority sisters.

“You’ve probably never needed one,” Eazy grumbled.

“I’ll have you know that I was celibate for several months after all my husbands’ deaths,” Ann said, climbing in beside her and fastening the seat belt. “There’s no shame in acknowledging you have needs. Besides, this could be fun.”

* * *

Christy’s Toybox on North May wasn’t deserted, as Eazy had hoped. But there were only a few customers milling about. And rather than waste time fording through a sea of feather boas and a mountain of shocking videos while looking for dildos, to Leta Lou and Merry’s amusement and Eazy’s chagrin, Ann nabbed the sales clerk immediately and asked her to direct them to the vibrators.

“What do you suggest?” Ann asked, once they’d arrived at the displays at the back of the store that wrapped around them on three sides.

The gum-smacking clerk blew a bubble, popped it and gave Ann a blank stare. “Why, whatever trips your trigger, sister,” she said noncommittally. “You want motion in the ocean, I’d say the Eager Beavers or one of the Power Bunnies. For variation in size, the row behind you goes from magnum to derringer, and there are more over there by the cock rings and flavored lotions.”

Eazy picked up what looked like a large water pistol. “What the hell is this thing?”

"It's a dildo, like the others," the clerk said. "The little thing right there that you're using as a trigger...it does look like a gun, doesn't it?" she continued. "But that's for your smaller hole. You know—your asshole."

Eazy dropped it as if it had bitten her, triggering a wave of laughter throughout their end of the building.

"You're shittin' me."

"Nope. Some women get off on that sort of thing. Men, too."

"But it has water in it," Eazy said in her own defense. "The thing has water. What's a dildo doing with water in it like a squirt gun?"

The sales clerk recovered it from the middle of the rack where Eazy had dropped it and pushed a button, turning it on.

"See?" She held it up for them all to see. "Bubbles."

"But whose gonna watch it?" Eazy asked with a perplexed frown. "I mean, it goes...well, you know."

"Sometimes there's a man down there, honey," the clerk said, unblinkingly. "And the bubbles are there for a reason, for *her* pleasure. Makes the thing throb very gently, not like someone hammering you."

Eazy still wasn't satisfied. "Where do the bubbles go?"

The clerk sighed impatiently and explained. "They don't go anywhere—they are regenerated by the battery. Bubbles equal satisfaction. Like a hot tub for your pussy."

By the time they'd all recovered, they were only halfway through with their shopping. Each of them found *the one* they wanted, along with either a bottle or tube of flavored lotion or gel, a video or two, and even a deck of playing cards.

"Another fantasy of yours?" Ann asked Eazy, eyeing the black Eager Beaver contraption she'd selected as they prepared to pay for their purchases.

"Hey, this is as close as I'll ever get, so why not?" she reasoned. "Besides, the only other one they had this size was purple. That would be just too weird for me."

Ann was thrilled that the shopping trip had turned out to be so much fun, and even though she was starting to feel a little tired, she knew that she had to make it through the rest of this night.

“What’s next?” Merry asked, once they were settled back into Eazy’s Cadillac.

Ann reached into her purse and pulled out the slips of paper she’d brought with her. Closing her eyes like some swami or fortuneteller, she chose one.

“This must be Leta Lou’s,” Ann said. “Looks like the next thing we’re all doing is getting tattoos!”

Love—as unpredictable as the weather

Blame the Rain

© 2006 Ann Cory

When Sable Morrison drives into the back end of handsome Maxwell Benning's new car, she is certain things will only get worse. Little has gone right in her life lately, and the last thing she needs is a new distraction.

Well-to-do Maxwell finds himself enamored over the beautiful stranger and treats her to an evening where inhibitions are left behind. He strongly believes fate had a hand in their accidental meeting, and does everything he can to make the night last.

While Sable is busy placing blame on herself for the evening's events, Maxwell prefers to blame the rain.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Blame the Rain*:

She pocketed the poor excuse for a tip and brushed a strand of bottled Champagne Blonde hair from her face. The day had dragged on and her feet longed to be submersed in warm water. Sable pulled off her ketchup-stained apron and left it in a crumpled heap on the counter.

"That's it. I'm done," she muttered to no one in particular and thrust both arms into her skimpy jacket.

They'd all heard the words a thousand times, but this time she meant it. No more waiting tables. She was through with earning a few extra bucks by cheapening herself for the classless men who walked in and out of the door, in and out of her life.

The smell of stale garbage and hard rain filled her nose the moment she stepped out the back door and onto the sidewalk. She wrapped her jacket tightly around her frame to block the chill in the air. Dimly lit streetlamps guided her to the beat-up old Chrysler she called

transportation. Within seconds, she was completely drenched and silently cussing up a storm. Two solid weeks of rain was enough to send her willingly to the nearest padded room.

She flung herself into the seat and started up the rusted beast. Once, twice, finally the third time the engine caught. Sable checked the rear view mirror and backed out slowly. Between the dark and the rain she could hardly see a thing. She turned on the radio and, after several tries to find a decent station, gave up and switched it off.

Her stomach grumbled as she drove by one fast food joint after another. Thanks to months of working around grease and lard every day, her appetite for quick and easy was ruined. Thoughts of a tantalizing pasta dish piled with noodles and a succulent Bolognese sauce ran through her mind. Half a loaf of crusty bread, layered with just the right amount of butter and fresh garlic to add a zip to her tongue. Washed down with a full-bodied Cabernet Sauvignon to liven up her palate. It had been a long time since she'd treated herself to such luxury. Times were tough and self-indulgence would have to wait.

She turned her head as she passed by the famed Vino's Italian Patisserie when the sound of squealing tires caught her attention. Sable turned in time to see a blur of red lights too close for comfort. She slammed on her brakes, the car skidding side to side. The car finally stopped, but not before making contact with what looked like a brand new Mini Cooper S.

She beat her fists against the steering wheel and screamed at the top of her lungs. "Noooo! Tell me this isn't happening. I can't afford another increase to my car insurance!"

The driver's side door flung open and a tall, dark figure came toward her swiftly. For a fleeting moment, she considered backing up and racing off, but her conscience wouldn't let her. Like every other time in her life, she would have to face the music.

Her legs shook as she rolled down the window. A steady stream of rain battered her face and the upholstery of her car. She had no idea what to say, but she sure as hell wasn't going to cry.

An angry voice cut into her desperate attempt to pretend she was anywhere else.

“Do you realize what you did? I just bought the damn thing!”

Sable wiped the side of her face and tried to make eye contact. “Wait. Let me explain.”

“What is there to wait for? I want insurance details, name and phone number, and I want to see some ID. Right now.”

She scrounged around inside her purse but couldn’t see a thing. Her interior lights had burned out a month ago and the constant rain in her face only made it more difficult.

“Look, sir? I understand your anger, I really do. Can we talk about this somewhere a little less...wet?”

The man bent down and looked at her. “Pardon me?”

“I-I asked if we could talk about this somewhere out of the rain?”

He stood up and looked over the hood of her car, at his dented bumper, and back at her. “I suppose that would be more convenient. Why don’t we dash into the restaurant over there?”

She squinted to where he had motioned and groaned. “Um. I don’t think I’m dressed in the right kind of clothes for such a fancy place. Maybe we could go to the record store at the corner.”

He shook his head, sending drops of rain off his hat and into her face. “No, I’m afraid that won’t do. Come, the patisserie will be just fine. Move your car over to the side.”

She blinked her wet lashes at him, hoping he’d somehow magically disappear. When she realized that home was a long way off at this point, she sighed and did as he’d suggested. He waited for her to park and then offered his hand to help her out. Struck by his good manners, she reached for him a little too eagerly, in her opinion, and together they made a mad dash for the covered sidewalk.

A doorman dressed in a fancy suit tipped his hat and ushered them inside. Immediately the sumptuous aromas of spaghetti sauce, lasagna and fresh baked bread made her mouth water.

Sable turned to address the guy she was about to pay a fortune to and was caught off guard by his regal good looks. He'd removed his hat and trench coat and hung them on the brass coat rack. She swallowed hard as she took in his nicely proportioned physique. Dressed in a charcoal-gray cashmere sweater and snug black slacks, he looked like someone who frequented such restaurants on a regular basis. His chestnut brown hair was slightly damp and curled a bit around the tips of his ears. The big, expensive Rolex on his wrist was a dead giveaway the guy had money.

He ran a hand through his hair and then motioned at her. "May I take your jacket?"

Sable's body had warmed from staring at him and she'd forgotten she still had it on. She quickly pulled off the soaked thing and winced as most of the water drops splattered on him in the process.

Embarrassed, she hung it up herself. "Sorry about that."

A pleasant looking man with a portly body and long, curly mustache greeted them with menus and an Italian accent. "Good evening, folks. Table for two this evening?"

Sable looked toward the beautiful stranger and gave him a half-smile.

He put his hand on the small of her back and cleared his throat. "Good evening, Reginald. A booth in the back would be preferable."

"As you like, Mr. Benning. If you would kindly follow me this way."

She enjoyed the formal conversation between the men and wondered if that was how it was when one was rich.

Mister Tall, Dark and Handsome held out his hand to let her go first. Their server, led them to a small booth in the far corner with a single candle floating in a martini glass. Sable looked around at all the people busy with their own private conversations, almost all of them dressed in elegant dresses and suits. She felt sorely out of place and hurried to sit down.

"Will you be interested in wine this evening, Mr. Benning?"

She started to protest but was interrupted.

“Yes, I believe we will.”

“Very well, I shall leave you to peruse the wine list.”

“Thank you.” Handsome leaned forward and winked. “You don’t mind, do you?”

The candlelight lit up his deep blue eyes, highlighting gold flecks in the corners. She certainly wouldn’t mind staring into those bad boys for the rest of the evening.

“No, not at all. It’s just that, well...I thought we came in here to discuss damages to your vehicle. I know I’m completely to blame and saying how sorry I am doesn’t even begin to repair the damage...”

He waved his hand at her and sat back against the booth. “Let’s not be too hasty. I’m not entirely sure it was your fault.”

“But—”

“It’s a tough call.”

Sable shook her head and bit her bottom lip. “You don’t understand. I couldn’t stop as fast as I’d wanted. The tires spun and the front of my car dented your bumper. I was obviously following much too close.”

“I don’t think that would have happened if it weren’t for the fact that I pulled out in front of you. Which would put it at my fault.”

Sable shook her head. Was he kidding? Her eyes hadn’t even been on the road at the time. She’d been too busy daydreaming about being inside the very restaurant she was in right now.

“I’m afraid I’m going to have to insist on taking the blame here.”

“How about we blame the rain instead?”

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