



Cabin Fever

Vanessa Hart

(c) 2004

Cabin Fever

Vanessa Hart

Published 2004

ISBN 1-59578-052-1

Published by Liquid Silver Books, imprint of Atlantic Bridge Publishing, 10509 Sedgegrass Dr, Indianapolis, Indiana 46235. Copyright © 2004, Vanessa Hart. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Liquid Silver Books
<http://lsbooks.com>

Email:
raven@lsbooks.com

Cover Art
by April Martinez

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

Dedication:

Thanks to the world's best critique partners and writing colleagues, Jasmine, Dee, Leigh, Judy, Sue, and Rae. A special thank you to author Rae Morgan, for lending her legal expertise to authenticate this story's heroine. Most of all, thanks to my hubby for his love, support, and expert advice with auto mechanics.

Chapter One

Benjamin Travis scraped the cold pizza into the trash. The sausage and mushroom creation had been his best yet, with homemade crust as thin as he'd ever eaten in a pizzeria. Paige would've been impressed if she'd managed to show up for dinner. But the pizza was now cold and discarded, exactly like their marriage.

He'd promised himself one last try before admitting defeat. Paige, after working all weekend doing legal research, had assured him there'd be nothing to keep her late today. So he'd hurried home after work and put together her favorite pizza. He'd had it in the oven in record time. Just as he rolled the blade of the pizza cutter through the thick, gooey cheese, the telephone rang.

He hadn't needed Caller ID to know it was his wife. "Ben, it's crazy here. I'm going to need another couple of hours. Don't wait on me for dinner."

That had been almost four hours ago. An hour for every year of their marriage. Funny, but he'd thought Paige King had married *him* four years ago. As it turned out, she'd already been married ... to the law firm.

Wiley, Chatham, and Howell, one of the busiest firms in Kentucky, had hired Paige right out of the University of Louisville's law school. Ben had jokingly referred to the firm as Willie, Cheatum, and How, which upset Paige to no end. She'd lost her amazing wit and crazy sense of humor about the time she lost her sex drive.

Or had she? He couldn't help the nagging suspicion that she was sleeping with some snappy young attorney at the firm. Could there really be that much work that she had to be in the office twelve hours a day, sometimes six days a week? Was she really too tired to have sex with her husband when she finally dragged herself home, or was she too tired *from* sex?

In the beginning, Paige had wanted to prove to herself and her family that she could make it on her own. Well, bully for her. She'd proven it time and again, and at the expense of her marriage. Ben held a lower priority than her family, just as his mother had warned he would. Hell, Paige made more time for her manicurist than she did him!

She didn't know it yet, but tonight she faced an ultimatum when she got home. If she greeted him without a kiss, if she talked a tad too much about Wilson Howell overworking her, if she fell asleep hugging her laptop instead of her husband, then Ben was moving out and moving on. They were too young to be tied down to one another if the marriage wasn't working.

He'd made his decision and he'd stick to it. Just as he wiped down the counter, the motor growled on the garage door opener. Paige, finally. He pulled out her wilted salad from the refrigerator, setting it at her place on the breakfast bar. Then he poured her a goblet of her favorite merlot and waited.

* * * *

Paige King-Travis dropped her briefcase and laptop by the door. Damn Wilson Howell! He'd waited until after four-thirty to meet with her and Letisha on the case, then debated every court decision she'd offered as precedent. Now she'd need to add further

case review to her already crowded schedule. Letisha had wanted to go to Harper's and get drunk, but Paige just longed to be home.

She would complain to her associates but they were as overworked as she. Now she hardly had energy left to drag herself to bed, even though she had a briefcase filled with her case work.

But oh, what a divine aroma greeted her from the kitchen! Garlic, oregano...

Her stomach growled its appreciation. Ben stood by the breakfast bar, waiting to serve dinner. He'd cooked tonight. Come to think of it, her husband had taken over the cooking. Often he'd reheat a plate for her when she dragged in late. How long had that been going on? He never complained. She made herself a mental note to tell him how much she appreciated it.

"You cooked Italian!"

He shrugged. "Pizza. I had to throw it out."

"Throw it out?! Why?"

"Paige, I was taking it out of the oven when you called. It doesn't keep well after four hours."

Four hours? Paige winced. Had it been that long? "Sorry."

"Your loss. Mushroom and sausage."

Mercy, she loved mushroom and sausage pizza! She cradled Ben's jaw in her hand, smoothing his nine-o'clock stubble with her thumb. "You're right. My loss. I would've gladly ditched the low carb diet for that."

"There's salad. I could make you something else..."

"Don't bother, sweetie." She dropped her hand from his face before she started something she was too exhausted to finish. "I'm really too tired to eat much, anyway, thanks to my inconsiderate boss."

"Bad day?" His tone sounded anything but sympathetic. What was with him? Maybe he was peeved about the pizza.

"Actually, the morning ran smoothly. My afternoon is another story. Wilson challenged every case I used for precedent in the brief, but not before I was ready to leave the office." Stepping out of her leather pumps, she bent to pick them up. "Damn, I get tired of jumping through hoops to meet other people's schedules."

"Why do you do it?"

"What? You know why I do it, Ben. You of all people know how important it is that I make a success on my own, without any help from the family." At least she thought he knew. But again she read no sympathy in his eyes.

"Your family's opinion takes priority over mine, I've accepted that. But, Jesus, you're already a member of the Bar and the top firm in the state. How much more success do you need?"

What had he said? Her family took priority? He knew better than that. Too fatigued and stressed to argue, she merely shrugged.

"Paige. We need to talk."

"Can we table this discussion, honey? I'm really tired."

"You always are." He paced the hardwood floor between the dining area and kitchen. "I just don't fit into your world."

Man, he really was in a snit tonight. "Don't be silly..."

"This marriage isn't working, Paige. We need a time-out."

What?!

Paige stared at him, speechless. All this over a friggin' pizza? The ingrate! Had he forgotten how hard she'd worked for him? Could he have started his own business without her income? While all these thoughts raced through her fatigued brain, Paige couldn't form an intelligent rebuttal.

Ben rubbed at his sandy-haired whiskers and met her gaze with a frown. "I'll pack my things."

Pack his things? He was leaving her?

"Where will you go?" She responded like an automaton, in a surprisingly normal tone. All of her body functions—circulation, breathing, swallowing—must be on automatic pilot because she was paralyzed with shock. But she knew better than to let her emotions rule her tongue. She'd never succeed in the courtroom if she allowed that to happen.

He shrugged. "I'll get a room near the shop."

"What if I need to reach you?"

"I'll call and let you know my number."

Ben wasted no time gathering his things. Had he been packed, just waiting for her to get home? If his mind was made up, nothing she could say now would make him stay. So she said nothing as he loaded his pick-up truck and fled.

Despite her fatigue, sleep eluded her until finally she'd cried herself to sleep. An hour later when the alarm buzzed, she shuffled to the medicine cabinet for Advil.

* * * *

"Okay, tell me what's wrong."

Paige surrendered her hands to her manicurist, Karen, and sighed. Two years ago, the tiny woman with Asian features had transformed Paige's well-chewed nails into glamorous acrylic beauties, launching a regular manicure appointment every other Wednesday. Paige probably could've stretched the interval to every three weeks, but she looked forward to escaping the office and visiting with Karen.

"Why do you think anything's wrong?"

"Girl, you look like hell."

She resisted a sarcastic *thank you*. "Ben left me."

According to his message on her voice mail, he'd moved to an extended-stay lodge near Fern Creek. This was no tiff over a pizza. Ben meant to separate.

"That's too bad," Karen said, shaking her head. She wiped Paige's nails with a polish-remover-soaked cotton ball. "Why? Did he say?"

"All he said was, 'Our marriage isn't working. We need a time-out.' Time out! Like you'd give a misbehaving toddler. Then he packed up his clothes and his Billy Joel CDs and left."

Even now, two days later, Paige ached from his sudden departure. She'd barely slept, and eating was out of the question. Good thing for the acrylics or he'd have her chewing her nails to the quick. How could he rip out her heart without a glance backward?

"Time out, my ass," Karen muttered. "You can bet it's another woman."

"You think?" God, Paige couldn't bear the vision of Ben in another woman's arms. Could he already have picked out a replacement? Her stomach roiled at the prospect, threatening to toss her cookies ... if she'd had any to eat.

Karen nodded. "Afraid so. Have you seen any of the signs?"

"You mean like lipstick on his collar or strange phone calls? No."

"Like, did he give you an address? If not, he's probably shackled up..."

"Yes, he did." She normally appreciated Karen's candor, but today found it insensitive. "Jeez, you're harsh."

"Just realistic. Had he stopped sleeping with you or made excuses to avoid sex? Wait..." Karen shook her head. "Don't answer *me*. These are questions to ask yourself."

Paige bit her lip. Although she and Ben had shared a bed, they hadn't made love with each other for weeks, although she, not Ben, had been the one too exhausted after long hours at the office. As was the case Monday night, she was often too wiped out to eat dinner.

Karen was probably right. Odds were Ben had himself another woman. Her suspicions filled her with pain rather than anger. She loved Ben. Always would. Where had things gone wrong?

Shit.

"Your hands are trembling," Karen said, tightening her grip. "I can't work my magic if you don't hold still."

"Sorry." Paige sighed. "Too bad you can't work magic on my marriage."

"Not my area of expertise, honey. I'm divorced, remember?" Karen stopped to slip on a mask, like those worn by health officials. In Karen's case, it was protection against the acrylic dust as she trimmed the nails. "I'll be honest, though. I think he's a fool to give you up."

"Thanks."

"No, I mean it. You have that perfect hair, flawless skin. I have customers who would die for your dainty hands. You're slim, pretty..."

"Wow, Karen, your tip just doubled!"

They both laughed, then Karen sobered. "I'm serious. Not only do you have it over any other twenty-something in the looks department, you're a smart career woman and a sharp dresser. Why should your man go looking anywhere else? He's an idiot who doesn't deserve you."

"There's no evidence to support infidelity here. You can't convict a man on suspicion alone." Paige worried her lip, now raw from chewing.

"Hey, I'm not prosecutin' the guy," Karen teased.

"Maybe it's wishful thinking, but I'm not convinced he's been unfaithful. That's just not the man he is."

"So, what are you saying? You want him back?"

"I don't know..." Paige considered the question while Karen applied more acrylic. True, Paige spent seventy hours a week working, but Ben knew why. She wanted to earn her own money, not be the spoiled, pampered heiress. And her income had given them the financial security that enabled Ben to start his own business, a business that was now making money after only three years. Yes, Ben worked hard, too, which was why they hadn't had much time together lately. "It'd help if I knew what went wrong."

"The creep walked out on you."

"He's not a creep," Paige shot back. Far from it, Ben had always been her Rock of Gibraltar. He'd kept her grounded. She loved him, depended on him for more than she'd

realized. Could he have changed so suddenly? Or had their relationship eroded gradually and she too blind to see? “Anyway, to answer your question, *yes*, I want him back.”

Karen dipped her brush into a bottle of foul-smelling liquid, then into the acrylic powder. As she filled in the gap formed by new growth of nail, she asked, “Do you have a plan of action?”

“Not yet. Any suggestions?”

Karen shrugged. “How often have you told me ‘knowledge is power’? You need one of those how-to books.”

“How to? You mean like that relationship rescue stuff?”

Another shrug. “I’m thinking more along the lines of how to drive your man crazy in bed. Make him *so* sorry he left. Make him miss you. Make him unable to live without you.”

“How do I do that?”

Karen turned her attention to Paige’s other hand. “I’m talking *sex*, girlfriend!”

What sex? Paige hardly had the energy to floss her teeth. She lowered her voice.

“You think it’s about the sex?”

“It’s always about the sex. Okay, maybe it’s not *only* about sex, but if you work on the bedroom part, the rest will work out.”

Paige digested that. Had she taken Ben for granted? Had she hurt his ego by letting their sex life slide? Had he sought comfort elsewhere, or was he tempted to?

She hadn’t battled her way through law school and the dog-eat-dog world of the firm to admit defeat. She’d fight for Ben, no matter what it took.

If she wasn’t too late.

Chapter Two

Ben pulled the torque wrench toward him until satisfied that the bolt was tight. Wiping the wrench clean of grease, he hung it on its pegboard hook, then tidied up the bay. He flipped the sign in the glass window of his garage from *Open* to *Closed*. The day's work finished, he was free to go home.

Then he remembered.

These days, *home* amounted to a two-room suite at the Extend-a-Stay. No more two story condo in Louisville's east end, no more workout room in the basement. No more plasma screen TV and DVD player. No more wood-burning fireplace or redwood deck overlooking the park.

No more wife.

Of course, his wife had been missing for a long time. He'd just postponed the inevitable until two days ago. He'd told her, "I need a time-out." But he couldn't see returning. He'd lost any hope of reconciliation when Paige let him walk out.

What had he expected? A tearful woman, begging to make things right? An offer of marriage counseling, maybe? Who was he kidding? She'd behaved exactly as he'd known she would, with her controlled courtroom behavior, her face giving no clue to her emotions. Or maybe no emotion was left. As far as Ben could tell, his wife accepted his prognosis of their marriage, relieved that one of them had finally admitted the sad truth.

Still, he'd hoped for a spark of a reaction, some glimmer of hurt or disappointment on her face. He'd searched her eyes for a trace of the tenderness they'd once shared. Walking out the door had been the most unpleasant experience of his adult life. He hadn't wanted to leave, but what was the point? He was like a piece of furniture, or live-in help. He would've felt like a male prostitute if they'd at least enjoyed the hot sex they'd had the first year following their wedding.

He had to stop that line of thought or he'd break something. Just as he inserted his key into the deadbolt, the telephone rang. He rushed back inside and grabbed for the phone. It could be a customer, and Ben wasn't about to turn down business, even after-hours.

"Travis Towing and Repair."

"Ben, it's Mama. Is this a bad time?"

"I was just closing up." He was in no mood for Mama's questions. He knew she'd be curious about his leaving Paige, but he wasn't up to the inevitable lecture. "What's up?"

"I thought you might want to stop by for dinner, son. I know you're lonely..."

"I'm fine, Mama. I have leftovers in the fridge."

"Leftovers? You can't possibly be cooking in that hotel." She didn't even try to hide the censure in her tone. "Cooking is a woman's job."

"It has a kitchen bigger than some houses. You should come over and see..."

"You don't have to stay there, Benjamin. Your old room is waiting for you here."

Ben sighed. He could tell her that he'd rather be on his own. He could remind her that he was thirty years old. He could even point out that the efficiency hotel room was roomier than her house. But Mama would dismiss every argument he'd offer, so he simply said, "No."

“You aren’t thinking about going back to that woman, are you?”

“Paige has a name...”

“She has a name, all right.” Mama harrumphed, as he knew she would. “She’s a King and her mother’s a Haywood. I told you to stick to your own kind, son. Didn’t I tell you? They’ll always look down their noses at you.” *Blah, blah, blah.*

He’d heard this same lecture from the time he and Paige started dating. Yes, Paige’s mother was a snob, and so was Mama. She wore her working-class roots like a purple heart. Tuning her out, Ben had learned to just let her run on until she wound down. Unfortunately, tonight she had more energy than usual.

“Mama, I really need to close up. Can we continue this later?” No doubt they would, too. He could bet on it.

After extricating himself from the call, he again inserted his key in the deadbolt. Again, the phone rang. But this time it wasn’t his mother’s voice on the line.

“Ben, it’s Paige. Can you spare me a minute?”

Odd choice of words, since she’d hardly spared *him* a minute during the past year or two. But his gut twisted with the smooth, silky timbre of her voice. She still had his heart in a vise grip.

He envisioned her speeding along I-64 in her Volvo with her cell phone pressed to her ear. He’d asked her not to drive when using her cell, but she’d waved him off with “Everybody does it.”

Would her brunette curls be loose or confined by a tight bun at her nape? Had she worn her contact lenses today or were her eyes too tired from reading opinions, or whatever lawyers read when they researched? She often wore her Ben Franklin wire rims these days.

Not that it mattered. Even with the severe hair style and spectacles, Paige was beautiful. Her soft soprano voice still slipped free from time to time, in spite of the speech lessons she’d taken after her moot court instructor said she needed a stronger courtroom voice.

“What is it, Paige?” he asked after a long, awkward pause.

“We need to talk about this *time out*.”

“I think we said all we need to say Monday...”

“No, you may have. But I deserve a turn, don’t you think?”

“You didn’t seem inclined to talk that night...”

“You blindsided me, Ben. I hardly knew what to say. Besides, you seemed eager to leave.”

Had he? He’d been nervous, edgy. “Fair enough. So, talk.”

“I want to, uh, see if you’re busy this, er, weekend.”

What was this? The sharp-tongued attorney stumbling over her words?

“Why?”

“I’m asking for the weekend, Ben. Can you give us that? One weekend?”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m suggesting we go to Grandy’s cabin at Barren River and isolate ourselves until we ... talk this out.”

“This weekend?”

“Oh, I see. You already have plans. Fine...”

"I didn't say that." He finger-combed his hair, letting out a long sigh. "I just need to know the plan."

"Just the two of us talking. No distractions, no interference."

"Yeah, right. So you'll leave home the laptop, the files, the PDA and the cell phone?"

She hesitated a beat too long.

"That's what I figured," he said, and hung up.

*

That went well.

Paige tossed her cell phone onto the passenger seat. She started the engine and realized her hands were shaking again. Her attractive manicure spoke volumes about Karen's efficiency, considering Paige's emotional state. Gripping the leather-wrapped steering wheel, she managed to calm herself to the point she could drive.

She needed to get home and get to work. Sure, there was the Palmer case, but she had other work to do, too. Developing a plan to win back her husband took priority. No time for dinner—not that she could digest food. Maybe one of those low-carb diet shakes would get her through the evening. She pulled into a convenience store, grabbed a cold can of *SlimQuick* Chocolate from the cooler, and slipped behind the line of customers.

With only the one cashier, it took several minutes for Paige to check out, so she read tabloid headlines. *Aliens from outer space invented Viagra* was upstaged by *Nostradamus predicted Julia Roberts' twins*. Paige wished she were pregnant with twins. Ben would be thrilled, instead of wanting to end their marriage. He'd told her often that he wanted children, but she'd postponed starting a family until her career was established.

How much more success do you need?

She didn't have energy to spare her husband, let alone children. How long would she be spending six days a week at the firm? She was so close to making partner ... just another couple of years and she could slow down.

Couldn't she?

Did she want to be a working mom? She surely didn't want to be a stay-at-home boring wife whose life revolved around soccer games and PTA. Nor could she be the society mom like her mother, always volunteering for one charity event after another. No, Paige was an attorney. She loved the work, loved her life. Well, most of it. Pregnancy was out of the question, for more reasons than one. First, you had to have sex to get pregnant.

How long had it been since she and Ben had made love? God help her, she couldn't remember. Was it April? No, wait, they'd made love the night of Grandy's Kentucky Derby costume party, which would've been the first Saturday in May. That was—her befuddled mind finally produced the day's date—three months ago! Summer was almost over and so was her marriage.

No! Ben's hanging up on her was a setback, but she wasn't giving up. She'd been given a wake-up call when he'd moved out, that's all. She still had a chance to make things right ... didn't she?

As she progressed to the checkout, she caught the latest issue of *Power Woman*. She hadn't had time to read the magazine since her college days. It reminded her of *Cosmopolitan* but with a *Business Week* flavor. The cover story was another one of those

“having it all” essays about juggling career and home. She didn’t have to read that story. It exhausted her to think about mothering children while focusing on a career.

Then one article captured her attention: *Passport to Passion: Exotic Sex Tips From Around the World*.

If only Ben would spend the weekend with her at Grandy’s cabin, she’d use every trick imaginable. Hadn’t Karen said to drive him wild in bed so he couldn’t live without her? Paige snatched up the magazine and plopped it on the counter beside her *SlimQuick* Chocolate. She didn’t know how yet, but she’d get Ben to spend the weekend with her.

She still had time to work on the Palmer case. For once, her job wouldn’t take priority over her personal life. Until now she’d had no choice if she wanted to make partner. And she did. But things were going to change. Losing Ben wasn’t an option. She wouldn’t give up on “having it all.” No way. Not Power Woman Paige King-Travis.

She’d study the *Power Woman* article as if it were part of the bar exam. Then she’d find a way to implement every one of the “exotic sex tips,” even if it meant shopping at one of those adult novelty stores on Market Street. And a trip to a lingerie shop wouldn’t hurt, either.

Ben had no idea what she had in store for him.

Chapter Three

The rest of the week dragged for Ben. He managed to dodge his mother's dinner invitations, but not her prying phone calls. She'd picked out a good divorce attorney for him and even had a girl in mind she wanted him to meet. She had always been in denial about his love for Paige. It'd do no good to tell Mama that he couldn't just rush to divorce court and on to other women.

After Wednesday, when he'd hung up on Paige, he'd heard nothing more from her. She'd given up too quickly, which served only to reinforce his expectations. She wasn't committed to saving their marriage, not at the expense of her career. Of course, hanging up on her had been poor manners and went against everything he'd been taught about courtesy.

But, damn it all to hell, he'd had to escape temptation. If he hadn't hung up, he feared he'd be seduced into doing whatever she asked, and he'd vowed those days of playing doormat were over.

He glanced at the clock. With one more hour until closing time, he considered locking up early. He had nothing pressing, but he had no plans for the weekend. Again, his mind returned to Paige's invitation to her grandmother's cabin. There was a time when he would have loved to spend a romantic weekend with his wife. Now her suggestion seemed like a counter-offer.

If he wasn't worth her time before, why now? What had changed? He hadn't walked out on their marriage to make a point. He'd given his all and it hadn't been enough. Now she was willing to throw him a few crumbs? No, thanks, lady.

By 4:15, Ben abandoned his garage and headed home to his studio apartment. He couldn't concentrate on his projects, and no new customers were calling, so why not start the weekend early? For three years, he'd given ten hours a day to his business and it had paid off. The world wouldn't end if he quit early once.

His phone was ringing as he opened the door. Running inside, he snatched up the phone and answered.

"Ben, I apologize for bothering you but I have an emergency and you're the only one who can help."

His heart rate accelerated and he broke out in a sweat. Paige was in trouble. "What's wrong, babe?" The endearment slipped past his lips from habit.

"My Volvo won't start, no matter what I do. I got one of those silly *Service Engine Soon* lights."

The damn car was her emergency? He let his annoyance creep into his tone. "Call the auto club."

"Uh, I'm a little bit out of their coverage area."

"Where exactly are you?"

"Well, um, remember I invited you to spend the weekend with me at Grandy's cabin? When you turned me down, I figured I'd go alone. So here I am, stranded."

"That's a three-hour drive. Didn't you work today?"

"I took off early. Look, if you can't help me, say so. As you pointed out, it's a three-hour drive. It'll be dark soon..."

“I’m on my way. Better give me the directions. It’s been awhile.”

Later, after he’d checked his tool box for supplies, he sped down the interstate toward Barren River Reservoir, knowing full well that Paige had manipulated him. She thought she’d trick him into spending the weekend with her. He couldn’t wait to fix her phony car trouble, then drive away, without so much as a good-bye kiss.

* * * *

Paige clicked off her cell phone and sighed. Ben was on to her. He’d serviced her nearly new Volvo himself, not three weeks earlier. He was the best auto mechanic in town. If something serious wasn’t wrong with her car, he’d be disgusted with her for her feeble charade.

She needed him in a protective, rescuing mood in order to put her plan into action. She knew diddly about cars, but she had to do something. She climbed the sloping lakefront lot to the gravel drive. Perspiration dotted her forehead and she struggled to catch her breath. Neglecting her health was catching up to her. At the ripe old age of twenty-eight, she was pitifully out of shape. But when did she have time to work out?

“Save your energy, Paige,” she muttered as she opened the passenger door. “You’re going to need it this weekend if this works.”

She reached under the dash and felt around, hoping she didn’t shock herself on something electrical. Then inspiration struck. Electrical! Ben had once complained that electronics were the bane of his existence. He seldom had the right part on hand because he needed to order specific whatchamacallits for each model vehicle. If only she’d paid closer attention.

But that was the gist of the problem, wasn’t it? She hadn’t paid attention. She hadn’t seen him slipping away, hadn’t seen herself turning into a workaholic, hadn’t realized her marriage was in trouble until Ben took drastic action. Now she was the one using extreme measures.

Feeling around the neatly arranged parts beneath the dash, she pulled a plastic sleeve into view. It appeared to house a number of wires. Which wire would cause the most damage?

She slid out of the car long enough to fish her key from her skirt pocket then insert it into the ignition. She started the engine, then returned to the plastic sleeve of wires. Picking one at random, she yanked it free of its connection.

Bingo! The engine died. The *Service Engine Soon* light glowed red.
And for the first time that week, Paige smiled.

* * * *

Ben nearly missed the gravel drive to Beverly Haywood’s lake cabin. He’d been to the place only once, on the occasion of a weekend party celebrating his brother-in-law’s engagement to Shelby Simpson. They’d never married, although Ben wasn’t sure what had caused the break-up. He vaguely remembered the dark-haired woman, but her name was unforgettable. Like the Haywoods, the Simpsons were a part of Kentucky society, rubbing elbows with the likes of judges, celebrities, and the governor.

He eased past Paige's disabled Volvo and brought his pickup to a stop. Without announcing his arrival, he jumped from the cab. Hoisting his tool box, he headed for the car. He'd get the engine running, then bid Paige a hasty farewell.

Damn. She'd taken the keys. He had little choice now but to walk down to the cabin and face her. Just as she'd planned, no doubt. He left his tools and headed down the sloping lot, reminding himself to stay unaffected by seeing her again.

As he approached the house, he marveled at its simplicity and beauty. Rather than an ostentatious lake house, the Haywoods had built a modest log home in harmony with the surrounding woods and water. From the front, it appeared to be about a thousand square feet, a one-story structure. But the back of the cabin faced Barren River Reservoir on a fall-away lot, a wooden deck running the full length of the house and forming the top of the walk-out basement patio. The finished basement doubled the living space of the cabin, giving the interior a surprising spaciousness.

It was exactly the home, he suddenly realized, that he'd dreamed of someday sharing with Paige. Why had he been reluctant to tell her? Had he known somehow that it was too modest for her taste? *Good enough for a vacation home, but not your primary residence.* Had his mother been right about Paige, or had he listened to his mother too often?

A little late to worry about that now. He rang the bell and Paige pulled open the door. He clenched his hands to keep from pulling her into his arms. No matter what he'd told himself during the long drive, he was in no way prepared for the sight of her.

Her blue eyes reminded him of the woman's who'd played Wonder Woman in the old TV series. Chestnut hair brushed her shoulders. It'd been ages since he'd seen her wear her hair down, and he ached to comb his fingers through the strands. She looked feminine and approachable and ... dangerous. He had to ignore the way her blouse had one too many buttons undone to reveal the swell of her breasts, or the sight of her slender, sexy legs beneath the short skirt.

He recognized the clothes. The white blouse and gray skirt were part of Paige's office uniform of conservative suits. But she'd ditched the jacket and loosened her shirt. And kicked off her shoes. Damn, but her dainty bare feet aroused him as much as anything, with her toenails painted hot pink. Hot pink! *Not* the natural look of her manicure.

If she wore a bra, it wasn't much. Her rosy nipples stood at attention against the silk fabric of her blouse. Paige had great tits. They fit perfectly in his hands and—

Damn! He pulled his gaze from temptation and held out his hand. "I need the keys."

He hadn't realized how harsh he'd sounded until she flinched. Her eyes drew his gaze and he realized how heavily she'd applied makeup to hide dark crescents beneath them. For one insane moment, he wondered if his absence had put them there. But she'd been overworked and tired before he left. The firm, not the marriage, had put the strain in her eyes.

Her welcoming smile slipped and she dug the keys out of her skirt pocket. "Don't you want a cold drink first? It's hot out here."

"Sure, I could use a Coke." He followed her inside the air-conditioned living room. Ignoring the inviting sway of her hips, he focused on the cabin. He'd forgotten how rustic the interior was, with its exposed beamed ceiling and natural wood-paneled walls. Woven

rugs covered parts of the planked floor. A double-sided fireplace, made with large flagstones, served both the living room and kitchen.

She pulled two cans of Diet Coke from the refrigerator. "Here."

He avoided touching her fingers as he accepted the cold drink. Whenever he and Paige touched they'd always made sparks, and it had nothing to do with static discharge. Sex had always been hot between them until...

Hell, no wonder he wanted to pull off her clothes and drive himself inside her. He'd been without too long. Struggling to remember the last time they'd made love, he didn't catch what she was saying. "Sorry. What?"

"I asked if you'd stay the night. I hate for you to make that long drive after working on my car."

Mischief made him ask, "What makes you think I can fix it tonight? It has to be something serious for the engine not to start."

Paige shrugged. "Nobody knows more about my car than you. You're the car wizard in my book."

Wizard? As he swallowed the icy soda, he closed his eyes. She'd said "you're the car wizard" with pride, as if she admired him. God help him, was he snatching at crumbs? Was he desperate for any sign of approval from her? Hadn't he had enough of living in her shadow?

He drained the can, then crushed it for the recycling bin. He'd like nothing better than to sleep with Paige. He couldn't deny that. But he'd just be back where he started. "Look, we're separated, Paige. I don't think we should be sleeping under the same roof."

"We're not legally separated. Have you consulted an attorney?"

He remembered the lawyer his mother had mentioned. Should he lie and say yes? If he didn't, Paige wouldn't take his leaving seriously. She'd think it was a ploy for attention or ... who knows what she'd think? Suddenly it seemed important that she think he'd taken steps to protect himself. After all, his wife was a hot-shot lawyer with Willie, Cheatem, and How. He'd better look out for himself.

"No, I haven't filed, but yes, I have an attorney."

She blinked, and grew pale. A knot formed in his gut for the pain he saw in her eyes. He'd put it there. But why pain? Did she truly miss him? She'd hardly had time to kiss him in the mornings as they left for work, barely had time for him at night. What was there to miss? No, he'd mistaken injured pride for pain.

"You don't waste time..."

"What's the point in dragging things out?"

She drew a deep breath and straightened her spine. "I guess you'd better look at my car so you can be on your way."

She wasn't hurt.

She was pissed.

The realization gave him satisfaction. Paige didn't like it when she wasn't in control. He'd surprised her. Well, Ben Travis wasn't going to be her lapdog anymore ... although the image of her giving him a lap *dance* flashed into his horny brain. *Get a grip, Ben.*

"Hand me your keys and follow me," he said, turning toward the door. "I need to get back to Louisville tonight." Before he lost his resolve and dragged her to the nearest bedroom.

Chapter Four

I need to get back to Louisville tonight.

Paige bit her tongue until she tasted blood. She wouldn't ask. Her worst fears confirmed, she now knew Ben meant business. He'd seen an attorney; he was in a rush to leave. To go to *her*, whoever the bitch was. Just as Karen said, Ben had another woman.

Nothing drove the point home more clearly than his indifference. After calling him, she'd showered, shaved, and cologned herself. She'd given herself the bedroom hair, loosened her blouse to reveal cleavage. Worn a wisp of a bra that revealed more than it covered. Karen had earned a generous tip for working Paige into her schedule yesterday for an emergency pedicure. All of her efforts to no avail.

Ben was unaffected. Immune.

Shit.

Fuming, she followed him up the steep walk to her car, hoping he wouldn't notice her reaction. She had her pride. He wouldn't see how her heart was breaking. He wouldn't know how she'd prepared for a weekend campaign to win him back, neglecting the all-important Palmer case. Luckily, she'd packed her laptop in the trunk, just in case her plans fell through. It appeared she'd have the rest of the weekend to concentrate on work after all.

She'd concentrated so much on work, she hadn't noticed her husband slipping away from her. Right under her nose, he'd fallen for someone else. Some other woman was screwing his brains out because she, Paige, had been too tired. Or too absent. Oh, God. How had she been so blind?

Ahead of her, Ben opened her car door and slid inside. She slowed her progress, hoping to recover her composure before facing him again. Clenching her hands to her side, she realized she was shaking. *I hate this!*

She stopped and called out to him that she'd be right back, then fled to the cabin. Paige, always level-headed, always cool and in control, was unraveling at *Mach One*.

* * * *

Ben opened the passenger door to get a breeze going through the hot vehicle. He tried the engine. Nothing. He suspected he knew how Paige had sabotaged the Volvo. She'd cut the hot wire to the ignition. He could splice the wires and wrap them in electrical tape until she could get back to Louisville.

But on closer inspection, he discovered he was only half right. She hadn't severed the wire, she'd pulled it out of the plastic box. Damn. Perspiration soaked him as he struggled with his large fingers to fish the tiny wire back into the housing. Finally, he managed to make a connection and the engine started. Still, it was a temporary fix. He needed to wedge something with the wire to keep it from working free on its own.

He turned off the engine then scurried down to the cabin, stopping just inside the door. Wet with sweat, he shivered from the frigid air blowing from the ceiling register.

"Paige?"

She didn't answer, but she was probably in the john. He continued into the kitchen in search of a toothpick or something similar that he could use to secure the wire. Paige's leather handbag lay on the counter beside her cell phone. What? No brief case? Her laptop wasn't in sight, either, but that didn't mean she had left it behind.

As he opened one drawer after another, the compressor on the air-conditioner kicked off. Intruding on the sudden quiet of the cabin, muffled sobs drifted from a distant room.

Paige?

Crying?

Ben could count on one greasy hand the number of times he'd seen her cry. Strong and composed, Paige always held her emotions in check. It had been one of their problems. He never quite knew how she felt. Weren't women the ones who were always wanting men to communicate, to get in touch with their feelings? Funny, but that's how Ben felt about Paige.

The protective emotional shield he'd erected around his heart dissolved like butter on a hot windshield. Whatever had her in tears, he had to know. He had to comfort her, whether or not she welcomed it. Following the sound, he found Paige standing in front of a bedroom mirror, her face in her hands.

"Paige, what is it?"

She spun toward him, dropping her hands to clutch her chest. "What are you doing in here? I thought you were outside."

The words weren't spoken with anger but with embarrassment, he realized, as he reached for her. "Babe, tell me what's wrong."

She shrugged away from his embrace. "You tell me. You're the one dropping the b-bombs in my life."

"You're upset because I said I had a lawyer?"

She hiccupped, sniffled, then wiped her eyes with her fists. "Well, duh!"

"What did you expect?" He'd asked the question softly, but she narrowed her eyes and her nostrils flared. He'd never seen this side of her, not in the four years they'd been married. Her anger was off the charts.

"Five days ago you announce you need a time-out. I was fat, dumb and happy, thinking everything was all right. You don't think I should be upset?"

God, he actually felt sorry for her. She'd been so wrapped up in her career she really hadn't seen it coming. But why should *he* feel guilty? He wasn't the one who'd abandoned their marriage.

"You're neither fat nor dumb, but I believed you to be unhappy. You didn't have time for me—for us—any more. I just got out of your way."

"So it's my fault. How convenient. Guess that soothes your guilty conscience..."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means that I'm no fool, Ben Travis. I know why you refused me this weekend, why you're in a rush to get home now. What I want to know is how long have you been screwing another woman behind my back?"

Ben stepped back as if dodging a left hook. Say what? She thought he had another woman? How could he possibly want anyone else when he was still lovesick over her? "You think I'd do that?" He backed from the room and turned to leave.

"What was I supposed to think? You hit me with this out of the blue, then refuse to talk to me about it." She slumped to the edge of the four-poster bed and hung her head.

“What about you? I figure you’re screwing some guy because you sure as hell aren’t having sex with me!” God, she was manipulating him, and she didn’t even seem to know it. Or was she sincerely hurt? He wanted to think so, but too many months of being ignored had taken their toll on him.

“Why didn’t you ask me this Monday night?” She sniffled. “If you hadn’t refused to talk...”

“Refused to talk?” He approached the bed and looked down at her. A subtle floral fragrance wafted from her, soft and seductive, but he resisted its allure. “Do the words ‘Can we table this discussion?’ ring a bell?”

She didn’t answer but shook her head. What did that mean? Resignation? Denial? Disgust?

Ben had two choices. He could finish with the Volvo and leave, or he could wrap his arms around her and join her on the bed. He thought of old song lyrics, “should I stay or should I go.” Pulled between hope that Paige still loved him and the reality that she wasn’t going to change, he debated.

Yes, he should leave. He hadn’t decided to end their marriage without a lot of forethought. He couldn’t see beating the proverbial dead horse. Why prolong his own agony? Make a clean break now, as he’d planned. It had taken all of his resolve to walk out Monday evening. If he caved now, he might not find the strength again. He should make an exit as soon as possible.

Absolutely.

But he couldn’t leave her like this. God help him, he wouldn’t walk away, not if there was a tiny seed of hope. He dropped to the bed beside her and pulled her into his arms.

*

Paige’s first inclination was to resist Ben’s embrace, but how could she? She wanted him, needed him. Falling into his arms was the most natural thing in the world.

Damp from perspiration, his shirt grew wetter from her tears. Damn it, why couldn’t she stop crying? She buried her face into his shoulder, breathing in the scent of him, a mixture of sunshine and Irish Spring soap. He’d smelled the same that summer day five years ago, when she’d lost Chattel.

Chattel was her beloved nine-month-old Maltese puppy, her birthday present from Grandy, whose own Maltese, Monique, had given birth to Chattel and three females who’d subsequently been sold. On a routine walk near Paige’s apartment, Chattel had spotted a squirrel and chased after it, somehow wiggling free of his harness.

It happened in the blink of an eye. Before Paige could give chase, Chattel ran into the street and was struck by a motorcycle. The biker jumped off to render aid, but Chattel was beyond his help.

At that moment, Ben had pulled up in his vintage pick-up. She’d been dating Ben for just a short time but welcomed his timely arrival. Gently cradling Chattel in his arms, he carried him to his truck. Paige jumped in the passenger side. Ben laid Chattel in her lap, then rushed to the nearest animal hospital.

Chattel’s little body shivered and he whined weakly as Ben maneuvered the truck through afternoon traffic. The puppy died in Paige’s lap before they’d made it inside the vet’s office. Wracked with guilt—had she loosened the harness too much? Failed to keep Chattel from harm’s way?—and grief, Paige cried in Ben’s arms.

Until now, she'd forgotten Ben's tenderness, his own tears for her loss. He'd told her he loved her, that her pain was his pain. She'd known in that instant that no man would ever measure up to Benjamin Travis. She proposed to him the following weekend.

Memories of Chattel's death brought an onslaught of fresh tears, tears of mourning for her lost marriage. How had she lost Ben? What would she do without him?

He kissed her hair, her forehead, her temple. Then he kissed her cheek. She gained control of her tears as she lost control of other parts of her body. Moisture between her legs took up where the tear ducts left off, and her breath quickened.

Had he any idea how his kisses of comfort were seducing her? When his own breathing labored, she almost smiled. He wasn't unaffected from holding her close.

"Paige," he murmured against the sensitive spot behind her ear. "Don't cry."

"I was thinking about Chattel."

He stiffened. "You're crying about your dog?"

She shook her head against his chest. "No. I don't usually cry, you know."

"So why now?"

"I'm crying about us. This." She turned her face toward his and found his lips, kissing him lightly. "I'm sorry."

"Hmm. Sorry?" He covered her mouth with his, his tongue urging her lips to open to him.

And they did. She savored the familiar taste of him and welcomed his tongue into the depths of her mouth. He stroked and sucked, lightly licked, then delved. This was no kiss of comfort. As he pulled her closer, his erection pushed into her thigh.

Ah, yes.

Ben wasn't indifferent to her after all.

*

Ben knew he'd lost the battle when Paige touched her lips to his. Powerless to stop the inevitable, he kissed her without restraint and tightened his embrace. She didn't object. In fact, she moaned and moved her hand to his crotch.

Hot damn, but her fingers felt terrific! She stroked him through his jeans the way she used to, teasing him with her fingers along the waistband.

He sucked in a breath. "Christ, babe, slow down. It's been a while since I've..."

"Has it?"

She shut off his answer by resuming the kiss, sucking his tongue into her mouth as if imitating a blow job. No, he couldn't think about a blow job or he'd come in his jeans.

His hand found its way to her luscious tits and he caressed them through the silk fabric. Then, as he deepened the kiss, he unfastened each button of her blouse, eager to touch her flesh.

Now.

He slid his thumb along the edge of the bra—what the hell? She was barely covered by a scrap of wispy gauze covering an underwire. Since when had she started wearing revealing underwear?

His brain shut down on that line of thinking. He didn't care when she'd decided to go skimpy. He loved it. Was the rest of her underwear as scanty? He grew harder at the prospect, eager to pull up her skirt to see.

But Ben wouldn't rush. Maybe it wasn't wise to have a last hurrah with his wife, maybe he was taking advantage of her emotional state. But she'd set the stage, luring him

to the cabin with her phony car trouble. His body craved her, and she seemed to want him, so he sent his conscience packing. He'd make this damn good, the best.

Unforgettable.

Chapter Five

Paige had succeeded in getting Ben to bed. Her preparations hadn't been wasted. She wouldn't squander a second of the opportunity. Despite the fevered pace, she'd stretch out the foreplay. She hadn't lost sight of the *Power Woman* article. She'd already committed every piece of "exotic sex" advice to memory. Now she'd apply what she'd learned.

And hope she passed her finals with flying colors.

"Make love with me, Ben," she purred, then backed away from the bed until she was standing beside it.

"I want to, babe." He reached for her, but she took a step back.

"Then watch."

With a quizzical grin, he leaned back on his elbows. She'd never prolonged foreplay when they'd made love. They were hot together and needed very little warming up. But four years of marriage and the fatigue of their careers had changed their sex habits into an infrequent routine.

That was about to change, if Ben gave her a second chance. No, she couldn't think in terms of saving the marriage now. She needed to focus on tonight, this weekend, what time she had to seduce him into loving her again. She'd concentrate on giving him the hottest sex of his life, then trust that everything else would work out.

Humming a Britney Spears song, she slipped first one arm then the other from her blouse. Swinging the garment, she sent it flying across the room. Then she caressed her abdomen and lower through the skirt as she moved her hands to the zipper. Slowly, keeping rhythm with the song she hummed, she slid the skirt down her legs in a move she'd seen in a movie about strippers. As the skirt puddled at her feet, she stepped free and gave it a kick in the direction of her blouse.

Continuing her striptease, she slid each strap of the demi-bra down her arms, then wiggled free, releasing her breasts. Ben's hazel eyes darkened and his mouth opened, as if he were on the verge of drooling. When she danced her way free of her new thong underwear, Ben groaned.

"Come here," he croaked.

"Not yet, stud. Now I'm going to undress you."

He stretched out on the quilted cover. "Be my guest."

"My pleasure," she said as she joined him on the bed. Leaning over him with her nipples pointed at his face, she urged him forward—his warm breath teasing her cleavage—so she could remove his shirt. She tugged it free, tossed it in a corner, then went to work on his belt. Slowly, she pulled down the zipper of his jeans.

"Hum that song again," he said.

Breathing heavily now, she struggled to carry a tune. Undoing his jeans was nearly her *own* undoing. When she tugged down his briefs, his gorgeous swollen penis sprang free, inviting her to taste its smooth crown.

Soon. First, she needed him naked. Determined not to rush, she slid his jeans and briefs to his ankles at a turtle's pace. She placed an open-mouthed kiss along the path on

either leg, tasting a hint of warm denim. Ben's muscles tensed beneath her mouth, but he didn't interrupt her slow seduction.

First one shoe, then the other dropped to the floor as she untied them. She peeled a sock from each of his feet with the same tempo as the song she hummed. Then she wriggled her body up the length of his until she lay atop him.

"I need to taste you," Ben said, then added, "please."

He didn't wait for her permission. Reaching for her breasts, he kneaded each of her sensitive globes with his strong hands. When he pulled one of her nipples between his lips, she stopped humming, breathing, or thinking. God, but the man knew his way around a woman's breasts!

"You always did know which buttons to push," she said. He just hadn't tried lately. Was that her fault or his? Well, she wasn't going to ponder their relationship now, not when his tongue had her deliriously aroused.

Now was for sex. If he kept sucking her nipple and caressing its twin with his thumb, she'd come. How on earth had she done without making love with Ben? How could anything be better than this? With a moan, she surrendered to the pleasure of his mouth.

*

Ben licked his way around her aureoles until her nipples doubled in size. Paige always had terrific nipples—pink, sensitive, and stiffly elongated when she was aroused, perfect for suckling. He'd always thought they'd be perfect for nursing their babies, too.

Yeah, right.

Paige wasn't mother material, but no use dwelling on it. In fact, Ben had little left of his thought processes now that she straddled him, her fabulous tits in his face and her crotch inches from his dick. Jesus, he'd missed her.

She began to rock into his pelvis and rode him as if she were on a bronco at a rodeo. He focused on licking her into a climax. He could do it, he had before. Paige had very sensitive, sensual nipples. If he concentrated on driving her over the edge, he could hold off his own climax ... he hoped. But, God help him, he didn't know if he could hold off, not with her body rubbing against him, barely touching him with each stroke.

"I'm ... oh, God, Ben..."

"Go ahead, baby. Come." He blew on her wet nipple before again taking it into his mouth.

Paige grunted, bucked harder, then held her breath. She stiffened. "Ohhhhhhhhhh."

Yes! Ben loved it when she came. It was the only time she truly abandoned her reserve. She collapsed atop him and moaned.

"You okay?" he asked.

She smiled against his shoulder. "God, yes. I-I didn't expect to get off so..."

"Quickly?" Ben couldn't contain a smug grin. Maybe she hadn't been sleeping with another guy. "It's been awhile."

She didn't answer. Had it been awhile for her, too? "I'm going to return the favor, all right?"

As she pushed herself down and warmed his rock-hard cock with her breath, Ben's grin collapsed and his gut churned. Since when did Paige take the initiative with a blow job? Maybe she had learned elsewhere, with someone else. In the past, he'd either hinted or flat-out asked her to go down on him. Now all of a sudden...

But she didn't take him in her mouth. He wasn't sure whether to feel relief or disappointment. "I hope you don't mind a little whipped cream," she said.

What?! Oh, boy. Oh, man. What alien had taken over his wife's body?

"I'll be right back." With that, she eased off the bed and ran from the room, oblivious of her nudity. Any other time she would've grabbed a robe or T-shirt. She returned seconds later with a purple aerosol can. "I've always wanted to do this."

Thank you, God! Having Paige lick whipped cream from him had been one of his secret, unfulfilled fantasies. "I had no idea..."

"I was always afraid you'd think it kinky."

"Well, I don't." He closed his eyes as she shook the can. "Is that on your diet, babe?"

"It's no-carb," she answered. "Brace yourself, it's chilled."

His flesh was so hot he welcomed the cold spray of foamy cream over his privates. "Hurry, I'm afraid it'll melt."

She leaned across him to set the can on the bedside table. "As you wish."

Exactly as he wished! Her fabulous tongue lapped at the cream until none of the sticky residue remained. And she didn't stop. She continued to lick his balls until he nearly came, then stopped. *No, don't stop!*

"You know, Ben, I read this article that said there's no rule against having orgasms during foreplay. I think I'll give you one now." Her lips covered his penis, taking its full length into the depths of her mouth.

Oh, yes. Yes yes yes yes yes!

She deep-throated him again and again, her lips pulling at his taut flesh. Her one hand stroked him, squeezed him, while her other hand fondled his balls. He couldn't hold back. He didn't even try. With a guttural sigh, he emptied into her hot mouth. She swallowed, then licked him clean, just as she had the whipped cream, with an enthusiasm he'd never seen in her.

Those aliens from outer space who'd invaded her body could stay, as far as he was concerned. Hot damn, she'd never been so aggressive in bed.

When he regained normal breathing, he told her so.

She knelt beside him. "Hang on, stud. I have more surprises planned if you'll stay the weekend."

Stay the weekend? He never wanted to leave this bed. "If only you'd told me in the first place, you wouldn't have had to sabotage your Volvo, babe."

A worried frown creased her forehead. "Did I do much damage?"

She didn't continue the charade, he'd give her that. "I wish you'd just cut the wire, but I should be able to repair it once you get home."

"Are you mad?"

"Mad?" He rubbed his chin, feigning deep thought. "Let's see. You stranded yourself in this isolated cabin and tricked me into driving down here so you could give me a weekend of sexual fantasies?"

She gave him a smile. "That's part of it."

"And the rest?"

"I meant it when I said we need to talk about our, uh ... our relationship." She looked away, as if embarrassed.

She had left work early, a move that was unprecedented, and set up a weekend for just the two of them. Maybe it was closing the barn door after the horse escaped, as his

mother would say, but it was a step in the right direction. The worst that could happen would be a fun-filled weekend of sex before he and Paige called it quits. He refused to allow himself to think about the best-case scenario. No sense getting his hopes up.

“I’m not mad,” he finally answered. “I’m flattered. Frankly, I didn’t know you thought I was worth it.”

“Yes, you’re worth it and more.”

She looked at him with such adoration he nearly forgot why he’d left. Yet he couldn’t forget. There had been too much neglect. He didn’t know if their marriage could be restored or if the damage was irreparable; but he’d give the weekend a shot. He owed it to Paige and he owed it to himself. He had to be absolutely sure he was willing to throw away the last four years.

“So, what other surprises have you planned?”

Paige bolted from the bed. “Stay there. You’ll see.”

He’d analyze the change in her later. Right now he could hardly wait to see what this new Paige had in store for him.

Chapter Six

Scarves. Where had she put the damn silk scarves? Paige rummaged through her bag until she found the two she'd ordinarily use to accessorize her business attire. Now she had a more interesting use for them.

"You don't object to a blindfold, do you?" she asked, returning to the bedroom.

A wide grin spread across his face. "I'll make an exception for you."

He seemed more relaxed now, as if really enjoying himself. That was the idea, though, right? She wanted to pleasure him endlessly until he couldn't possibly think of living without her.

He sat upright while she tied one silk scarf around his head, covering his eyes.

"Now, stand up."

Ben hesitated. "Why?"

"You'll see. Trust me."

After staggering to his feet, he reached for her, but she ducked. "Stand perfectly still, legs slightly apart."

He complied, and his grin returned. "Do your worst."

"Uh-uh, baby. I'll do my *best*."

Who'd have thought turning on Ben would turn *her* on? Still sensitive from orgasm, her clit tingled as she knotted the blindfold. Biting her lip, she held back her own arousal as she slowly dragged a second scarf over his head, then slowly around his neck. She lingered at his chest, then pulled the silk fabric along his waist.

"That tickles, babe."

"A ticklish person is a sensual person." She threaded the scarf beneath his arms, over his back, then lower. As slowly as possible, she dragged the scarf between his legs.

"Does this tickle?"

He groaned.

Smiling, she continued to caress his balls and penis with the scarf. He hardened again. "Yes, I see that you are sensual."

By the time the scarf had completed the journey down and around each leg, Ben was begging for relief. "End this torture, babe. Can't you see I need you?"

Hmm. He needed her. Did he really? Did he know how badly she needed him?

"Your turn," she said, yanking the blindfold from his head.

In a surprising and swift move, Ben grabbed both scarves, then scooped her into his arms. "My turn."

"Wha-what are you going to do?"

He flashed her a wicked grin and her breath caught. Then he dumped her in the middle of the bed. "Lie back and enjoy."

Taking the two scarves, he tied one of her ankles to the posts at the foot of the bed.

"Bondage? My, my!"

"No, bondage would be tying your wrists, too. But we're out of scarves."

Too bad. A thrill shot threw her as he knotted the second scarf. She *was* feeling wanton, wasn't she? God, he was hard again. His stiffened penis bobbed as he joined her

on the bed. In a slow, deliberate journey he kissed every inch of her body, starting at her head.

She closed her eyes as his lips feathered the tender flesh inside each arm. He paused at her breasts, then trailed more kisses over her abdomen. When he skipped over her pelvis, she stifled a frustrated moan.

He licked his way along each of her thighs until she wiggled against her restraints. After he kissed the instep of each foot, he returned to her mons.

Ah, yes, he knew what she liked. He always had. She closed her eyes and savored the moment. A cold spray against her pelvis jolted her, and her eyes popped open. Ben had the can of whipped cream in his hand, squirting a generous peak between her legs.

"As I said, my turn." Inserting one finger deep inside her, he pressed against her G spot as his tongue lapped at the foamy cream and found her clit. The pressure grew inside her as his mouth stroked her sensitive bud. Already aroused beyond reason, she wouldn't take long to come. He pulled back, his breath hot against her sticky flesh. "Yummy pussy."

He returned to his feast and she once again closed her eyes. His tongue's stimulation intensified until she feared she'd burst into flames. Teetering on the edge of completion, she lifted her torso from the bed in rhythm with his finger and tongue, seeking fulfillment.

"Christ Almighty!" she cried as she climaxed.

A kaleidoscope of color burst behind her eyelids, followed by a shower of stars. Trembling beneath Ben's mouth, she surrendered to wave after wave of incredible pleasure. When she finally opened her eyes, she gazed into Ben's smiling face hovering over her.

His penis nudged at her sensitized opening, and she tensed, on the verge of coming again. He drove deep inside her, again and again, the sensation so intense it bordered on pain. She surrendered to another shuddering climax. Following her over the edge, Ben stiffened; then erupted inside her.

They lay for several minutes in silence. Filled with a languid satisfaction she hadn't known for months, Paige suspected her bones had dissolved. Ben's weight on top of her was like a cocoon, safe and sheltering.

They retained their intimate connection as long as possible. He finally pushed himself up and rolled to the foot of the bed to untie the scarves.

"We're going to leave a wet spot on your grandmother's bedspread." He scooted up the bed and kissed her lightly on the lips. "Not to mention sticky."

She giggled. Few men would worry about laundry. But Ben cared. "I'll wash it tomorrow."

"I'd better clean up." He didn't move, though. He draped his arm across her tender breasts and sighed. "You are amazing. That was our best sex ever."

Ah hah! Progress. And she'd only worked through the first two exotic tips in the *Passport to Passion* article. She had at least two more up her sleeve. Wonder what Ben would think about her next approach?

As if reading her mind, he asked, "So what's next, Wonder Woman?"

"Greece."

"I hope you're talking about food, because I've really worked up an appetite."

She flashed him what she hoped was a seductive smile. "Honey, I plan to satisfy all your appetites."

He covered her mouth in a slow, thorough kiss. "Okay, but I'm going to need nourishment if I'm going to keep going."

"There's food, too." She kissed him back. "Don't worry, stud. I intend to keep you coming *and* going."

* * * *

After a quick shower to rinse away whipped cream and sex, Ben joined Paige in the kitchen. He grinned at the sight of her bending over the oven to pull out their dinner. She had never claimed to be much of a cook, but he'd give her an A for effort ... *and* a nice ass.

Twin ham steaks with slices of pineapple sizzled in a cast iron skillet. She dropped one piece of ham onto his plate, then spooned the pineapple slice atop it. "Here you go, stud."

The ham steaks were the extent of her cooking. She'd picked up potato salad and slaw from a deli. His stomach growled. After the incredible sex, anything would taste great.

They ate the meal without conversation, thankfully. He wasn't sure what Paige would have to say about their break-up, but she'd prepared a speech. Very little about Paige King was spontaneous, not anymore. She always prepared and rehearsed her arguments, whether at home or in the courtroom. She saw him as just another case, and it grated.

Even the weekend of sex had a program she prepared, he'd bet. As enjoyable as it was, nothing had really changed. He was just an action item she'd scheduled in her electronic organizer. He'd shaken her up with his leaving, so she had to react. After she gave him some attention, she'd go back to her workaholic routine, damn her.

What a friggin' waste. They could've been good together. Of course, in bed they still were. It'd been so long since they'd made love, he'd forgotten how exhilarating it was to love Paige. Although she had always let him take the lead with sex—until today—she wasn't a bashful woman. After all, she had been the one to propose marriage.

Never in his wildest dreams did he expect the pretty socialite to want a permanent life with him, although he loved her from the start. He'd been unprepared for the powerful emotions that rocked his world, and he'd been unable to fight them. He assumed she was going through a rebellious stage and would soon outgrow it. Move on and up.

Face it, pal, marriage to a Haywood heiress is like a plow horse mating with a thoroughbred.

Yet she'd wanted them to get married and he was so deliriously happy, he had ignored both his misgivings and his mother.

"Hello?" She snapped her fingers in front of his face. "Where are you?"

He shrugged, pushing aside his empty plate. "In the past."

"Hmm. *Our* past?" When he nodded, she asked, "Can we talk about it?"

Now she wanted to talk. Well, why the hell not? "I was thinking about when you proposed to me."

"I was thinking about that earlier."

When she was crying? Tears came easier for her dog than for him. His dinner churned inside his angry stomach but he said nothing, just made an intelligible noise for her to continue.

"You know, I decided I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you that day when Chattel died."

His gut tightened. He'd been concerned that she'd named her darling puppy "Chattel," a legal term for personal property. At the time he thought it was because she was a law student. Later he wondered if she thought of her pet as nothing more than a piece of her property. Paige kept a cool demeanor that was sometimes difficult for even him to penetrate. Yes, he hadn't expected her to propose marriage to him. "I was surprised when you asked."

She shook her head, her bright eyes dimming. "You were never going to propose to me, were you?"

He couldn't lie to her, although it hurt to acknowledge his self-doubt. "No."

"If you didn't want to be married to me, why did you accept?"

"It's not like that, Paige." He expelled a long breath. How did he explain to her that he'd been out of his league? "I think we were a doomed match."

Her lips thinned and she glared at him. "When did you decide this?"

"I always suspected we wouldn't make it. We're too different..."

She bolted from her chair and paced before him as if he were on the witness stand, unaware of the effect it had on his blood pressure. God, he hated when she slipped into attorney mode.

She pointed one of her perfect acrylic nails at his chest. "Let me see if I understand, Ben. You married me with the expectation that we'd fail?"

Damn. No wonder she was good in the courtroom. That glare would unnerve any witness. The way she re-worded what he'd said made him sound like a jerk who hadn't given the marriage a shot. Didn't she realize he'd given them plenty of chances? "That's not what I meant."

"It's exactly what you meant. It's easy to find fault and hold a grudge when you expect the worst."

"I didn't..." But he had. He'd piled up an album of grievance stamps that he'd finally cashed in, without telling her about his collection. Perhaps he'd presumed she'd seen what was wrong when she hadn't. A tiny seed of doubt threatened his well-constructed resentment. He shrugged. "You couldn't find the time to talk about our problems."

"You never told me..." She held up her hand, palm open. "Wait. You tried. I'll concede that point. I know I've been a workaholic at times. But you were quick to admit defeat."

A concession? Well, well. A little bit of steam escaped his pent-up anger, so he vented. "Don't lay all the blame at my feet. You're the one who's career-driven, damn the cost, who hasn't time for..."

"Funny, but you didn't complain when my career enabled you to quit work."

"I didn't quit work, damn it!" he ground out through clenched teeth. "I work harder at my own business than I ever did for a boss, but I still managed to be home for you."

God, he didn't want to argue with her. Still, they were talking ... at last. He struggled to tamp down his anger.

She collapsed into her chair as if she'd been overruled. "Yes, you did. I really appreciated your taking over the cooking, too."

Another concession from counselor? The rest of his anger dissipated. "You never said."

"You're right." She sighed. "You probably thought I took you for granted..."

"Didn't you?"

"No, I didn't. I appreciated everything you did but failed to communicate it. That's where I've wronged you, and I'm sorry."

He nodded. It was far more than that, but God help him, he almost felt sorry for her. She sounded so sincere, looked so wounded. She really didn't get it, did she? And she never would. She neglected far more than a show of appreciation, damaged much more than his ego. The honeymoon was over for the blue-blood heiress and her redneck mechanic.

"Paige, it's not that simple."

"Fine. You have all weekend to explain it to me ... when we aren't enjoying wild sex, that is." She gave him a saucy wink and a smile.

His throat tightened with emotion and disappointment at the obvious distraction. Just when they made a little progress in communicating, she backed off, changing the subject. As he'd suspected, the wild sex was her way of throwing him a few crumbs, that's all.

He'd play along and not ruin her weekend plans. Hell, he'd enjoy them, too. But come Sunday evening he'd head back to his studio apartment. No way Paige could convince him she'd changed when he knew better.

He was just a B-item priority on her time management program.

Chapter Seven

"I'll help you load the dishwasher," Ben said, rising from his chair.

Talking hadn't gone as well as she'd hoped, but Paige wasn't ready to throw in the towel, not by a long shot. She'd been unprepared for the depth of Ben's bitterness. Obviously, he'd been nursing a grudge for some time. If only she'd known. Guilt washed over her as she thought about how she'd disregarded his feelings.

If it wasn't too late, she planned to make it up to him, starting this weekend. She'd give him her undivided attention. She just needed to kick things up a notch.

She rinsed the few dishes and utensils, then handed them to him to arrange in the empty racks. "I'll run the dishwasher Sunday before we leave," she said, just for conversation.

He murmured agreement, then leaned against the counter. "This is awkward."

"What's awkward?" Oh, no! He was going to leave. He had "flee" written all over his face. "Spending the weekend with your wife?"

She hadn't meant to sound so snappish, but her nerves were frayed. She'd had little sleep since he'd left Monday night, and tonight's dinner was the first decent meal she'd managed to eat. Now she might lose her chance to wow him and woo him as she'd planned. No wonder her hands shook.

He snorted. "I'm not used to having you all to myself for an entire weekend, Paige. It's been ages..."

"I know, Ben, and I'm trying to change that." Tears borne of frustration and panic threatened but she swallowed and blinked. She'd never had to struggle to stay cool, calm and collected before Ben had called his *time-out*. Now composure was a constant battle. Hiding her face from his gaze, she wiped the table and countertop, hoping not to betray her inner turmoil.

He didn't seem to notice. "Yeah. You know, I don't have a change of clothes. I wasn't planning to stay."

God, that stung. He really hadn't been tempted by her invitation, had he? She filled the broiler pan with soapy water to soak, then absently rubbed at the hardened residue. "I'll throw what you're wearing into the washer."

"I can do it." He covered her hand with his and stopped her scrubbing. "You're going to rub a hole in the stainless steel."

She twisted her back toward him, afraid to meet his gaze. "I'm just making sure it's clean."

His other arm snaked around her and pulled her against him. "You're upset."

Damn! Busted. He knew her too well. "A little."

But she didn't want to tell him why. She'd planned to amaze him in bed, not beg him to give her another chance. She wanted his love, not his pity.

"If you're still thinking I've found another woman, you can forget that."

She welcomed his reassurance like a balm. "I guess I did think that, not that I blamed you..."

"What do you mean?"

"I've already admitted that I've neglected you. Another woman's attentions would be a normal temptation."

"Not for me. Look, I just felt I was losing you..."

"No!" she said. "Maybe I was losing myself. I know I'm a workaholic who temporarily lost perspective..."

"Temporarily?" He tugged her closer and spoke into her ear. "Tell me, babe. Is what I think of you more important than anyone—than everyone else's opinion?"

God, yes, but dare she say so? She wanted Ben back, above all else, but passion warred with pragmatism. What if he took advantage of her vulnerability? If she eased up on work and sacrificed her goal of partnership in the firm, what if he still left her? She'd tank both her career and her marriage. He wouldn't be unreasonable, though. He still loved her ... didn't he? She had to trust him. Before she answered him, he dropped his arms and stepped back.

"I'll take your hesitation as a 'no.'"

She spun to face him. "No! I mean, yes! Oh, Ben, what will it take to convince you that I want to fix this?"

"I know you want to, babe. I just don't think you can."

Perfect. Fury nearly choked her. If he'd had one tenth of this pessimism toward his business, he'd be bankrupt. With his low expectations, she didn't stand a chance. "Must you be so negative?!"

Ben held her gaze for a moment. "Not negative, just realistic. It protects me from disappointment."

"Melodrama doesn't suit you," she said, rolling her eyes. "I think we can work out our differences. I want to. If you don't, then I'm wasting my breath."

"I want to, but..."

"It all boils down to this: I love you. Do you love me or not?"

He reached for her and squeezed her shoulders. "Love isn't the issue..."

"Answer me, dammit!" She'd placed her head on the Guillotine block, put all her cards on the table, bared her soul, and any other cliché that came to mind. Now she held her breath.

*

How did he answer Paige? Ben loved her as he had never loved another woman, probably never would again. She was a dream woman: intelligent, beautiful, energetic, fun, sexy ... what wasn't there to love? Her career, that's what. Its importance to her couldn't be ignored. He didn't expect her to give up her work, nor should he. Her income had made them comfortable, enabled him to open his own garage, take that cruise to Mexico for their first anniversary. He just wanted to be *more* important to her. Was that unreasonable?

He answered as honestly as he could. "I do love you, Paige, a lot more than I thought you loved me."

"Oh, my God." Her mouth dropped open in shock. Why should this surprise her when she'd already admitted her neglect. "You thought I didn't love you?"

He watched a series of emotions parade across her face as she struggled with composure. "You know, I think we both need rest. I don't know about you, but I'm nearly exhausted from this week."

Her smile was tremulous. "I haven't slept much myself since you left."

Another admission. Another chip off the block of resentment he'd erected. Dare he hope? God help him, he wanted to. He gathered her into his arms and savored the feel of her. "I know you plan wild sex with me, but could we start fresh in the morning, after a good night's sleep? Start fresh with the talking, too."

She nodded. "I have to shower first..."

"How about a nice hot bath? I'll fill the tub."

* * * *

Thirty minutes later, Ben peeked inside the cabin's modest bathroom where Paige lay soaking in the bathtub. Was she asleep?

A rolled towel supported her neck in a makeshift pillow. Her eyes closed, she lay on her back, the water barely covering her. Although an elastic band held her hair together in a stubby ponytail on top her head, dark tendrils escaped and lay damp against her serene face.

Through the water her luscious breasts stood in creamy peaks, her nipples puckered and pink. She had crossed her legs and tucked them beneath her hips to accommodate the short tub, raising her patch of dark pubic hair above the water. Her stomach gently curved where it had once been flat and tight—she'd often complain about having a pot belly—and all Ben's dreams resurfaced. He longed to have his baby growing inside that sweet body and start the family he wanted.

Jesus, she was sexy! He nearly forgot his own suggestion about starting fresh in the morning after a good night's sleep. Drinking in the sight of her hardened him, anyway. Since his clothes were downstairs in the wash, he had no way to hide his boner.

Paige's eyes popped open and she grinned at his erection. "Does that mean you're happy to see me?"

"Is it obvious?" he deadpanned.

"Well, it's hard to say." It was hard, all right. She sat up and the water surged against the sides of the tub. "I can take care of that for you."

"No doubt."

"I wasn't trying to seduce you..."

"I know. You looked very ... relaxed lying there." He dragged an oversized towel from its bar on the wall and held it up. "Come on. I'll dry you off."

"Leave it to sensible Grandy to make every towel a beach towel," she said as she stepped out of the tub. "Not that I'm complaining."

Come to think of it, Paige had never been a complainer until she went to work at the firm. Did she realize that? he wondered.

No, he dropped that line of thinking. They'd both agreed to a moratorium on their discussion until after a good night's rest. But had they agreed to no sex?

He wrapped the towel around her damp body, holding the ends together in front of her tempting breasts. "Maybe I better take a cold shower."

"Don't."

She pressed into him, terry cloth and all. Her breath smelled of cinnamon mouthwash, and he nearly groaned with the need to kiss her again. Powerless against the strength of his hunger for her, he released the towel. It glided to the floor and he kicked it aside.

His hands slid over her wet flesh, along the gentle curve of her waist down to her ass. He pulled her into his own fevered body. Maybe he'd been without her too long, maybe he'd underestimated his desire for her, but he ached to be inside her again, regardless of their intense before-dinner sex.

"I promised you we'd rest tonight..."

"We'll both sleep better after a little nookie," she whispered.

"It would take the edge off," he agreed and scooped her into his arms.

Chapter Eight

Paige hugged Ben's neck as he carried her to the bed, ignoring the bathwater that dripped across Grandy's hardwood floors. She'd mop later. Now she focused on the feel of Ben's hair as she threaded her fingers through it at his nape. About a week beyond his normal haircut, Ben's sandy hair began to curl at the ends. He hated the natural curl but she thought it was adorable.

He positioned her on her back with her legs spread, taking command of their lovemaking. Was it her imagination or did he intend to take control of her plans for a sexy weekend? Did he want to insert his own agenda into hers? The thought made her giggle.

"What?" he asked.

She glanced at his erect penis. "I was thinking about inserting your agenda..."

"It might be lengthy." He grinned as he settled himself between her legs. In the years they'd been together, Ben had learned to play with words as she loved to do.

But now all she wanted was to play with *him*. "I'm sure I can work you in."

"I'll get right to the point then." With that he lowered his mouth to her clit.

She couldn't think of a clever retort. She couldn't think at all. He sucked and licked her into abandon. Her own fluid oozed from her sensitized membranes and mixed with his saliva, creating a slickness that enhanced sensation. He knew how to make her come, but he lingered, taking his time as if savoring the taste of her.

His fingers weren't idle, either. He pulled her labia apart with his thumbs and massaged the vaginal opening. With both thumbs inserted, he slipped inside her, sending her squirming off the bed.

"Oh, God, Ben! Oh, please, please, please!"

He ignored her pleas but not her mons. His tongue stroked and stroked, building the pressure inside her that demanded release. He drew the sensitive bud between his teeth and lightly nipped her, then soothed her again with another gentle caress of his tongue.

Her orgasm seized her and she screamed, bucking against his mouth until she thought she'd faint from pleasure.

"I love to watch you come," he whispered as he rose from the bed.

He was getting up? "Where are you..."

He nudged her onto her belly and she understood. Doggy style. They hadn't done it doggy style since their cruise. Excitement coursed through her as she positioned herself on her knees. She had read that anal sex was popular in Greece. What would Ben think if she suggested it? But he was in charge this time, so she settled for pulling her cheeks apart as wide as possible to increase penetration. Moisture leaked from her as she spread herself open to him.

Ben eased inside her, inch by tantalizing inch. He filled her; then shoved deeper. His hands busied themselves at her breasts, each one teasing her nipples into an aroused frenzy. She came apart, spiraling down a blissful abyss into another shuddering climax.

He followed her, plunging one final stroke deep inside her as he came. As had been their habit as newlyweds, they lay together soaking in the afterglow of making love. A

kiss, caress, or simple touch spoke tenderness better than words could. Paige sighed with more contentment than she'd felt in ages.

She closed her eyes and dared to hope that she and Ben could be together again. She could make things right and she would. He'd said he loved her. She wouldn't throw away anything as precious as their marriage for any career. Too tired to sort it all out now, she scooted her back against Ben, his arm wrapped possessively around her waist, and surrendered to sleep.

* * * *

As had once been their Saturday morning custom, before Paige began worrying about her "pot belly" and started a low-carb diet, they ate pancakes and coffee for breakfast. Ben flipped the flapjacks while Paige set up the coffee maker. He'd managed to get up first, retrieve his clothes from the dryer, and ready the kitchen before waking her.

Ah, waking her. How sweet. She'd stretched, yawned, then reached for him, her hair tousled and her eyes heavy-lidded. Pulling him down to where she lay, she gave new meaning to breakfast in bed. God, but she was inventive and adventurous in the sack! He didn't know what magazine article she kept quoting but he'd love to read it.

He set a plate of pancakes on the table in front of her. She was a vision in her black negligee thing—a *teddy*, she'd called it. He'd watched her pull it on after she'd gotten out of bed. On Paige, anything was sexy but the black lace creation was exceptional. Hugging her every curve, it revealed more than it covered. Her luscious tits appeared ready to spring free any second.

"I don't think your grandmother has sugar-free syrup, babe." He dragged his attention from her pushed-up boobs back to the griddle. "I looked in every cabinet."

"I don't need syrup." She waited for him to get his own plate of pancakes and sit, then pushed her plate toward him. "Butter me up."

He carved a ribbon of butter from the stick and spread it over the top pancake. "Butter you up ... now there's a visual."

"Anything like the whipped cream fantasy?" Her tongue licked a slow, sensuous path over her upper lip and he stifled a groan.

"Could be." He slid the plate across the table to her. "But let me refuel first."

She slid her fork slowly into her mouth and closed her eyes. Whether her sensual "Yum" was a deliberate attempt to arouse him or not, it did.

"Do you have to do that?"

Her eyes and her smile widened. "Do what?" As if she didn't know.

"Make love to your food. You're driving me crazy here." He dug in to his own syrup-laden pancake to avoid watching her lick her lips. "Or is that the idea?"

"The idea is to addict you to me so you can't give me up." Her tone was light but heavy with the truth.

God help her, she'd never been the devious type. Even when she sabotaged her Volvo, she didn't try to carry out her deception when confronted with it. How did she reconcile her natural candor with her job as a lawyer? Not that lawyers were liars, but they were trained to be very careful with the truth.

Then again, maybe she wasn't comfortable with law practice. The one course in law school she'd struggled with had been moot court. She'd taken non-credit speech classes

and handled an extra practice case to improve her courtroom presence. Even now she was a bundle of nerves right before she had to speak in court, although she excelled at it.

"Hello." She waved her fork in front of his face. "You're frowning. What's wrong?"

"I was thinking about your job at the firm and how much it's changed you."

"Oh." She took another bite of her pancake. A short silence followed as she chewed and swallowed. "Let's talk about that. You said you didn't fit in my world. Is this about the firm?"

He snorted, unable to hold back his disdain. "The firm *is* your world, babe."

She shook her head no. "You hated that firm from day one, Ben. Even if I've changed, it didn't happen overnight."

"But it did. I didn't say anything because I was putting in long hours myself."

"Yes, you were. The garage is your career, the firm is mine."

He should've been pleased that they were talking. But they both sat there discussing crucial issues in their relationship as calmly as if they were talking about dinner plans. He couldn't shake the feeling that they both were about to explode, the proverbial calm before the storm.

"I wear greasy overalls, you wear power suits. You can hardly compare the two..."

"Bullshit." She put down her fork and straightened. Uh oh. Now came the storm. Her cheeks reddened and her eyes snapped. "You know, we both went to college. You earned a business degree, for Crissakes. Why do you pull that redneck-grease-monkey act with me? It's insulting."

"You earned a BA and a law degree in the same amount of time I earned my BS at night school." He was working as a mechanic to earn his tuition while she attended sorority meetings and socials. He couldn't ignore her privileged upbringing. "It's hardly the same."

"Have I ever put down your work? Ever talked down to you because you work on cars?"

"No." As a matter of fact, she'd celebrated with him when he'd opened his business, calling him an *entrepreneur extraordinaire*. He smiled at the memory. "You're right. You respect my career."

"But?" She dragged out the word and made an out-with-it gesture.

"The fact is, we're worlds apart in the people we deal with, the work we do..."

"Again, not true." She leaned back from the table. "We serve the same clientele. You tune up their SUVs and I draw up their wills. We both offer a service to people. I protect their legal interests, you protect their transportation."

Damn she was good, and he had no rebuttal because, dammit, she was right. He shrugged. "I guess I never looked at it that way..."

"If you *don't* start looking at it that way, you're going to wind up just like your mother. She hated me sight unseen because she thought I outclassed you. Your own mother! Jeez."

Was he a freakin' reverse snob like Mama? That was the last thing he wanted, but her words gave him pause.

"Honey, Mama doesn't hate you. She just thought I was marrying out of my..." He stopped. Paige was right. Again. He *was* a product of his mother's fears and prejudices. Why hadn't he made the connection himself?

So was the issue her career, or his own insecurities? Had he listened to his mother too much? As if reading his mind, Paige asked, “Is my work with the firm threatening our marriage or your self-confidence?”

He couldn’t form a clever reply. What could he say? He stuck to the truth. “Yeah, I felt threatened by your career, but not because it attacked my manhood. It meant—means so much to you. You’re so consumed with the need to prove you don’t need your inheritance. I guess I wanted to be the most important thing in your life.”

“Ben, you *are* the most important thing in my life. You just won’t believe it.”

The words sounded good but they didn’t match her recent behavior. Admittedly, he’d been hung up about the difference in their background. Too much of Mama’s programming. “Let’s just say you haven’t shown it.”

“I’ve admitted that. I’ve apologized. I’ve vowed to do better.” Leaning across the table, she reached for his hands. “Work with me here, Ben. Are you willing to do that?”

Squeezing her hands, he gazed into her earnest baby blues. God, how could he walk away from her? He loved her as much as ever, needed her even more. Had he been guilty of a negative attitude that sabotaged their marriage? She’d made concessions this weekend. To be fair, he had to meet her halfway. He answered her the only way he could.

“Yes.”

*

Yes!

Paige offered a silent prayer of thanks. Relief washed through her. She’d been holding her breath while she watched a series of expressions flicker across Ben’s face. She could almost hear the gears grinding inside his head. If only she could read his mind.

“Good...”

“Paige, listen to me. We have our work cut out for us. You need to balance your schedule, and I need to work on my...”

“Self-esteem?” she offered.

“Right. But we also need to talk about what we both want.”

“Want? You mean in the marriage? In life?”

“I need to know where you see us five years from now. Ten years from now.”

“You’re talking about goal setting...”

“I’m talking *expectations*. If we don’t share the same dreams, we won’t make it.”

She read between the lines. Did she share his dream of a family? Was she willing to take on motherhood? How could she think about that now? Her mind raced to figure out how she was going to balance her schedule, as he put it. At a firm like Wiley, Chatham, and Howell, you didn’t cut back or you were cut out.

If she didn’t find time Sunday evening to work on the Palmer case, she’d be well on her way out the door. If she left the firm, where would she go? No firm would put up with fewer hours from their junior attorneys, and she’d lose the prestige of working for a top firm. Whatever she did, she’d have to make a change because Ben and her marriage came first.

“Let’s take this one step at a time, okay?” she said.

He stood, picking up the plates from the table. “Okay.”

She followed him to the sink and stuffed the rinsed plates and forks into the dishwasher. “I promise that every night, regardless of how tired either of us is, we’ll talk. We’re communicating now. Let’s keep it going.”

“I promise, too.” He dried his hands, then pulled her into his arms. “I love you, Paige.”

She closed her eyes and sighed, inhaling the fresh laundered scent of his shirt. “I love you, too. Don’t ever doubt that.”

He covered her mouth with his in the gentlest of kisses.

“We have the whole weekend. Why not treat it as a second honeymoon?” She gave him a meaningful smile.

“I’d like that, babe.”

What Paige had in mind, however, was something she never would have done on their first honeymoon!

*

“Watch me, Ben.”

Paige stepped back and untied the ribbon at the top of her teddy. Slowly she loosened the garment, inching it down her body until it fell to the floor. She stepped out of the black lacy wonder and kicked it aside.

Ohmanohmanohman! Another striptease. What else was in that article she’d been reading? “You are full of surprises this weekend, babe.”

“Keep watching.” She placed one foot on a dinette chair and ran her hands slowly across her abdomen, then lower.

He swallowed. Twice.

She began a movement, an exotic erotic dance. While her hips gyrated in slow motion, her fingers slid lower, then parted her pussy lips. She inserted a finger inside; then dragged it slowly across her clit and moaned.

Ben groaned and reached for her but she shook her head. “Not yet. Just watch.”

With one finger stroking her clit, Paige pulled her other hand to her breasts, pinching first one nipple then the other. Each nipple stood at attention and so did his cock. How could he be hard again after this morning’s romp in the bed? But watching her bump and grind and touch herself, how could he *not* be hard as a slab of concrete?

Her hand rubbed her pussy with faster strokes now and glistened with her own wetness. She held his gaze as she brought the finger to her lips and flicked it with her tongue. Had she any idea how insanely sexy she looked?

“Hmm. So that’s how we taste.”

Of course. She was on the pill so he didn’t use condoms. That was a mixture of their cum and he longed to kneel before her, to taste for himself. “Please, Paige. Let me touch.”

“Not yet.”

She continued to masturbate for him, moaning and mewling as her strokes grew harder. She worked at her nipples and closed her eyes, then began to squat. Ah, Jesus, she looked close. He ached to finish her himself.

“Fuck me, Ben,” she cried. The coarse language excited him all the more and he scrambled out of his clothes to join her.

“Oh, yeah, baby.” He picked her up and placed her at the edge of the table top, spreading her legs wide.

“Now, Ben!”

He plunged into her juicy depths, amazed at her slickness. She came immediately, clinging to him as she climaxed. Her warm breath brushed his ear as she whispered her pleasure.

Just on the verge of his own climax, he nearly came when she whispered, "Have you ever wanted to have anal sex, Ben? Because now's a good time. We're *so* lubricated."

Anal sex? Without waiting for his answer, she pulled away and bent over a chair. Jesus. What next? When she used her fingers to spread apart her cheeks for him, his heart stopped. God, what a lovely ass! He slid three fingers inside her vagina to wet them, then stroked his cock. He took his time, careful not to force himself against her delicate anus, and edged inside.

"Does it hurt, babe?"

"It's very ... sensitive. Don't stop!"

He moved his hands around to her clit and massaged it as he eased in her back door. With slow, easy strokes he brought her to climax again. She screamed his name and thrashed wildly. Who would've thought his proper little attorney-wife was a sex adventurer? What was next, whips and chains?

Ben sucked in a breath as he delighted in her uninhibited conduct. He didn't know if she truly wanted anal sex, but she'd done it for him. She'd gone to the extreme to prove her love. That thought followed him as he soared over the edge and spurted into her ass.

A sticky mixture of fluids trickled down his legs as he leaned over her at the table.

"Uh, we've made a mess."

"We'll clean up. In fact, why don't we clean up each other? That sounds interesting."

He chuckled. "I hope you're teasing, babe, because I'm spent."

"But just until later, right?"

"I'm sure I'll recover eventually." He kissed her neck, her shoulder. God, he loved her. "Why don't you soak in the tub while I clean up the kitchen?"

"Wonderful idea. To tell you the truth, Ben, I'm a little sore."

He laughed at that and gave her hip a playful swat. "You deserve to be, young lady!"

Chapter Nine

Paige submerged herself into the bath water, rinsing her hair. She'd soaked so long she risked wrinkling like a prune, but still she lay in the tub. After their sex marathon, she felt relaxed and lazy. Content. Very content.

Ben was staying. Everything was going to work out fine. Of course, she'd made promises she didn't know how to keep, but she had to figure out something. She'd always been the woman who could have it all, or so she'd believed. And she could, if only she could balance her life better. Right now it was heavily skewed in the career quadrant.

Well, no more.

Of course, she had to see the Palmer case through, and a lot of work loomed ahead for that. Truman Palmer, one of the wealthiest men in Louisville, had died leaving most of his fortune to the city museum, which was badly in need of restoration. He also left five children to contest the will. Wiley, Chatham, and Howell represented the deceased and had, in fact, drawn up the papers of endowment. The firm's reputation was on the line.

All of Louisville would be watching to see who won: the popular and needy museum or the greedy heirs. To say it was an important case for the firm would be like saying California was an important state for a presidential candidate. Wilson expected everyone in his division to put everything else on hold until the Palmer case was settled, including any semblance of a normal family life.

"Hey, babe." Ben poked his head just inside the bathroom door. "Mind if I use your cell phone?"

"It's in the kitchen, I think, on the counter. You'll have to turn it on." Would he appreciate the fact that she'd turned off her only means of communicating with the outside world this weekend so she could focus on him?

"I was supposed to go to Mama's for dinner and I need to cancel."

Mama. Great. Although Paige couldn't complain. Ben had never been a "mama's boy." In the four years Paige had been married to her son, the woman still treated her like a visitor, not a member of the family. Paige had discussed it with her own mother.

"All in good time," her mother had assured her. "Be patient."

"I don't know why Ben doesn't stand up to her..."

"Paige, dear, never involve your husband in any grievance with his mother. You make your own relationship with her, woman to woman. Talk to her."

But Paige hadn't talked to her. She'd rather face the strictest judge in the Jefferson County Courthouse than approach her mother-in-law. Yes, Jean Travis was *that* intimidating.

* * * *

Ben dreaded calling Mama because she'd question him, although he was thirty years old, too old to let his mother hassle him. Besides, Paige loved him! She'd jeopardized her career by taking off and devoting her weekend to him, and nothing could spoil his happy mood.

“Hi Mama,” he said when she answered. “Don’t count on me for dinner tonight. I’ve gone out of town.”

“Out of town? Where are you?”

“We’re spending the weekend at Paige’s grandmother’s cabin, on the Barren River...”

“You mean you and *Paige*?” At least this time she hadn’t referred to Paige as *that woman*.

“We’re working things out, Mama.”

Silence. He thought he’d lost his connection until he overheard Dad in the background. “Your father is going to be disappointed, son.”

Yeah, right. “I’ll drop by for a visit one night this week, all right?”

“Alone?” she asked.

“Does it matter?” His tone challenged her.

But Mama knew when to back down. “Of course not. Paige is welcome to come with you anytime. It’s just that we hardly see her.”

“I’ll call and let you know, okay? Right now I need to go before the battery runs down on the cell phone.”

After ending the call, he started to power down the phone when he noticed the message symbol. Paige had calls she probably needed to check. As he carried the phone into the bedroom, Paige emerged from the bathroom wearing short shorts and a tank top. No bra.

He dragged his gaze from the dark points of her sexy breasts. God, she had great tits. “You have voice mail.”

She shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant. But he knew she was anxious to return her calls. Paige hated to fall behind schedule. “I’m tempted to ignore it. This weekend is ours.”

“Honey, when I said balance your life, I knew it wouldn’t happen overnight. Go ahead and check your messages.”

“Would you do me a favor? My charger for the cell phone is in the trunk, inside my briefcase.”

“I’ll bring it in.”

“Thanks.” She took the phone and smiled. “I love you so much.”

“When you’re finished, meet me downstairs. Let’s dig through your grandmother’s DVD collection and watch movies all afternoon.”

“Great idea. I brought a video with me, too.” She winked.

The way she’d said *video* made him wonder if it was a porn flick. Hell, nothing could surprise him this weekend. “What is it?”

“A *Playboy* movie. It’s on top of the TV downstairs.” She winked. “I read that in some countries, it’s customary for couples to watch porn movies together for um, inspiration.”

Where in hell was that magazine article she kept quoting? He’d ask later. For now, he’d just relax and enjoy.

* * * *

An hour later Paige found Ben downstairs, a long neck dangling from two fingers staring out the French doors that overlooked Barren River. She hadn’t meant to take so

long, but Wilson Howell had insisted on an update. She'd had to plug in her cell phone to keep talking because the battery had died. He'd not been happy that she'd left town instead of coming in that morning.

"I have a family emergency, Wilson," she'd explained. "I'll be in early Monday."

"Monday? Paige, can't you take care of whatever it is and get back tomorrow? The firm has an emergency, too. We need you to be up to speed on the Palmer case by Monday."

Of course, she wouldn't be behind in her work on the Palmer case if Wilson hadn't rejected her first brief. All that work down the drain. She'd thought it thorough research and strong argument, as had her colleague, Letisha Williams.

During Paige's evaluation in the spring, Wilson had given her high marks and told her she was partner material, if that was her goal. She'd assured him that indeed it was. But now she wondered if he was simply dangling a carrot to keep her running on the wheel as a hamster in a cage.

Ben turned away from the scenic view of Barren River and smiled, but his smile quickly morphed into a concerned frown. "What is it, babe?"

"If I want to keep my job, I have to go into the office tomorrow and work all day."

"Why am I not surprised?" He gave her an icy glare.

Her stomach churned with anxiety. Man, she needed Ben's understanding, now more than ever. "If I leave tomorrow, I keep my job but lose you, is that it?"

He didn't answer. Instead he finished off the bottle of beer.

Paige felt her cheeks warm, and her heart hammered in her chest. Was this a test? She was suddenly afraid that she'd failed. The weekend effort, her angst, for what? She was stressed by her miserable dilemma. But mostly she was pissed. "What happened to 'Honey, when I said balance your life, I knew it wouldn't happen overnight?'"

He held her gaze with his serious hazel eyes and sighed. "Maybe that went the way of 'Ben, you *are* the most important thing in my life.' I see you brought along your laptop, briefcase, and PDA."

"In case you didn't come." Tears of frustration burned her eyes but she blinked them away. God, she didn't know what to do, which way to turn. She didn't want to lose Ben. He *was* the most important thing in her life. But he asked too much. "We need my income, Ben. Don't you understand that I put up with Wilson's crap for you? For *us*?"

"I never asked you to."

"No, but you don't complain about having a nice condo or the latest entertainment..." She stopped, covering her mouth with her hand as reality intruded. "Oh, God. I'm sorry." He'd left all of that behind when he walked out Monday. "You're right."

"I never asked you for any of that, Paige. Unfortunately, I can't afford to give you the lifestyle you're accustomed to. As I said, I don't belong in your world."

"You never objected..."

"You never asked what I wanted. That's what I meant about sharing dreams. I guess we want different things."

She wanted to object, to scream at him to talk it out, but she was in no position to make requests. Not when she'd just reneged on her promise of a second honeymoon weekend. Her heart was breaking. Hopelessness engulfed her. She wanted to reach out to him but he turned away.

“I’ll finish your car so it’ll get you back, but it needs to go in the shop Monday.” He tossed the empty beer bottle in the waste can, then stomped up the stairs.

* * * *

Ben tromped up the hill to the Volvo, fuming. It was ungodly hot. Sweat soaked his shirt within minutes. With each step his disappointment deepened. The beer soured on his empty stomach. Although it was late afternoon, he’d not had lunch. He’d been about to suggest they eat when Paige had joined him downstairs and spoiled everything.

Just as he’d feared, she’d thrown him a few crumbs to string him along until the next crisis. Hadn’t he known better? How had he allowed himself to be seduced into hope? His heart ached for what he believed had been within their reach. Compromise. Communication. A future.

All a freaking illusion.

This time his departure hurt more deeply than ever. She’d succeeded in her weekend mission. He *was* addicted to her and didn’t want to be without her. He loved her beyond reason. He’d be a glutton for punishment if he stayed *or* if he returned to his studio apartment. Talk about a lose-lose situation.

Shit. He couldn’t continue to yo-yo. He had to stay away, make a clean break.

Yet a little voice nagged at him. *Aren’t you being unfair?*

Unfair? She was the one running back to her precious career.

Can’t you see how it’s tearing her apart? She doesn’t want to go. Her job is at stake. And remember that you’re the one who suggested she check her phone calls.

Oh, yeah? Then what are her laptop and briefcase doing in the trunk?

They’re in the trunk, not in the cabin. She intended to devote the whole weekend to you, jerk.

Jerk? Was he being a jerk?

You were quick to assume rejection, pal.

She was quick to return to her old ways.

Was she? Or is that negative attitude of yours looking for the worst?

No! He wanted to make their marriage work, more than anything—

Is that why you run away at the first sign of trouble?

Run away? He wasn’t—

But he was. If he loved her as much as he claimed, he’d stick by her no matter what. Instead, he’d added to her stress. Where was his faith, his confidence? They’d vowed to stay together, for better, for worse. He was *not* going to leave!

Don’t tell me, dummy. Tell her!

This time Ben listened to his inner voice and raced back to the cabin.

Chapter Ten

Paige ran her hand over the framed picture of her grandparents. Grandpa had died when she was only ten, so she'd spent a lot of time with her grandmother, especially here at the cabin. She adored Grandy and learned much from the wise and feisty woman. Grandy often told her and her brother Haywood, "Remember, nobody lies on their deathbed and bemoans, 'Oh, if only I'd spent more time at the office.' Never let the pursuit of money keep you from your pursuit of life."

"Good advice, Grandy."

"What's good advice?" Ben asked. She hadn't heard him come downstairs.

"Something Grandy says. Listen, I'm..."

"No, wait. Me first, okay?" He joined her at the étagère where the family photos and curios were displayed. "I'm sorry I acted like a jerk. Forgive me?"

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. "Forgive you? Of course, but can you forgive me?"

"For what? Trying to keep your commitments? You're a responsible attorney with a high work ethic. I was wrong to pressure you."

"I was wrong to even consider breaking my promise to you. I'm staying here with you for the weekend and that's that."

"Even if they fire you?"

She nodded. "As for my career path, I'm feeling ... confused all of a sudden."

"Want to talk about it over a beer?"

She nodded and headed for the sectional sofa. "If you don't mind..."

"I'm your husband." He grabbed two bottles of beer from the fridge beneath the wet bar and joined her on the sofa. They both propped their feet on the huge steamer trunk that served as a cocktail table. "Talk to me."

"I got the impression you didn't like for me to talk about work." He'd been less than sympathetic Monday night.

"Honey, I didn't. You're right. But I'm trying to get past that ego thing..."

"Ego thing?" She giggled. "I didn't call it an ego thing. I said 'self-esteem.'"

"Whatever. I really want to hear, so shoot."

She took a deep breath, then let it out slowly, an attempt to untie the knots that squeezed her stomach. "My goal is to be a partner. I guess it's a realistic goal, but sometimes ... sometimes I think I'm being manipulated, you know? By Wilson."

Ben finger-combed his sandy hair. "You don't want to know what I think..."

"Actually, I do." This was a first. Ben had never offered an opinion about her job except that she gave it too much priority. "You mean about Wilson?"

"Yeah, Wilson." He took a swig from his bottle. "He's using you to make himself look good to his old man. Wilson couldn't pour piss out of a boot if directions were printed on the heel. I wonder if it's even within his power to recommend you for a partnership in the firm."

"Gee, don't hold back. Tell me what you really think," she teased.

He chuckled. "I'm glad to see you've recovered your sense of humor. I've missed it, babe."

“Have I been that intense? I know I’ve been absorbed...”

“Obsessed?”

“—with work. I didn’t realize how demanding Wilson is. The overload piled up gradually.”

“I just don’t trust the guy. He’s slick.”

“It’s eerie that you say that because the same thought occurred to me. But Wilson’s my boss and I’m stuck.”

“For now.”

What did he mean by that? “I have to see this latest case through, Ben, and I’ll still be working too many hours. But if you’ll just see me through this, you’ll see changes, I promise.”

He pulled a magazine toward him to use as a coaster for his bottle. “Have you thought about being your *own* partner?”

She flashed him a wicked grin. “I thought I did that after breakfast, remember?”

He chuckled. “I’ll never forget that one, babe. But seriously, why don’t you think about going out on your own?”

“If you think I work long hours now...”

“I know all about being in business for yourself, remember? That’s why I’m suggesting it. It’s satisfying to do all the work and get all the credit...”

“—or blame...”

“—and keep all the profits...”

“—if any. It’s risky, Ben. Don’t you think we need for one of us to have a regular paying job?”

“Must you be so negative?” he said, tossing her earlier words back at her.

She smiled. “Touché.”

“Think about it. You could even work from home. That would save overhead.”

“You wouldn’t mind?” She hadn’t expected this. He’d been the one complaining about her always bringing work home. Work would be home all the time if she practiced from the condo.

“I wouldn’t mind, Paige. I’m not really the hillbilly trying to keep his wife barefoot and pregnant.”

She stood her bottle beside his, then crawled into his lap, giving him a scorching kiss. “At least not yet.”

He drew her against him and gave her a thorough, bone-melting kiss. “Just remember that I love you and support whatever you decide to do.”

“I will give your idea some thought. But now, how about watching a raunchy porn flick and getting it on?”

“I already have it cued up and ready for play.”

“The DVD?”

He grinned and wiggled his eyebrows. “That, too.”

Epilogue

One year later.

Ben checked his watch. She was late.

Paige worked as many hours as ever but now at her home office. She had carved out a nice career for herself handling arbitration cases. Today he'd made an appointment with the contractor to finalize plans for remodeling their new house, and she'd promised to be there promptly at five o'clock.

In the past year, they'd stuck to their agreement to talk every night, making a game of it. They'd each share the worst thing that had happened that day, then the best thing. Ben insisted they end on a positive note. Funny how much they had to learn about each other. For one thing, he'd learned that Paige wasn't interested in a fancy new house in an upscale community like the one from her childhood. She wanted an older house—but with updated plumbing and electrical wiring, of course—in an established community close to the city. One with character and history, as she put it.

They'd found one, a modest eighty-year-old two-story with a basement, that suited them both. The old-fashioned parlor and sitting room, divided by sliding pocket doors, were to be Paige's reception area and office. There was plenty of room for a living room in back, where the kitchen and dining room were located. A bath and the staircase separated the sitting room from the back rooms. Upstairs were three large bedrooms and another bath. The bathrooms and kitchen needed the most work.

At ten after five Paige sped into the parking lot and jolted her Volvo to a stop beside his truck. He grinned as he held open the door for her. Same old Paige and he loved her more than ever.

The contractor waited inside his office. Paige gave him a finger wave and called out to him, "Can you give us a couple of minutes?"

What the hell? She'd already made the poor guy wait. She grabbed Ben by the arm and pulled him to the small love seat in the reception area.

"We need to make another change in the remodeling plans, honey," she said, a worried frown pleating her forehead.

"How big a change?"

"You know that huge walk-in closet off the master bedroom, the one with the dormer windows?"

The closet was actually the attic over the attached garage, which had been recently added by the previous owners. "What about it?"

"We need to finish it into a nursery."

It took a second for her meaning to penetrate his mind. "What?! Oh, babe, that's wonderful! I didn't..."

"I wanted to find out for sure before I told you. I just came from the doctor's office. Are you happy?"

"Extremely. And very surprised."

He longed to know what had changed her mind. She'd never been enthused about motherhood. Dare he ask? The past year they'd grown more open with each other and

held nothing back, but he'd still postponed the baby discussion. He didn't know why, as he felt free to broach any subject with her, no matter how sensitive.

"What about you, babe? Are you happy?"

She grinned. "It's exactly what I want, a home and baby with the man I love. But as long as I worked for the firm, I knew I couldn't do justice to parenthood. I'd be a horrible mother. Now that I work from home, I'll be able to juggle home and career, although I expect to need some outside help during the day."

"No problem. We can afford it."

She started toward the contractor's office and he followed. "I thought I'd talk about it with Mama Jean. She might know someone."

Ben didn't know exactly what had shifted in Paige's relationship with his daunting mother, but she'd won her over. It'd certainly made his life easier.

* * * *

Paige remembered exactly when she'd made an ally of Jean Travis. Paige's mother had given her good advice. Paige's relationship with her mother-in-law was up to her, not Ben.

After that intense weekend last year at the Barren River cabin, when she and Ben had recommitted themselves to their marriage, Paige gave considerable thought to Ben's attitudes and their origin, which was mainly his mother. Once Paige realized that the woman had passed along her own insecurities and fears to her son, she knew how to approach her. Paige was a skillful negotiator, after all. Surely she could conquer her mother-in-law.

She invited Jean to lunch, just the two of them, and took her to a quiet bistro on Market Street so they could talk. After they ordered, Paige folded her hands and began.

"I've been married to your son for four years, Mama Jean, yet I don't think I've ever thanked you."

"Thanked me?" Jean's fork froze and her eyebrows lifted.

"For doing such a great job bringing up your son. Do you realize that Ben picks up his own clothes, avoids creating extra housework or laundry, and even helps in the kitchen? How many men worry about using a coaster for their drinks, for instance? Ben is a rare and special person. He's thoughtful in so many ways, and it's all because of you."

"Uh, well ... thank you, dear."

"No, thank *you*. I knew when I started dating Ben that he was one in a million. I am so lucky." Paige wasn't just pouring it on to her mother-in-law. She'd meant every word, and Jean seemed to accept Paige's sincerity.

Jean also seemed at a loss for words. "Well ... he seems happy..."

"I only hope someday I can be as good a mother to your grandchildren. I know I'll be asking for your help."

"You ask anytime," Jean said.

As soon as Jean no longer felt threatened by Paige, she relaxed and learned to love her. In truth, Paige loved Mama Jean, too, and looked forward to telling her about the baby. Jean needed to feel needed in Ben's life, so Paige made sure to include her. Surprisingly, Jean seldom interfered, offering her input only when asked.

Ben held open the door for Paige as they left the contractor's building. "I'll follow you home. Or would you like to dine out tonight and celebrate?"

“I have plans for us tonight, stud. But it involves my stopping at the video store.” She winked.

“Is this *Debbie Does Dallas* night?” he teased, referring to their once-a-week tradition of renting a porn flick. Most were laughable instead of inspiring, but it didn’t matter. They always ended up making love during or afterwards.

“Right. You pop the popcorn, Pop, and I’ll be home soon.”

“I’ll pop the top of a diet pop to go with it,” he retorted. “But before you go...” He pulled her into his arms and kissed her until she trembled with need. “Hurry home, babe. I’ll be waiting for you.”

She drove off smiling and blinking back happy tears. Thanks to a lot of compromise and effort on both their parts—not to mention her new subscription to *Power Woman!*—Ben always would be home with her.

Paige King-Travis truly had it all!

The End

About the Author:

Vanessa Hart writes romantic erotica for Liquid Silver Books. Her debut novel, *LOVE LESSONS*, was a bestseller and received a four-star review from *Romantic Times BOOKClub* magazine. It also was runner-up for the Romance Studio’s 2004 CAPRA award for erotica.

Shy and reclusive, Vanessa lives with her husband and red poodle on a pine tree farm in north Florida, where she spins tales of erotica as Vanessa Hart and romantic mysteries as her alter ego. She’s currently working on her third novella for the “Fever” series.

Meet LSB authors at <http://lsbooks.net>

We invite you to visit Liquid Silver Books

<http://lsbooks.com>
for other exciting literary erotica romances.

Weekend Games—Chris Tanglen

Destiny's Magick—Rae Morgan

Love Lessons—Vanessa Hart

Portal—Sydney Morgann

Bittersweet—Louisa Trent

Business or Pleasure...or Both?—Rae Morgan and Jasmine Haynes

And many, many more!!